

Book, Theatre, and Wheel

Karl Schroeder

Neville Dumoutier drank in the smell of pigs and the rattling sound of the nearby mill wheel. He smiled easily at the woman seated opposite him.

“This is not a formal investigation,” he said. “Not yet.”

The Lady Genevieve Romanal straightened in her chair and lifted her chin as she looked at him. “Of course not. What would we have to hide?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” chuckled Neville’s companion. Brother Jacques was an agent of the Inquisition, but not so humorless as most. He aimed his usual puzzled-appearing smile at the lady and, clasping his crossed knees, leaned forward to peer at a book he had laid open on a low table.

“Your local priest, he was born and raised here?” asked Jacques.

“Yes.” She glanced at Neville. That sort of look signaled a guilty mind in city-bred people; he wanted to think she was merely guileless.

“So you know him well, and he knows you,” continued Jacques.

She nodded.

“He swears he has never tutored your people in reading and writing. It is, after all, forbidden for the commoners of your estate to learn letters, according to the edict of the Duke.”

“I am not a commoner,” said Lady Romanal.

Jacques chuckled. “I know; even if I didn’t, it would be obvious in your bearing. Reading changes the eyes and broadens the brow. Those who can read know each other.”

“Where is this leading?” she asked.

Neville knew Jacques would take forever to get to the point. “Have you taught any of your people to read?” he asked.

She shook her head.

Jacques pursed his lips. "Your priest swears he hasn't either. Strange."

"Why?" she asked. Her fingers twisted in her lap.

Neville grimaced. "I shouldn't have to point out, Madam, that yours is a tremendously wealthy household. Especially in the past five years, you have made a great deal of money in trade. Your agents..."

"They are very good," she said with the hint of a smile.

"Uncanny, actually," corrected Jacques. "The shrewdness of their dealings and the thoroughness of their knowledge are nothing short of astonishing."

Romanal blinked, as if coming to a sudden understanding. "Have we made someone envious? Is that what this is about?"

Now it was Neville's turn to glance at Jacques. The inquisitor smiled and shook his head. "Of course not. It's just that wealth flowing so freely through untutored hands is unusual, and the unusual is, sad to say, the first and best hint that the devil has been at work."

"Not here," she said seriously. Neville hid a smile; he was beginning to think she was far from guileless.

Jacques scratched his tonsured head. "We found this on one of your people." He slid a cloth-covered package onto the table, and slowly unwove the covering to reveal what looked like a book missing its binding.

Neville stared at the loose pages in annoyance. Jacques had not mentioned this to Neville, not even hinted at it during their long journey to this remote valley. What else had the inquisitor kept from him?

"What is that?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Jacques. He looked from the spilled pages to the lady. "The man was desperate to protect it, though."

"Who? Is he all right? Have you hurt him?" Lady Romanal reached out suddenly and flipped up the edge of one velum page. "Rodrigo. Oh, he's our best! Tell me he's all right."

“He’s fine.” Jacques made a soothing gesture with both hands. “He is safe within Mother Church, and he has his life and health. As soon as we learn what we need to know, he will have his freedom as well.”

She looked skeptical. Neville had known about the merchant they’d arrested in Milan. He also knew the man had been tortured, but this was not the time to bring that up. Gingerly, he reached to touch the burst book. The pages were loose, about palm-sized, and innocent of writing. Each had a single image painted on it, very strange images from what he could see. The whole collection was bound by a beaded thread that pierced each page’s upper left corner. Under the pile of pages Neville could see a number of other threads, and some loose beads as well.

“So what is this?”

Genevieve smiled. “But it’s nothing! This is a child’s game. We call it the wheel of books. See, you loose the pages and match them.” She unwound the beaded thread and fanned the pages into an arc.

“A game.” Jacques’s expression was completely neutral. “I see.” He gathered the pages together again and wound the cloth around them again. “Then you won’t mind my keeping it.”

“Of course, if it amuses you.” She smiled at both of them. “Was there anything else?”

“Not now.” Jacques smiled and raised his hand for her to kiss. “I believe Sir Neville and I are quartered above this room?”

“Yes. Please, settle yourselves and then join us for dinner.” Genevieve laughed. “If you pay the usual traveler’s price, that is.”

Neville had been about to stand. “Price? What price?”

“Why, a story, of course,” she said.

He and Brother Jacques laughed, and some of the tension left the room.

“I can supply a story,” said Neville. “Never fear about that.”

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“She is lying,” said Jacques. He bowed to an image of the Virgin on the

wall, and then crossed himself.

