

## Midnight Rider

Thundering hooves clattered along the cobbled streets. The heaving breath of a hard-ridden horse left soft clouds of steam in the rider's wake. The thick black night was broken only by a slight sliver of moon that appeared and then disappeared again. Occasional street torches cast a dull amber light at the corners of chapels and inns as the horse and rider rode on; otherwise the city of Noyon was both dark and silent. The scrape of horse hoof against cobbled stone was the only sign that someone was in a mighty hurry that night. A quick look out of a window by a sleepless householder would not have been fast enough to catch even a glimpse of them. The midnight gallopers vanished through the streets of Noyon as quickly as a fork of distant lightning zigzagged through the sky.

A terse, anxious voice urged the flagging horse on. Small drops of rain were ignored by both mount and rider. Any sign of weariness on the part of the horse was met with a stern flick of the whip. They were on an urgent mission – a matter of life or death.

The further into the city they went, the more cramped and forbidding the streets felt. Buildings sprawled out in all directions. The city walls of Noyon

rose high above. They gave necessary protection to the secluded squares and twisting alleyways that made the midnight rider's task so difficult. A town that was well known during the day was a labyrinth of confusion when night-time fell.

'God willing, the patient will still be alive when I arrive,' the young rider muttered to his horse as he searched desperately for some landmark by which to guide him. 'For what good is a doctor if he cannot, at first, find his patient? Cures and medicine are all very well, but they are totally useless sitting inside this satchel of mine,' the doctor chafed inwardly. 'Lord Montmor assured me that the house was in a prosperous commercial area, not far from a chapel. Now what chapel was it?' he asked himself, peering earnestly around the dark streets once again.

Reining his mount in, he tried to find his bearings. The horse's flanks rose and fell under the saddle; glad of a rest, it let its head droop toward the ground in search of a mouthful of grass, or a puddle of fresh rainwater to quench its thirst. But not for long. The doctor urged the horse on again as he anxiously looked one way and then another. 'What was it Lord Montmor said to me before I left? "The patient's name is Gérard Calvin – or at least it's his wife who is sick – he's a notary in the town and the chapel is ..." Ah! That's right – Sainte-Godeberte!'

It wasn't that the name of the chapel had suddenly popped back into his head – the chapel itself had

suddenly appeared as his horse turned the corner near the corn market square.

‘Now I know that the house is directly across from the church. If I take a moment or two, I’m sure to find it. But I must make haste ... Lord Montmor said that the woman in question is in danger of losing her life. Perhaps he should have sent for the family priest and not the family doctor.’ Again the young man urgently looked for some signpost or street name that would give him a clue as to where he was.

‘They live in a comfortable house on the Place au Blé, between La Ruelle des Porcelets and Rue Formentière. But which of these streets is the right one?’ he anxiously exclaimed. ‘I can see the towers of the cathedral on one side and the chapel on the other. I am definitely in the right area!’

The loud thud of a door slamming interrupted the doctor’s thoughts. ‘What was that?’ He turned his horse around and trotted towards where he had heard the sound.

A house halfway down a side street was lit up like a beacon. Lamps were on in several windows. The door opened and shut again, loudly. The occupants weren’t worried about waking their neighbours. Perhaps this was the house he had been sent to find?

A servant girl was now running down the street, anxious and out of breath. ‘Hey there!’ the doctor called out, trying to get the girl’s attention. But she would not stop. ‘I can’t talk to you now, sir. I’m on an

urgent errand to fetch the priest. Madame Calvin is at death's door.' And with that the young girl disappeared into the night.

Just then the light of the moon and the dull flame from the dying embers of a street torch, lit up a name at the doctor's shoulder, 'Place au Blé'. With great relief the young man tethered his horse and rushed up to Gérard Calvin's house. He knocked loudly on the door and didn't cease until it had been opened. 'Gérard Calvin, I'm here to see Mr Gérard Calvin on the request of Lord Montmor. I'm his personal physician.'

At that, a hand reached out into the darkness and dragged him into the hallway. 'Quickly now, I beg of you. I've sent for the priest, but if you can do anything we may not need his services tonight. My wife appears to have reached a crisis in her illness; her fever grows ever higher and her breathing ever lower.'

As the anxious husband recounted symptom after symptom on their way to the sick chamber, the doctor quickly began to realise that it wasn't the priest's services that were unneeded, but his own. He was only sorry that he had come. 'It appears that all I am giving this loving husband is false hope,' he thought ruefully.

