PEPIN: A TALE OF TWELFTH NIGHT

Books by
Evaleen Stein

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PEPIN: A TALE OF TWELFTH NIGHT

by

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To My Friend

MADAME PAULINE MARIOTTE DAVIES

WHOSE VERSION OF AN OLD LEGEND OF HER OWN FAIR FRANCE I HAVE WOVEN INTO THE FOLLOWING LITTLE TALE

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CHAPTER I

AWAITING THE COMING OF THE KINGS

Lo, 'tis now the twelfth day since the Christmas bells did peal forth their joy in the blessed Christ-child's birth, and with this night ends the holy season which we keep to do him honor; therefore on the morrow must we cast in the fire our boughs of mistletoe and our holly garlands, lest, as wise folk declare, the elves and hob-goblins might do us mischief. And ever at this time does there come to my mind a strange story, which I will tell thee, my child, if thou wilt harken; for the tale has to do with the Babe who lay in the manger and with this day whereon the Three Wise Kings of long ago did kneel before him offering him their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Surely thou knowest how they came seeking him from their far-away kingdoms, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, in their splendid purple mantles and crowns of gold, riding on camels all shining with scarlet trappings and tinkling with little silver bells, whilst overhead shone and sparkled the wondrous Star that led them to Bethlehem. Now, when thou hast heard the story I shall tell thee, if thou dost

wonder how certain parts of it came to pass, I can say only that I myself know not; I do but repeat the strange happenings which the folk of France declare took place in the olden days; though, in truth, the beginning of the tale is homely and simple enough, as thus:

Long and long ago, in the old province of Bourbonnaise, in the heart of France, there stood a great forest. Not far from one edge of this a rude wooden fence enclosed a bit of ground which surrounded the hut of a poor vine-dresser. Small and brown and weather-beaten it was, and its roof, thatched with straw, was heaped with snow; for the wintry day that was breaking was, even as is this day, the twelfth after Christmas. Still were starry flakes falling, drifting over the dark green boughs of the tall pines and hemlocks and hanging the bare branches of beech and chestnut trees with feathery garlands of white. Now and then did the wind, sweeping fitfully through the forest, send the smoke which curled from the clay chimney of the hut whirling about it in a blue cloud; and as one of these chilly gusts shook and rattled the door, suddenly it opened and there came out a little lad. A coarse smock of homespun he wore, and on his head was a knitted cap with a pointed top and swinging tassel. In one hand he carried a wisp of hay and in the other three small cakes of oaten meal sprinkled with a bit of barley sugar.

Eagerly the lad looked around, and then, passing through the gate of the little door-yard, hastened toward the sheet of drifted white which covered the highroad

not far distant, his wooden shoes stuffed with straw making deep prints in the untrodden snow through which he went. When he reached the road, wistfully did he gaze up and down to where it wound away in the distance; but no marks could he see to tell of the passing of either man or beast.

For a few moments thus did he stand there, panting a little from his walk through the heavy snow and still watching the road. Then, by and by, he pricked up his ears to the sound of a silvery tinkling.

As nearer and nearer it drew, "Oh," he said to himself, his face brightening whilst the eager look deepened in his eyes, "it may be 'tis the camel-bells of the Kings." And he tried to hurry in the direction of the sound.

But his face fell when he passed a curve of the road and there was naught save the heavy two-wheeled cart of Peasant Coquillard; the big, shaggy horse, pulling it, at every step set ringing the little bell on top of the broad wooden collar which he wore.

Then did two quick tears of disappointment spring to the lad's eyes, but he brushed them away as, "Ho, Peasant Coquillard," he did call, "hast thou seen aught of the Three Wise Kings?"

"Well, well, son," answered the peasant with a kindly smile, "thou art up early." Then shaking his head sagely, "The Three Wise Kings?" he repeated. "Nay, Pepin, not on this road have I seen them; but two miles back, where it forks to go to Angers, sure was I that I did catch a glimpse of them."

"Didst thou?" asked Pepin quickly, his eagerness returning. "Were they all together, Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazzar? And did they wear golden crowns and furred mantles, and were they of a truth riding on camels with little silver bells on their bridles? And, oh, Peasant Coquillard," the boy added, his voice shrill with excitement, "tell me, what manner of strange beast might be a camel?"