Neville had flopped on the single straw mattress in the room. He knew Jacques would sleep on the hard wooden floor, so hadn't offered the bed to the priest. He yanked his tall boots off and massaged his feet, scowling.

"I don't like to think that," he said. "This is such a friendly place."

"Friendly? Of course - when you're this isolated, you have two possible reactions to visitors. Friendliness is one of them. Makes no difference whether they're really welcome or not."

"So what is she lying about? Her people being lettered?"

"Oh no; they can count, but they can't read. No, it's this." Jacques patted the cloth package that lay in the center of the room's one table. "It's not a game."

Neville glanced at it uneasily. "Devil's work?"

Jacques laughed. "Not at all. But more powerful than letters, I think." He unwrapped the pages and sat on the floor next to the bed. "Do you know the writings of Tullius, Sir Neville?"

"Only the First Rhetoric. My father deemed it unwise for me to learn too much."

"It's a wonder you can read at all," said Jacques wryly. Neville watched as he unbound the pages and started laying them out in a rough square. "If you'd read *Ad Herennium*, my dear Neville, you would know that this is a memory system. Look at the pictures: Judas hanging, the Moon, a wheel. They are simple images, but surrounded with strange details. The men who took this from Rodrigo assumed it was sorcery, and they beat the poor man almost to death because of it. In fact, it's just an application of Tullius's art of memory."

"I don't understand."

"This is how the lady's men are able to trade so well," said Jacques. "They are committing everything they see and hear in the marketplace to memory. This memory." He tapped the pages. "They know what is short and what in surfeit. They know the price of everything, even the names of all the guildsmen in all the towns they pass through. And the guildsmen's dogs. If they were properly trained in the Art, they would not even need this

prop," he flicked the pages negligently, "but could memorize a hundred names if they heard them recited once - and they could recite them back to you perfectly a year later."

"I once heard of a man who could do that." Neville rolled on his side and reached to pick up a page. On it were a man and a woman, chained together and holding hands. A crown floated above their heads. "So there is no sorcery here," he said with relief.

Jacques shook his head. "There is something. Else, why did she lie to us?"

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Genevieve Romanal was charming at dinner. She wore a fine green dress, and her hair was held in a lace bonnet. The dress revealed her bosom nicely, a fact that emptied Neville's mind of serious thought whenever he took note of it. Especially because she smiled at him so much.

She had invited the priest, Warrel, and her almister to dine with them. Calculated though the move was, it was also so obvious as to be disarming. Jacques had intended to interview the almister anyway, and now fell to discussing charities with the man over a haunch of venison, while Warrel looked on anxiously. It was evident that Genevieve gave a very large part of her wealth to the poor. Trading for profit was illegal, and Neville was happy to learn she avoided such sin.

"And who is your guardian?" Neville asked as he helped himself to a third slice of venison.

"My guardian?" She blinked at him.

"Who is the master of this estate?" He'd thought it a perfectly obvious question.

"Ah. Yes." She fluttered her fingers over the slab of bread that held her meal. Tearing a corner from the bread, she used it to gather up a mouthful of vegetables and gravy. "In the absence of a male heir to the house, and until I am married, the land naturally belongs to the Duke."

"But who is in charge of day to day affairs?"

"I am. That is," she added quickly, "the house is headless, and I execute the commands of the Duke."

“Which must be infrequent and vague,” suggested Neville. “He lives a hundred leagues away. So you have no man in charge here?”

“No.” She looked him in the eye. “The house is prospering, as you can see.”

Neville nodded. He wasn’t altogether comfortable with the idea of a woman running an estate this size, but it had been common enough during the crusades and the Death.

“I’m surprised the Duke hasn’t married you to some fine noble lad,” he continued.

She actually blushed. “He hasn’t seen me since I was five. Perhaps he’s forgotten me.”

“Well, a woman shouldn’t be unmarried,” he said.

“Are you married?” she asked.

Neville turned back to his venison. “I was,” he said shortly.

“Ah. I’m sorry.” She glanced at the clerics, who were debating some point. It seemed it was the almshouse’s turn to sit back and watch. “Tell me what happened,” she said.

“I’d rather not.”

Genevieve smiled. “Ah, but Sir Neville, you forget, you promised me a story earlier. And after all, you are the ones asking for the hospitality of the household. Tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because life is short, we may never meet again, and there is simply nothing worth discussing except the fundamental things: pain, love, meetings, and partings.”

He laughed shortly. “I didn’t expect you to be so serious.”

