

THE FEAST OF THE ASS

BY

K.R. Wilson

I met Melisende at The Feast of the Ass. I can still see her, the poor child, perched nervously on my donkey Marsilius in the light from the stained glass windows while her swaddled newborn squirmed in her arms.

Wait, the Feast of the Ass isn't a thing anymore, is it? The Christian calendar used to be filled with these niche festivals. If you were a medieval villager your whole week would revolve around things like The Exaltation of the Holy Cross or The Feast of the Circumcision or The Festival of Saint Scrofulo's Pants. Two of which are real, by the way. You can look them up. The Church was fine with a good festival as long as it had a proper liturgical basis. Why do you think they repurposed so many pagan Roman ones? You think people didn't party before Saint Scrofulo turned up?

Anyhow, The Feast of the Ass. Catholic Masses tend to be serious affairs. Readings from Gospels. Wine conjured into blood. A few tunes to drive the teachings home. You'd be surprised to see a donkey marching up the aisle at one, though. Especially as a featured performer. I know I was. And he was my donkey. And that wasn't even the most surprising part of that Mass.

I'd ridden into Beauvais at the butt-end of the twelve days of Christmas, looking forward to some fine Twelfth Night revels. You know how these things go. Handsome stranger rides into town from somewhere exotic, dot dot dot. Not that I'd presume to call myself handsome. Draw your own conclusions. But after almost 2400 years on this Earth at that point I could be all kinds of exotic when I wanted to. And more importantly, crowded Twelfth Night celebrations would be a good place to shake off my pursuers. There'd been a bit of a dispute in Amiens over the ownership of a quantity of silver. I'd slipped away at dusk and ridden poor Marsilius through the night without a rest.

My starting point in a new town was always its cathedral, if it had one, though any large-capacity church would do. Not that I was religious. There just weren't any tourist information bureaus in medieval Europe. The quickest entry point into a local society was always its church. Followed soon after by the taverns in its immediate neighbourhood.

I found Beauvais' cathedral near the north end of the walled town. It had a flat stone facade capped by a simple triangular gable and was flanked by a

shoulder-like pair of buttressed wings. Under the round arch of its main door a young priest with copper-red hair was emptying a basin of water onto the cobbles of the square. He looked up with a base-level public-service smile as I approached. Then the smile broadened into something warmer and more genuine.

“Good day, Father,” I called out as I slid down from my mount. I continued on foot, Marsilius’s rope harness in my hand. “I wonder if there’s somewhere nearby where I could feed and water my poor tired beast?”

The priest looked at Marsilius the way a fox looks at a field mouse. “Yes, he looks in need of a rest and a bite to eat.” He looked me in the eye. “We could stable him here at the church, if you like.” His tone made it clear there was an unspoken condition.

“That would be most welcome, Father, uh ...?”

“Father Godefroid, sir. And you are?”

“Estienne de ... Tours.” That worked. I’d been in Tours for a while recently.

“Welcome, Estienne de Tours. You’re a traveler, are you?” He was looking at the bundles tied across Marsilius’s back. Or maybe just at Marsilius.

“Yes. Just arrived.” I narrowed my eyes. “Does something about my animal puzzle you, Father?”

He looked up sharply. “Oh. Sorry. No, it’s just that this morning at prayer I’d been lamenting the death of the church’s venerable old donkey and wondering how we’d replace him. And now here you are.”

“Marsilius isn’t for sale, Father.” I rested a proprietary hand on the beast’s haunch. “Not even to the church.”

“No, no sir,” said the priest, his palms raised, “that’s not what I mean.” He reached to ruffle Marsilius’s bristly mane. “I wonder if we could borrow him, though. Just for an afternoon?”

Marsilius nipped at him. The priest barely got his hand out of the way in time.

The Feast of the Ass was one of those Christmas-adjacent festivals that kept the celebrations going for weeks on end. The Bible contained any number of little nativity embers that could be fanned into full-blown feasts. In this case, it was the bit in Matthew’s Gospel where Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with their newborn because Herod is having all the boy babies massacred. With Mary riding on an ass.

The Feast was coming up. The cathedral’s ass was dead. To Father Godefroid, Marsilius was literally the answer to a prayer.

“He can be temperamental when he’s tired,” I said. I didn’t need to elaborate. The young priest was still holding his almost-bitten hand protectively against his chest. “I’d need to be the one leading him.”

Godefroid was fine with that.

The Feast was in eight days. Marsilius and I could stay in the cathedral's stables until then, which would spare me having to spend any of my cache of silver on an inn or feed.

Though I did drop some in the local taverns. Handsome stranger, dot dot dot.