"Not so fast with thy questions, my child," replied Peasant Coquillard, rubbing his eyes a bit uncertainly. "Thou knowest these two hours has the snow been whirling down, so none can tell beyond a doubt the yea or nay of what he sees. But something there was, I saw, shining down the road to Angers, and it might have been their gold crowns—and I did hear a tinkling of bells, I dare say quite like camels wear, though to be sure never have I looked upon those strange beasts, seeing that I have never journeyed to the far countries the Wise Kings rule. 'Tis a pity, Pepin, thou couldst not have chosen the Angers road. But run home now, son, and mayhap next year thy luck will mend."

Why was Pepin watching for the Three Kings, dost thou ask, my child? Harken, and I will tell thee. It was when the dear Christ-child was twelve days old that the wonderful Star of the East did at last stand still over the stable of Bethlehem, and the royal riders found the Babe whom they had sought so far. Therefore in many parts of the world, and especially in the French land, is holiday made in memory of them, and 'tis called Twelfth Day, or the Feast of the Kings. And the French folk tell their children that early in the morning of that

day again do the Kings ride on earth, even as they did when the Christ-child lay in the manger of Bethlehem, and that if the little ones will watch the highroads it might be they will see them. That is why on Twelfth Day they hurry forth to look for the strange riders; and always do they fill their hands with the best of their Christmas goodies, which they keep to offer to the Kings, and with wisps of hay to feed the camels. For in the kindness of their hearts the little ones feel sure that all, both Kings and beasts, must be weary and hungry because of their long journeying from those far-away kingdoms whence they come. But the trouble is, none can tell of a truth which road the riders will take, so never are the children quite certain which one to follow.

Thus, on that Twelfth Day morning long ago, Pepin, though from what Peasant Coquillard had said he knew he had made a mistake, yet could he not help hoping that mayhap the Wise Kings might change their minds and after all come riding along the highroad where he stood. So, still gazing wistfully around, he waited a little longer.

Two miles away, in the wintry distance, was the old city of Angers, and in the sharp frosty air Pepin fancied he could hear the cathedral bells chiming for the holiday mass. But then, so intently was he harkening for the camels of the Kings that his ears seemed filled with the sound of bells; though, indeed, really might he have heard them ringing in the village of Bourbon, hidden beyond a far curve of the road and nestling, with its narrow, crooked streets and little houses with peaked roofs of thatch, close beneath the crag whereon

The little ones will watch the highroads.

towered the strong castle of the lord of the land, Duke Loys, or, as more often was he called by his vassals, "Loys the Good."

That was because he did rule them kindly and tried to better the lot of the poor peasants who tilled his fields and tended his flocks, and dressed the vines which in their season covered the hills with purple grapes. In those days the life of such humble folk of France was hard enough at best; for hundreds of years had their families ploughed and sown and reaped for the nobles who lived in the castles and possessed the land. In return for their toil the peasants received an humble home for themselves and in time of war, which was often, their lord was obliged to protect them with his soldiers. But if the lord they served chose to be harsh or cruel, nowhere had they to turn for help; they were not allowed to seek a home elsewhere, and, in truth, no more dreamed they of such a thing than of uprooting the trees in the great forests and planting them in the lands of another master. So were they used to bearing their lot with patience, whether it were good or ill, and often indeed it was ill enough. But with the peasant folk of Loys the Good it was not so; the well-beloved Duke pitied their toil and hardships, and, as I have told thee, kindly and justly did he govern them; and the great door of his castle was ever open to the poor and needy as to those of high estate.

And now did Pepin gaze up at those tall castle towers and turrets all capped with gleaming snow; he wondered if perchance the Three Kings had ridden thither and might even then be warming themselves at

the great fire of logs which he knew would be blazing on the castle hearth. Then did he remember that since the wheat harvest had Duke Loys been away. Though Pepin knew not wherefore he had gone, 'twas to the city of Paris wherein stood the royal palace and whither Loys and other of the great nobles had been summoned because of the grievous illness of the French King. No one knew when he would return, and the little lad sighed, for he felt sure that, as the good Duke was not in his castle to welcome them, the Wise Kings must have fared on elsewhere.