“Am I being serious? Maybe I just want to get the serious out of the way as quickly as possible so that we can be properly frivolous together.”

Neville shook his head. She had all the usual strangeness of someone raised in isolation in the country. "I'll tell you if you tell me something."

"No. Now tell me! I demand it."

He sighed. "There's nothing much to say. We were married quite young, at fourteen years' age. Cecile died at twenty."

"How did she die?"

"Plague. Her mother died of it and she insisted on staying with her. I... could not bring myself to visit them. When she became ill, I... stood below her window and listened to her dying. I couldn't go in."

"You were wise," said Genevieve sympathetically. "But it must have been very hard."

"It wasn't wisdom, it was common cowardice!" He raised his voice and the others fell silent. Neville glared at Jacques. "Custom would have us abandon those stricken with plague. But it's just an excuse for cowardice."

Jacques shook his head gently. "You are alive to protect us now, Sir Neville. I'm sure your wife would have wanted that. I'm also sure it's what God wanted."

It was too late; he remembered standing under her window, listening to her cry in her delirium, and learning the lessons of his own weakness. He pushed back from the table, his appetite quite gone.

Genevieve laid her hand on his. "I am sorry if I upset you. But surely pain isn't all you remember of your marriage?"

He shrugged uncomfortably.

"Then you haven't properly mourned," she said. "Do me one more favour, and I'll release you from your promise." He glanced up at her expectantly. "I am not being cruel," Genevieve said, "but describe her to me. How tall was she? What color was her hair? Her eyes?"

Despite himself, Neville told her, though he seldom spoke about Cecile to anyone but her own family. Jacques and the others listened intently; now that he was committed to speaking he didn't begrudge their attention. Everyone's life was everyone else's business, after all. He simply

treated his pain as inaccessible to relief, so never spoke of it.

The rest of the evening was a blur. He and Jacques were very tired from the road, and it was a relief to retire to their small room.

As he lay in the darkness, watching the vapor of his breath appear and vanish in a shaft of moonlight, Neville found himself feeling homesick for the first time in years. He knew the lady had meant to be hospitable, but, "She is so strange," he said aloud.

Jacques grunted from the floor. "You only think that because you're smitten with her."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Foolish of you; she may be dangerous. Now go to sleep."

Neville rolled over to peer at the black lump that was the inquisitor. "Brother Jacques, you are dangerous."

"Only to blasphemers, apostates, idolators, infidels, and heretics. Who would seem to be in the majority. Just now though, I would add to that list," he yawned loudly, "those who insist on talking to people who are trying to sleep."

"Bah." Neville lay back. He was still awake long after Jacques had begun to snore.

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In the morning Jacques went with the almshouse to examine the estate's accounts, leaving Neville alone with the lady. She took him on a tour of the estate. He and Jacques had been quartered in the main house, a large, white stuccoed building with two wings, two storeys, and a number of outbuildings. Its walled enclosure nestled at one end of a narrow, tall valley. Beyond the hills rose the Alps. At the center of the valley was a small lake, surrounded by her peasants' fields. There was a smithy nearby, and her masons and ostlers had been born and raised here.

"There was a period," she said, "when we had no visitors for decades at a time. They say that this villa was built by a Roman senator, and after Rome fell he and his family hid themselves here, having no commerce with the outside world for over a century."

"I can believe it," said Neville. He could see from the window where they stood how the roads made a circle in the valley; none led out. He and Jacques had walked narrow deer paths for much of their journey here. Had they not been told where to find the place, they would never have come this way.

"Eventually bandits started nesting in the hills." She pointed. "So we had to call on outside protection. Otherwise, we might be hidden still."

He turned away from the window. "You would prefer that?"

Genevieve shrugged. "We have everything we need. Come with me." She led him through a number of rooms. Her people looked up from their work at looms and benches as they passed, and they smiled at Neville.

They entered a room that held no less than a dozen books, none of them Bibles. He murmured his appreciation.

Genevieve laughed. "I thought you were an untutored knight. What do books matter to you?"

He shrugged awkwardly. "The Bible is a book. I respect them, and I do try to read when I have the chance."

"Would you like to read these?"

"I would be honored." He opened one thick volume and peered at the spidery Latin text. "I know this." He smiled, remembering his conversation with Jacques yesterday. "This is Tullius."

"Cicero, you mean."

"Who?"

"Cicero. That is his Roman name." She motioned for him to join her at a table by the room's one window. "Here. I wanted to give you this."