In fact he had only been in her chamber for twenty minutes at the most when Jeanne Le Franc Calvin breathed her last. The frantic priest had barely managed to utter a prayer over the dying woman, before she closed her eyes in death.

‘What good is a priest now?’ thought the doctor. ‘About as good as a doctor,’ he pondered. ‘All there is to care for now is a dead body.’

Sighing, he allowed the husband and the out-of-breath priest to begin the process of mourning. Quitting the room, he sat down on a seat in the corridor and buried his head in his hands. Just then, from out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a white nightshirt, inside it a small child, not much more than three or four years old.

‘Who are you?’ asked the child.

But before the doctor could answer, the door to the sick-room opened and Mr Calvin stepped out. ‘John, fetch your brothers. You can see your mother now.’

The face of the little boy lit up. ‘May I take my wooden horse in to show her? She would like to see that, I’m sure – now she’s better.’

The doctor sighed as he picked up his satchel. How do you tell a young child that his mother will never look at his toys again? The last he saw of the Calvins, was when three little boys were being ushered into their mother’s room. The doctor disappeared, but one little boy turned round and looked puzzled at the quick appearance and disappearance of this strange man.

Young John had woken up that night to the sound of servants rushing to and fro. Doors slammed and feet hammered up and down the corridor. It was a strange thing for the little boy to witness, as for

weeks now he had been forbidden to make as much as a sound indoors. As he listened to the anxious calls of servants running up and down the stairs, John was very confused. 'I thought Mother didn't like noise any more and that everyone had to be quiet. Why are they all running around playing games at night? I'm not allowed to do it, even during the day.'

Someone suddenly called out, 'Clear away that linen and get firewood to the sick-room immediately.'

A thought came to young John's mind as he lay snuggled under his blankets. Had he cleared away the carpet bowls as he had been told? he wondered. It was one of his favourite games and he loved to play it in the long corridor outside his bedroom. Today, however, he had been kept to his room all day with only the bowls and his brothers to keep him amused. But, if he hadn't cleared the bowls away, as he had been told, then the maid might not allow him to play with them tomorrow and that wouldn't do at all. John immediately scrunched up his eyes tightly.

Even in the dark he could still see. All he had to do was close his eyes and John could picture in his mind exactly where everything was. A chair was on his right and a small table on his left. The window was at the other end of the room. And yes, he had pushed the carpet bowls under the bed. He remembered now.

In fact he found it very easy to remember things – stories, poems, things that people said; they were all inside his head just waiting to come out again. At that

moment, John's thoughts stopped ... then started again. With all the noise going on, he had forgotten to listen for one sound – the sound of his mother. He had grown so used to her hacking cough over the last few weeks, that now its absence appeared to him to be the loudest sound in the whole house. 'Is she better, now that she has stopped coughing?' he wondered.

The front door slammed and footsteps hurried up the stairs. He could make out his father's voice and the voice of a stranger could be heard also. John pulled away the covers and slipped out of bed. Quietly, he tiptoed to the bedroom door. But he could have stomped his feet all the way; nobody would have paid him the slightest bit of attention.

A maid rushed past, bringing a basin of hot steaming water from the kitchen. The man who helped with the yard and garden work, was struggling up the stairs with more kindling for the fire in his mother's room. Then suddenly the door slammed yet again and a priest ran up the stairs, his gown flapping, a crucifix dangling in a most undignified way from around his neck.

'What is going on?' John wondered as he burrowed down to sit and watch. The priest rushed into his mother's bedroom and moments later John noticed a stranger leaving it. He was looking tired, rather dirty and very sad.

'Who are you?' the little boy asked. But John never discovered who the stranger was. In a few moments his childhood had been changed for ever.

As he was ushered into his mother's room, he soon realised why she didn't want to see his toy horse.

'You can't see anything when you are dead,' his older brother explained to him. 'Mother is dead and we shan't see her again either.'

'Not even if we close our eyes tight and imagine her?' John asked, puzzled.

Over the next few weeks, he would try that. However, what worked for dressers, tables and carpet bowls didn't seem to work for loving mothers who were no longer with you. For a few weeks, he would try to conjure up the colour of her hair and the exact tint of her eyes, but even when he was pretty sure it was an accurate picture, it just didn't feel right, it was never the same. She was in his mind, she was in his heart, but she just wasn't there.

A darkness that little John had not been aware of before had now appeared in his life. Something was missing – his mother, a feeling of peace, a sense that everything was as it was supposed to be. He felt none of these things any more. With this deep sort of darkness all around, he longed for someone to light a candle so that it would be light and joy once again ... but no wax candle, however bright, could help little John Calvin.