Then, as thinking of the blazing logs in the castle fire-place reminded him that he himself was shivering with the cold, reluctantly did he thrust the oaten cakes in the pocket of his smock, and, pushing the wisp of hay along with the straw in his wooden shoes, he turned around and made his way as fast as he could through the drifting snow back to the hut by the forest.

When he opened the door, an old man was sitting by the fire mending a pruning hook. "Old Yann, the vinedresser," was he called by the peasant folk, and grandsire he was to the young lad.

Hearing the boy enter, he looked up from the pruning hook which lay on his knees. "Well, child," he said, "didst thou see the Three Kings this time?"

"Nay, Grandsire," answered Pepin, coming near the hearth and warming his hands. "Peasant Coquillard did say they passed down the road to Angers, and sure I was I heard the bells of the cathedral ringing for them there. Oh, I wish 'twas that way I had gone. But thou knowest,

Grandsire, last year they rode beyond Bourbon and I missed them because I went toward Angers." And again did the tears of disappointment spring to Pepin's eyes.

"There, there, little one, never thou mind," said old Yann, pausing from his work to lift off the lad's cap and stroke his dark hair right tenderly. For Pepin's father had been dead since the boy's babyhood and his mother for a twelvemonth, so none was there left to care for him save only the patient grandsire. A peasant he was, belonging to the lands of Duke Loys; and though the hut wherein he and Pepin lived was humble enough, yet had it a whole thatch over head and always was there a fire on the hearth and a pot of soup hanging over it. Sadly indeed did they miss the mother's care; nevertheless, old Yann and the lad were both industrious, and betwixt them right well did they manage to keep the hut tidy. Besides, Yann was no ordinary peasant; in his youth for three years had he served in the castle under Duke François, the father of Loys. And though, to be sure, most of that time was Yann only a boy of all work, yet was he quick of wit and understanding and therefore had his life in the castle taught him many things. Moreover, one of the pages to the Duke had befriended him and shown him much kindness, and in this way also had he learned as a lad a gentler manner and speech than did most peasant folk. As he grew older, because of his liking for all growing things, and because whatsoever he planted in the castle garden flourished as if by magic, he had been appointed vinedresser by the Duke; for to this day is Bourbonnaise famous for its rich vintage of grapes.

Thus had Yann passed his life, and as now he sat on the bench mending his pruning hook, he made a place beside him; and drawing Pepin down, "Come," he said, "sit by Grandsire and do thou help to mend these tools. Do not grieve because thou didst not choose the King's road; always canst thou try thy luck another year;" and again did he pause to pat the lad's hair. For in their lonely life the old man strove as best he could to make up to the orphaned boy the tenderness he needs must miss from father and mother.

Quietly did they work together for a little while, and then Yann, laying down his tools, rose from the bench. "Well, Pepin," he said, "though the Kings did pass another way, nor could we go to the merry-making in the village, yet must we not forget our Twelfth-loaf for this night." So, taking a sack of coarse, dark meal from a shelf over a deal table and bidding Pepin fetch some other needful things, then did he begin mixing them in an earthen bowl. Presently, patting out a round, flat loaf of dough and taking a knife, he did prick a cross on one part of it. Then placing it in an iron pot, he brought it to the hearth to rise.

Pepin had been watching him, and as he looked at the loaf, he pointed to the part whereon was pricked the cross, and "Grandsire," he asked, "dost thou think a beggar will come for this to-night?"

"Nay," replied Yann, "I doubt if so. Yet will we keep the portion, and if any poor wayfarer asks, right welcome will he be to it. Many a beggar will be treading the roads this night, and 'tis rough weather for the

homeless," added Yann, with a sigh, "but rather will they be flocking to the castles to receive their share of the fine Twelfth-loafs of the noble folks." And again did old Yann sigh as he looked at the humble loaf of coarse meal beginning to rise on the hearth.