What she held was a single velum page, the same size as the ones that made up Jacques's captive memory. On this, some sure hand had painted the figure of a very young woman. She had the hair, the eyes, and the dress Neville had described to Genevieve last night. Her gaze was compassionate. Over her head hung a glowing crown, above that a dove. Her left hand proffered an olive branch.

Aside from pictures of the Virgin, Neville had seen no portrait of a woman in several years. He took this one gingerly from Genevieve, his eyes brimming with tears as he looked at it.

"It is she," he said. "Thank you."

"From your story," she said, "it seemed evident that you needed your wife's forgiveness."

Genevieve had included a loom, a dog, a book, and a cluster of grapes in the picture - all details about her life that the lady had pried out of him, with some difficulty, last night. The image seemed to burn in his hands now; he had not pictured Cecile at her loom in years.

He wiped his eyes. "I will treasure it."

"Just don't show it to Brother Jacques," she advised. "Lest he confiscate that, too."

"This is like the pages we saw last night," he said. "Did you paint those too?"

She nodded.

"We know the pages are a memory system," Neville said gently. "It's not an unheard of thing; Jacques understood it at once."

"Oh." Genevieve frowned at the wall for a moment. "So much knowledge has been lost. Sometimes we forget how much has been kept. I didn't know the Church had preserved the Art of memory."

"The Church knows everything," he said sincerely.

"Of course." But her smile, as she said this, seemed a bit sad.

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Brother Jacques was waiting when Neville returned from his daily ride. The inquisitor was full of febrile energy; he kept glancing around himself, and his fingers repeatedly touched the cross hung around his neck. "There you are!"

"I was looking for you earlier," said Neville. He dismounted and patted his stallion's neck. "Where were you?"

“Seeing with my own eyes that something we had been told was true.”

“What do you mean?” Neville pulled the horse’s reins and headed for the stables.

“Hush.” Jacques looked around. There was no one nearby. “It was something we learned from this Rodrigo. Tales of a secret grotto, here on the estate. It seemed too fantastical to be true, and yet it is! I have just been there. Neville, it is a place of the devil. We must leave here at once.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“There is a pagan temple in the hillside. It is being cared for by someone. This lady, no doubt. What else has she been doing with her money? We must leave now. This is too much for us to deal with. The proper authorities must be called.”

“Wait.” Neville put a hand on his arm. “I’m sure the lady has nothing to do with it. We can learn more if we remain good guests of the house than if we bring in troops.”

Jacques peered at Neville oddly. “I see. Do you really think so?”

“I think these people’s troubles have more to do with a conflict with the Duke, than with the Church. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if there were some old pagan ruin in the hill - Lady Romanal tells me this was once a Roman senator’s villa. And aren’t some of the most sacred shrines in Rome built atop pagan temples?”

“Sir Neville, this temple is in use.” He hesitated, then said, “there is more.”

Neville led his horse to the stable and began to groom him. They’d had quite a run this morning, and Neville himself was feeling hot and irritable. The act of washing the horse would make him feel better, as if he had bathed himself.

Jacques hovered outside the stall. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you everything about this case before,” he said. “But the theology is not your concern. You are our protector, true...”

“Who needs to know when to protect.” Neville sighed. “What else haven’t you told me?”

“One of the witnesses against Rodrigo was a man who claimed to have participated in a Satanic rite led by Rodrigo. We think Lady Romanal’s merchants are spreading such filth under the guise of merchanting, and by means of her almister.”

Neville laughed shortly. His horse blew and nickered at him as if in agreement. “An evil almister? I find it hard to believe a man can be doing evil by giving money to the poor.”

Jacques watched the horse suspiciously. “They’re not just giving alms, Neville. They’ve been educating people. Romanal has endowed schools, and her men have visited those schools. We believe they are conducting their rites there. Education is dangerous to begin with. It is an open window for the devil to enter your soul.”

“Maybe.”

“So we must leave.”

Neville shook his head. “Your caution is admirable, Jacques. But you employ me to be incautious. I won’t leave until I’ve heard about this from the lady’s own lips.”

“But Neville,” whispered Jacques, “we are alone here. Isolated.”

Neville laughed out loud as he scrubbed the horse’s flank. “Don’t be a coward, Brother Jacques.”

“Fear of the devil is not cowardice,” said Jacques, and with that he walked away.

Watering and feeding the horse calmed Neville somewhat. Still, his mind was a jumble of conflicting impulses as he went to find the lady. On the one hand, he did not doubt that Jacques had found what he claimed. On the other, he could not reconcile such a thing with his impressions of Lady Romanal.

He found Genevieve working her loom with some of her maids. He bowed, and she gestured for him to sit next to her.

“Brother Jacques is making serious accusations against you,” he said. “Your situation is going from bad to worse.”

She sighed heavily, and dismissed her maids. A couple of them glared at Neville as they left.

“Tell me,” she said simply.

“He says there is a pagan temple on the hill. That it is in use.”

Genevieve swore in an unladylike manner. “You were right. I should have admitted to what the Theatre was in the first place.”

“Then it’s true?”

“No, not at all! But... it’s impossible to explain. Ah, what a disaster.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can prove to you that we are not worshipers of the devil. Tonight,” she said. “But do not bring Brother Jacques. Each man requires a proof that fits his own soul. Jacques would not understand what we will show you.”

“I’m not sure I should trust you.”

“No harm will come to you. Jacques can judge in the morning whether you are possessed,” she said, smiling slyly. “And tomorrow night we can prove our case to him.”

“Why not both together? Why not right here and now?” he demanded. “Do you take me for a fool, to walk into some trap?”

“Neville,” she said seriously, “if we wished to compel you, we could do that - right here and now. It’s hard to explain, but you’ll see. Put it this way: Brother Jacques did not find a temple in the hill, he found a theatre. And tonight we will perform for you.”

Grudgingly, he nodded. “For a day, I will trust you.” He rose. “I should find Jacques and calm him down. Somehow.” He rubbed his forehead, which was beginning to hurt, and turned to go.

“Sir Neville,” she said as he was about to leave the room. “Do you believe civilization is something we receive, or something we construct?”

He paused. “What?”

“What if it were the obligation of each generation to re-invent its civilization? How would that affect the way you lived your life?”

He shook his head, puzzled. “I don’t know,” he said, and left.

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Genevieve arranged for her almshouse to invite Brother Jacques to a private dinner. She and Neville ate in the kitchen. Throughout all this she maintained a coy silence, but was evidently enjoying his curiosity.

Afterwards, they walked into the warm, deepening evening. Genevieve followed a tenuous path that led into the forest. No one was about; even the animals had fallen silent. Genevieve walked slowly, humming gently. She seemed inspired somehow, but Neville only felt nervous. “What’s going to happen?” he demanded.

“Nothing bad,” she said. “You understand how memory systems work, do you not? One can use any striking, bizarre, beautiful, or horrid image to impress a thing into memory. We use that to remember names, accounts, prices, and so on. But there’s another use for it.

“When your wife died, the experience of standing below her window for days was so strange and so memorable, that it completely eclipsed any other memory of her for years. You did not know that this would happen when you did that. But if you wish to change your life in any way, that is how you do it. You impress the change upon your character with the stamp of an event that’s completely outside ordinary life. That’s what ceremonies are. Like the marriage rite.”

They ascended a winding path up the side of the hill. Rocky fissures with moss-grown sides began to appear around them. The hillside had split here like the roof of a loaf of bread in the oven; the fissures varied from knee-depth to fathomless.

The path entered a particularly wide fissure. Neville could see more torches strung along its length, at ever-increasing depths.

“One of our books talks about that,” said Genevieve. “It concerns the pagan mystery cults. The Duke or the Inquisition would have it destroyed, because it’s a book about designing a religion.” She nodded at his shocked expression. “It talks about how to change the direction of a man’s life by using the right ceremony at the right time. We only have a few rites in common - christening, marriage, death - because these are the passages

we all share. They're the only ceremonies we see, so we think they're all we could have. The ancients knew you could invent a rite to fix any change in your life for all time. Yet you could have a rite specific to just one man, and meaningful only to him. That's not such a strange idea: the king is the only one who experiences coronation, true? This book I spoke of describes how to create rites of passage for small groups, or even for individuals."

"But what does this have to do with your memory system, or your merchants?"

"It has to do with alms. And civilization." She laughed at his confused expression. "You'll see. Tonight, it has everything to do with you."

The small worry Neville had endured all day began to grow. "What do you mean?"

She paused at an archway that had been carved into the side of the fissure. "Each page in our wheel of books is a striking, memorable picture. You can use it to make sure that you never forget something. True?"

"Yes..."

"How much more powerful would your memory be if you could step into that page?"

"This sounds like sorcery."

"Don't you see, Neville, you did that when you stood beneath Cecile's window. You painted a picture so vivid that now it is the only picture of Cecile that hangs in your palace of memories. What you did unknowingly we are going to undo now. By the same means."

She motioned for him to pass through the arch. "Come. Look at Jacques's 'temple.'"