Dost thou ask, thou who hearest this tale, what manner of dainty were the Twelfth-loafs whereof Yann spoke? Harken, as I tell thee. Always for the feast of the nobles, which on this night was the merriest of all the year, was provided a wonderful sweet loaf; especially made, it was, for this Feast of the Kings, and still to this day do the people of France so fashion it. Fine white flour, almonds and honey and spices, all these go into its making; and in the olden days always in one portion of it was there baked a bean, and this it was which made the feast so merry. For whosoever of the noble guests received the bean in his share, him did the rest hail as "King of the Bean," and he it was who ruled the revel until midnight. All the others were obliged to obey his every command laid upon them, even as though this mimic king were indeed their own true sovereign crowned and throned in the ancient city of Paris. And because of this obedience which all must show to him, 'twas the duty of the King of the Bean to provide tasks which would provoke laughter; and many and merry were the madcap pranks that ever followed his crowning.

But another thing there was which thou must know concerning the Twelfth-loaf; always was a goodly portion of it marked with a cross and set apart as the

right of the first beggar who should knock at the castle door. And true it was, as old Yann had declared, that in those days poor folk aplenty were wandering on the highroads. This portion marked with the cross was called "God's Share," because we are taught that to give to the poor is the same as giving to our Lord; and no one dreamed of dividing the Twelfth-loaf without leaving this share, for not to do so would have been thought both wicked and unlucky. And because of this custom of the noble folk, many of the peasants also did mark with a cross the loaves of black bread they baked on this day, even as did old Yann; for though in their huts there was no King of the Bean, neither merriment nor feasting, nevertheless did their hearts pity those poorer than themselves; and they thought perhaps that some weary wayfarer, too feeble to climb to castle heights, might knock at their own doors to ask their bounty. In truth, it is the humble folk, used to toil and hardship, who ofttimes can feel more compassion for the beggar's lot than do those bred up within noble halls.

Now, my child, since I have told thee of the Twelfth-loaf of the olden days, do thou remember well these two things whereof I have spoken: the *King of the Bean*, and the beggar's portion which was called *God's Share*, for much have they to do with this tale.

CHAPTER II

THE TALE OF GUNDEBOLD THE WOLF

And now will we go back to the hut wherein did old Yann and Pepin busy themselves through the short wintry day. At evenfall, having finished their supper and set the beggar's portion of their dark loaf upon a pewter plate to await any chance wayfarer, then did they pull their bench near to the hearth, and side by side for awhile they watched in silence the flames as they leaped and flickered around the oaken log which Yann laid upon the fire.

Without, the wind rose sharply, driving the whirling snowflakes before it and drifting them over the hut and through the great, bleak forest.

As these wintry blasts sighed and moaned, or swept by with a shrill wailing, presently did there come from the heart of the forest a sound as of deep baying. Again and yet again echoed the long-drawn dismal cries, and Pepin and old Yann shivered as they harkened. Then did the young lad creep closer to his grandsire; and as once more the snarling sound rang out mingling with the wind, "Grandsire," he asked, "why do the wolves howl so long to-night?"

"Grandsire," he asked, "Why do the wolves howl so long to-night?"

"Nay, child," answered Yann, "that I cannot tell. Unless," he said, pausing awhile, "it may be they do call for their comrade, Gundebold the Wolf. Thou knowest 'tis Twelfth Night when he follows with the pack."

"Gundebold the Wolf?" repeated Pepin, with a question in his voice. "Who was he? I know naught about him."

"What sayest thou?" said Yann, as he turned slowly and looked down at the lad. "Didst thy father never tell thee of Gundebold?" Then did he add, sighing a bit, for old people do sigh often in thinking of the past, "Ah, well, I had forgotten, child, too young thou wast whilst thy father lived, seeing thou wast but a babe. Yet as none there be in Bourbonnaise but must some time hear the tale, I will tell it to thee, even as I had it from my father, and he from his grandsire; for in such manner, I know not from how far back, has the story been handed down."

Eagerly did Pepin wait, as the old man, softly stroking the lad's hair, paused again and sat gazing at the red coals upon the hearth.

Then passing his hand across his eyes, at last he began; telling the tale to the young lad even as I repeat his words to thee, my child. Thus spoke old Yann. "Long, long, long ago, more than thrice a hundred years, in the days when the good King Louis surnamed 'The Saint,' ruled our realm of France, there lived a baron of Burgundy whose name was Gundebold."