A natural grotto had been enlarged by men some time in the past, and pillars had been carved around its sides to make it resemble a temple. Faded frescoes adorned the walls. Bright torchlight wavered on one that showed a youth with a sword and a broad, billowing cape inside of which stars shone. Another wall held an image of this figure killing a bull.

The frescoes were not the focus of the chamber. The place was built in tiers like a theatre, but instead of seats, each tier held numerous tall wooden plaques that reminded Neville uncomfortably of headstones. Many

of Genevieve's people stood among these plaques, all wearing outlandish costumes representing mythological figures.

He looked at her with mixed suspicion and curiosity. "You will see," she said.

Genevieve led Neville down to the stage. When he turned to look back the entire space suddenly seemed filled with color and motion, for the plaques were colorfully painted with scenes and symbols he recognized from the wheel of books memory system.

Indeed, the whole Book seemed to have come to life. It swayed and danced in torchlight above him. Near the stage were the bound-together man and woman, fully life-size, glittering under lamplight. Next to them was the Sun, farther back the Moon. He gaped in astonishment, and Genevieve smiled.

"Temple rites are just a debasement of the kind of thing we're about to do. As I've come to know you, Neville, I have learned what you need, and where your life is incomplete. And so I have designed a play for the Theatre that will undo the heavy lock you have set upon your own memory. Begin!"

Two of Genevieve's people appeared; one took on the role of a dying woman, the other her lover whom she commanded to leave for his own safety. The actors would pop up from behind one of the large cards, speak their lines, and then duck down again. It was as if the memory images themselves were speaking, the man and the woman taking on various guises as the action progressed. Though Neville knew it was play-acting, the combination of setting, drama, light, and color brought a tingle to his spine. Soon he had forgotten the artifice of it all and was simply immersed in the story. Suddenly Genevieve said, "Look at me." He turned. She stood close to him. She was dressed as he had described Cecile to be, and in one hand she held an olive branch. "It is time for you to enter the drama, Neville," she said. "Before the night is done, you will finally take this token that your Cecile has been offering you these many years."

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Brother Jacques was waiting for him when Neville finally returned to their room. The inquisitor sat on the stolid chair, a candle illuminating his face from below. He said nothing as Neville came in, merely examining his face with that familiar, puzzled expression.

Neville felt as if years had passed since he had seen Jacques. There was no way to explain it, but he was not the same man he'd been this afternoon.

"They wrought their work on you, didn't they?" said Jacques in a low voice.

"It is not sorcery," croaked Neville. He fell backwards into bed, totally drained.

"I know it isn't sorcery," said Jacques.

Neville had closed his eyes; now they opened in surprise. He had been ready for Jacques to argue, or preach. With a groan, he sat up.

"What?"

Jacques shrugged. "I put a suitable amount of wine into Lady Romanal's almshouse and snuck away early. So I was able to witness your ceremony from the archway. Romanal posted no guards."

Neville felt a weight lift from his heart. "Then you know there's no evil here. We can leave these people to their business."

Jacques laughed and shook his head. "You're a wondrously naive man, Neville. Nothing has changed. We still have to call in the militia."

"What? Are you mad?"

Jacques stared pensively into the middle distance. "The Inquisition is an attempt to reclaim lost souls," he said. "How those souls are lost is not our concern. Your lady is not dealing with the devil. But the Duke is right that she is trying to raise people above their station. Her Theatre is too powerful. It can educate even the illiterate. And now she presumes to take over the healing of men's souls as if she were the Church itself."

"But—"

Jacques waved his hand peremptorily. "Don't interrupt me. My brother, we are tending a very large garden. That means that sometimes we have to pull up some flowers, when they grow in the wrong place."

Neville was too appalled, and overwhelmed with mental and emotional exhaustion, to know what to say. He simply stared at Jacques.

“When you have seen the things I’ve seen, you will understand,” said Jacques. “We will talk about this further tomorrow.” He leaned over and blew out the candle.

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In the morning, everything looked different. Neville felt this reawakening had happened to him before: on the day of his marriage, at his confirmation in the Order, and the first time he had traveled to a new country. But he had not felt this way in many years.

During the night, he had given himself permission to remember the good things about Cecile. These far outweighed the bitterness of their parting, he now realized.

The only thing that spoiled Neville’s mood was the fact that Jacques was nowhere to be found.

He asked in the kitchens, but they had not seen him. Neville immediately went to see the lady. He arrived just as one of Genevieve’s ostlers ran in and breathlessly reported one of the estate’s horses was missing.