"Where is Burgundy, Grandsire?" asked Pepin.

"As to that," replied Yann, a bit uncertainly, "I cannot tell thee more than this; 'tis just beyond our own province of Bourbonnaise. A fair country 'tis said to be to-day, full of vineyards and with rich pastures of sweet grass for flocks and herds. But in the days of the Baron Gundebold, rough and lonely it was, and many and wild were the great forests wherein did range boars and wolves and all manner of fierce untamed creatures of the woods.

"Over one of the wildest of these woodlands, a dark reach of pines and hemlocks called the Forest of Ott, rose a rocky height; and on this stood the strong castle of the baron, with its high towers and walls of stone thicker than a man is tall."

"Was it larger than the castle of our Duke Loys?" again did Pepin ask.

"Yes," answered Yann, " 'twas larger and stronger even than his, and deep and wide was the moat round about it. But though Baron Gundebold's castle was filled to overflowing with splendid furnishings, for great riches were his, yet did the great, gray towers rise grim and forbidding, and the place was shunned by all save the evil companions of the baron. For Gundebold himself was hard-hearted and selfish, and wild and roistering was the life he led, caring for naught so much as the hunt. He would leap on his horse and, seizing his bow and boar-spear, so furiously would he gallop off chasing the beasts through the forest that often was he called the 'Wild Huntsman.' Thou knowest, Pepin, I have told thee of the wicked hunter who rides on the

storm-wind over the tops of the tallest trees of the forest, his fierce pack of hounds snarling and baying about him and the Evil One close on his heels?"

"Yes, Grandsire," answered Pepin, giving another little shiver as he crept closer.

"Well," continued Yann, "the Baron Gundebold was indeed a wild rider, and so fierce and merciless did he become in his chase of the forest beasts, and so cruel and heartless to the peasant folk around him, that soon people began to add to his name 'The Wolf.'

"As thou canst guess, child, he was not loved by his vassals as is our Duke Loys the Good. But though well he knew he was both feared and hated, little cared Gundebold. So that his own table was spread with the richest fare and his cloak and doublet were of the finest fur and velvet, it mattered not to him if the poor peasants who tilled his fields and dressed his vines had naught but rags to wear and crusts for food."

Here did old Yann pause for a moment, thinking of the castle life he had seen in his youth. Then did he go on thus: "Thou dost not dream, Pepin, what wonderful things the noble folk do eat and drink! Thou knowest when I was a lad I did serve in the castle in the time of the father of our Duke Loys, and never will I forget the silver platters and flagons, and the gold and jewelled cups that were sent in for his table, and the fine white loaves, and the spits full of pheasants and hares and boar's flesh and venison roasting in the great kitchen, and the baskets of strange fruits from far countries, and the sweetmeats which the castle cooks did fashion in

the oddest shapes! 'Tis almost past believing!"

As the old man sat living over the past, "Do noble folk always eat white bread; and all those other wonderful things?" added the lad vaguely. For never had he been in a castle kitchen, and naught did he guess of what went on therein.

"Always," replied old Yann, nodding his head wisely. "And we peasant folk must be content with our coarse black loaves; that is the way of the world," and again did he nod. "But never does Duke Loys let us go without bread, and always does he see to it that we have a sound thatch over our heads and a whole smock to our backs; which is more than did Gundebold.

"Withal so haughty and selfish and wild he was, that the hearts of all his vassals melted with pity when they saw the young bride he one day brought home to his castle. Fair and sweet she was, as beautiful as the white lilies that grow in the garden of Duke Loys. And so kind and gentle she was to everyone, that soon was she christened by all as 'The Dove'; and thus always did they speak of her."

"Was the Baron Gundebold cruel to *her?*" said the lad, wondering if even The Wolf could be unkind to so sweet a bride.

For answer old Yann did but nod his head sadly as he went on with the tale. " 'Twas an ill mating, The Wolf and The Dove, and wretched and sorrowful enough must have been the lot of the wife of Gundebold. By and by, when a son was born to them, fair and gentle he was, like to his mother; and this angered The Wolf.

Gundebold loved the child, in a fierce, masterful way, more than his hard heart had ever loved anything, but he wished him to be bold and reckless like himself; and to make him so, just as soon as little Gaspard, for thus did they call him, could sit in front of him on his saddle-bow, then did The Wolf begin to take him for companion on his wild hunts."

"I should think The Dove must have been ill pleased with that, and so must Gaspard also," said Pepin, who himself was a gentle lad and so did shrink from the thought of chasing to the death the creatures of the forest.

"Yes," answered Yann, "little Gaspard did indeed hate and dread those fierce rides even as wouldst thou, Pepin. And as for The Dove, many and bitter were the tears she shed to be thus forced to see the child so early trained in those rough and dangerous ways. But," here did old Yann shrug his shoulders as he went on, "who could withstand the will of The Wolf? And so, day after day, in vain did The Dove wring her white hands as she besought him to leave the boy with her; for Gundebold paid no heed.

"But at last, when Gaspard was about thine age, Pepin, there came a day when The Wolf, snatching him from his play, swung him to the saddle of his great black horse and galloped off to chase the wild boars through the Forest of Ott.

"Pale and trembling, the lad clung to his father when they set out; and paler still, but trembling no longer, did he come home. For it was his lifeless body that lay cross

the saddle-bow. Gundebold, in seeking to hurl his heavy boar-spear, had unwittingly struck and slain Gaspard. And well-nigh crazed with grief was the unhappy father as he bore him back to the castle."

As old Yann paused in his telling, Pepin was silent, save for a low, long-drawn sigh of pity.

Presently, again did Yann take up the tale. "Before long The Dove faded away and died of her sorrow. And Gundebold, if he had been wild and reckless before, now was he a hundredfold more so. He passed his time chasing the boars and wolves by day, and by night feasting and drinking red wine with the companions he would gather in his castle; all of them only a little less wild and wicked than himself.

"And so it went on till Twelfth Day came, and in the castles round about him they kept the Feast of the Kings. But Gundebold, though he held a feast that night, had no mind to honor the Wise Kings. Little enough did he care for them, or the blessed Christ-child either; no Christmas had he kept, nor did any green garlands deck his walls as in the castles of the other noble folk who had remembered the Christ-child's birthday. Nay, Gundebold's feast did but chance to fall on Twelfth Night, and 'twas but one of his many wild revels where they did eat and drink enough for thrice their number and amused themselves shouting out rude jests and loudly singing their wicked, heathenish songs. And never one of them gave a thought to the little Lord Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem, nor to the Three Kings who came seeking Him on this day."

Again did old Yann sit lost in thought for a few moments; then did he go on. "As I have told thee, great riches had the Baron Gundebold, and these did he delight to show. Therefore, very splendid was his table as it stood in the midst of the castle hall, spread for that Twelfth Night feast. Gold and silver cups and flagons and platters glittered in the torchlight as the company took their places. At the head of the table sat The Wolf; he was dressed in the finest of velvet and over his furred mantle and wide collar of lace hung golden chains set thick with jewels. When all were ready, at a signal from the baron there came into the hall a long procession of serving men bearing the most costly food."

"Was there a Twelfth-loaf with a bean in it?" asked Pepin.

"'Tis to that part of the story I am coming," replied Yann. "Naught cared The Wolf for aught to remind him of the day; but those there were who served him in the castle kitchen who were more careful to keep the Feast of the Kings. So a Twelfth-loaf had they made, and though in it they had placed a bean, thinking thus to please their master with some fresh excuse for folly, not less had they taken pains to mark with a cross another goodly part of it for God's Share.

"At the beginning of the feast was the great loaf borne in so that some one of the noisy company might be proclaimed King of the Bean and so rule the revel. When each guest had taken his portion, then was the platter which held it set before Gundebold; and dark was his frown when he saw God's Share still left upon

it. For he had no pity for the poor and did scorn the kindly old custom of giving them part of the Twelfth-loaf. Frowning again, then did he take from the platter the beggar's share, and slowly crumbled it on the floor so that the hound at his feet might lick it up.