Neville cursed roundly. “Jacques has taken things into his own hands. I have to go after him.”

“When did you last see him?” Genevieve asked.

“Late last night. That means he’s got a half-day’s head start on me. But I can catch him if I start now.”

“What will you do if you catch him? Take him prisoner? Kill him?” Genevieve shook her head. “We don’t want a murder on our hands. Does he believe you’re a slave to Satan now?”

“I don’t think so. He... believes I’m infatuated with you,” he said sheepishly.

“Oh.” She half-smiled. “And that has clouded your mind?”

He nodded.

“That’s been known to happen to men,” she said. “But I don’t believe

your mind is clouded. Quite the opposite.”

“But what are we going to do? He’s going to bring our troops here!”

“Can you stop them when they arrive?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t the authority. And I will be suspect, if not by him then by his superiors.”

Genevieve sighed. “This increases the urgency of things, that’s all. I knew something like this was bound to happen eventually.”

“Why? Because of your defying the Duke?”

“No. Because we have chosen to accept responsibility for civilizing ourselves.” She waved to dismiss the ostler. “It’s time you began reading, Sir Neville.”

* * * *

She led him to the room that held her books, but continued on to the room’s other door. She opened it for him to see what lay beyond.

Neville’s breath caught in amazement. The next room was stacked with books. Many were so old they resembled bales of dusty cloth.

“This is why the Duke forbade any of our people learning to read,” said Genevieve bitterly. “Because they might read these books and rise too far above their station.”

“The Duke is a conservative man,” said Neville. He wanted to step inside the room, but somehow felt he needed extra permission to do that. “He once told me that there were only three kinds of people: the clergy, who tend our souls; the nobility, who tend our property; and the peasantry, who tend our bellies. Hence his hostility to merchants.”

“So you know the man. Yon didn’t tell me that.”

Neville winced. “But I don’t understand, why didn’t the Duke confiscate this library if he knows about it and disapproves?”

She looked down. “He tried. We refused. He was not about to send troops here, it would cost too much.”

It was all too clear to Neville what was going on. "But if he could interest the Inquisition in the problem, he could root the library out without having to lift a finger." He frowned. "That suggests you would have raised arms against the Duke's men, if they'd come here."

"Well." She gently closed the door. "We did, actually. He sent some bullies to take the books. And," she added quietly, "to take me. The little matter of my marriage, you see. We turned them away at sword-point."

"Oh." Neville's heart sank. "That was a very foolish thing to do, Lady Romana!"

"I have lived here my whole life. I've never been outside this valley. These are my people. He wanted to send me away, marry me to some fat lord in Toulouse or somewhere. I would never have seen my home again." He said nothing. "I thought you would understand," said Genevieve, "because you once lost something that meant everything to you. Do you think because I am a woman that I feel any less than you?"

He shook his head. "No. You're right. I do understand." He wished he didn't. "The trouble is, your theatre in the hillside has given the Duke a pretext to strike back at you."

"We had to educate people," she said, "any way we could. You saw - the volumes are crumbling faster than we can copy them. They are so old. Books from the Empire. Books that tell how to live a civilized life. There's nothing this land needs more than that sort of knowledge."

"You mean to say that these image pages of yours... contain this library, somehow?"

She nodded. "That is what I was afraid Jacques would learn. They are the mnemonic for it, readable to those properly trained. I should have told you before." She sighed and sat on a bench. "I'm a fool."

Neville still had the page she had painted for him. He looked at it, then at her. "No one told me we were coming here as errand boys for the Duke," he said. "I don't think I approve. Not at all."

He sat down next to her. "You've broken no law. You certainly haven't sinned against the church. You must come to some arrangement with the Duke regarding marriage, but we can't help you with that. Neither should we be the ones to enforce his wishes. It's not a church matter." He looked again at the portrait. "I'll not help them in this."

“And will you help me?” she asked. He hung his head.

“For my soul, I will.”

* * * *

Genevieve brought him a lamp. She bade him read, and as Neville read, she laid the pages of the Wheel before him. For each written volume, she had a beaded string representing some sequence of pictures. When she laid the pictures out, he could see that the sequence of images - hanged man, star, charioteer, two or ten of staffs - could be made to remind one of the contents of the written volume.

During the days that followed, he helped make preparations for the evacuation of the estate. In the evenings he read, laboriously at first, then with increasing speed, and as he read he made mnemonics using the pages of the Wheel. The seventy-seven pages could be made to represent any history or concept, if one knew how to use them.

On the fourth day they awakened to the sounds of someone pounding on the door to Genevieve’s bedchamber. “Lady!” someone cried from the corridor. “They’re attacking! They’re here!”

“How is that possible?” Neville threw off the bedcovers and reached for his boots. “It would take Jacques a week to reach the Inquisition’s camp. And one more than that for them to return.”

Genevieve wrapped herself in a heavy brocade robe, and went to the door. “I know who it is,” she said.

The messenger confirmed it. “The Duke’s men have encircled the valley, lady. There’s nowhere to go.”

“How dare he! I am sovereign on my own estate.”

“Lady.” The soldier lowered his eyes. “You are not a man.”

“Still-”

Neville took her shoulder gently. “It’s Jacques,” he said. “He must have been in the Duke’s pay all along. He had troops waiting outside the valley.” He buckled on his sword. “I’ll lead the defense.”

“You will not.”

“What?” His fumbling fingers missed their beat, and the sword belt dropped to the floor.

“Listen,” she said. Sounds of combat came from the courtyard below. “It’s too late! All we can do now is save the library.”

“Save the - How? The books are too bulky. We could never...” Then he realized what she was saying. “No.”

“Yes. We can’t defeat them. But you are not their enemy, Neville. You can walk free. You must take the wheel of books from this place.”

“I won’t leave you to them!”

“You must! It is your duty.”

“They’ll know I was in league with you anyway,” he said, and bent to retrieve his sword.

“No they won’t,” she said, and gestured to someone behind him.

He had no time to avoid the blow that felled him. The last thing he heard was Cecile saying, “You have to live.”

* * * *

Neville awoke to hear the clash of weapons and screaming voices. As he tried to sit up, he wondered how much the Duke had paid Jacques for the Church’s permission to do this.

His head was throbbing and his whole body ached. He was a mass of bruises. Apparently he had been enthusiastically beaten.

He looked around. He had been dumped in a storage room hastily converted to look like a prison. The room had one window, and its draft carried the smell of smoke.

He staggered over to the narrow slit and looked out. Several bodies were sprawled in the courtyard below him. Across the flagstoned square, the tower that housed Genevieve’s library was burning.

He heard thudding footsteps outside the door, and shouts. He

pounded on the wood, and after a moment a wild-eyed soldier opened it. He wore the livery of the Duke.

He raised his sword, then saw the coat Neville wore. "You are Sir Neville Dumoutier?"

Neville nodded dumbly.

The man glanced around the cell. "The heretics imprisoned you?"

Again he nodded. The guard handed Neville a dagger. "Walk warily," he said. "There may be some in hiding."

It was that simple. He was not searched. He was grateful that he was able to make it down the stairs and outside without assistance. A helping hand might have found the cloth bundle someone had sewn into the back of his coat.

Brother Jacques was waiting for him in the courtyard.

"The lady," Neville croaked. "Where is the lady?"

Jacques shook his head sadly and nodded to the burning tower.

* * * *

Neville awoke with a start. Some troubled dream had come to him, of fire and screaming. When he realized it was no dream but a memory, he lay back on his bedroll and wept.

He couldn't regain sleep, so he crept out of his tent and added a few sticks to the fire. He had pitched his camp a little apart from the other troops and they had respected his silence since everyone knew he had been ill-used by the heretics. The raucous celebrations of the soldiers had kept him awake anyway; the heresy was destroyed, they had reminded one another - and him - over and over again last night, and the Duke had his revenge.

Finally, they had all fallen asleep. Neville unfolded the cloth bundle that contained the Book and laid some of its pages near the fire. He read them while he waited for drowsiness to return, feeling again the spark of wonder and awakening awareness he'd first encountered on the stage of Genevieve's theatre.

She had given Neville a task worthy of his strength. He knew now that each man had to take responsibility for the whole of civilization. He would do what he could to ensure that ancient knowledge bore fruit in his actions and in those who learned from him. But first he would have to properly mourn Genevieve, for he had failed to properly mourn his wife and paid for that failure with years of unhappiness.

He took the pages and for a while he laid them this way, then that, trying arrangements to express the story of what had happened here in this remote valley. Nothing quite captured the shock and pain of it.

Finally he shuffled the pages into one package and fetched his saddlebags. He took out his writing kit and a fresh sheet of parchment. By the light of the fire he drew a tower, blasted by lightning, with figures falling from it and flaming books tumbling to the ground all around. His tears blurred the lines.

When he was done he added his page to the Book, wrapped it carefully, and laid himself down to sleep.