I met the rest of the cast on the afternoon of the Mass, in the square in front of the cathedral. Melisende, holding a cloth-wrapped child, and her husband Urso, holding his wife tightly by her upper arm, were waiting with Father Godefroid and an older priest by the arched door. Melisende couldn't have been more than sixteen. Her head and much of her face were covered by a severe white wimple, the end of a long black braid seemingly trying to escape below it. The baby—a girl, I'd been told—was tiny, probably not more than a couple of days old. Urso seemed entirely uninterested in his daughter. Presumably because she wasn't a son. Melisende flinched as Marsilius moved to sniff her. Her wimple shifted slightly. Was that the edge of a bruise on her cheek?

“So,” said Father Godefroid. “The first part of the process reenacts the flight into Egypt. Your beast will carry Melisende and her child from here to the church of Saint-Étienne. We'll conduct a brief ceremony in front of the church, and then you'll lead them up the nave to the sanctuary, where you'll stay until the end of the Mass.”

“And I'll be with her the whole time,” said Urso. He was a brutish-looking man as dark-haired as the bear he was named for, and probably twice his wife's age. He leaned toward me with a scowl. “You don't touch her.”

I nodded. “I don't touch her.” I didn't need trouble. I was already fleeing one town.

He leaned away again but held the scowl.

When the congregants started arriving Urso lifted his wife roughly onto Marsilius's back. The cathedral choir assembled behind the priests and, at a nod from Father Godefroid, sang an odd hymn I'd never heard. It opened by invoking the light of joy on this day— “Lux hodie, lux laetitiae”— and finished up wishing joy and delight to all who observe the Feast of the Ass. It was a pleasant little tune, and a nice sentiment to start the festivities with. Once it was over, we set out for Saint-Étienne, Father Godefroid's copper-red hair leading us through the expanding crowd.

By the time we arrived, some ten or fifteen minutes later, the procession had swollen to more than a hundred people, with easily twice that number already

waiting by the church door. Marsilius was skittish in a crowd that size, but I managed to keep him steady.

The two priests led us to the door, where two other priests waited. Servers brought each of them a flagon of wine and a glass goblet. In unison the four priests filled their glasses and raised them to the crowd, who cheered. Another part of the Mass I hadn't seen before. They drank down the wine—to more cheering—and the servers opened the doors.

As we moved down the nave the choir sang a lively tune in celebration of the Biblical ass that carried Mary into Egypt, praising its strength, its speed, its appetite, and so on. The verses were in Latin, but at the end of each there was a rousing refrain in French—“Hez, hez, sire asnes hez”—in which the congregation joined in praise of Sir Ass with a nasal sound almost like braying. It was all I could do to keep Marsilius calm until we reached our spot at the left side of the sanctuary. Urso's relentless presence by his flank didn't help matters.

The Mass itself then began in a more conventional way, with the choir singing a gentle Introit. I sang along. Finally, a song I knew. All of it but the end, as it turned out. Because instead of simply concluding the chant peacefully on the tonic—as I did—the choristers tilted their heads back and brayed a loud “Hee-haw!”

I jumped in surprise. Marsilius shifted nervously, his hooves clacking on the stone floor. The baby started to cry. I stroked Marsilius's mane and whispered in his ear to calm him. The Mass then carried on as before, and he settled back down. Until the end of the Kyrie. At which point the choristers again lifted their heads and brayed!

Marsilius had had enough. He lifted his front hooves and smashed them down on the floor, braying back at the choir with all his might. From the corner of my eye, I saw Melisende tilt sharply. I turned and reached to steady her. Urso shoved me away and grabbed her arm.

The baby slipped from her grasp.

She screamed.

I caught the baby easily. You get a lot of practice catching things over 2400 years. Not always babies, of course, but still. The impact barely disturbed the swaddling around her head.

But it did that just enough to reveal her thin, copper-red hair.

Urso's eyes went wide. He howled in rage. Apparently, his lack of interest in his daughter had extended to not bothering to see her hair until that moment.

He drew a dagger from his belt and ran toward Father Godefroid. The priest just stood there in shock. I guess he hadn't seen her hair until that moment either.

I handed the baby up to Melisende—who'd managed to settle herself—and leaped onto Urso's shoulders. I pulled his head back so he couldn't see where he was going. He twisted and stabbed at me. I dodged his blows easily. Another one of those things you get a lot of practice at over 2400 years. But he kept at it. It turned into quite the scuffle.

Somehow at some point his dagger ended up in his chest.

Beats me how that happened.

"How far is it to Tours?" asked Melisende from her seat on Marsilius's back. Her loose dark hair shone in the morning sun. The bruise on her cheek was starting to fade.

"A few days." I looked back at her. "Reconsidering your decision?"

She shook her head. "There's nothing for me in Beauvais." She nuzzled her baby's copper-red hair. "You're sure these friends of yours will take me in?"

"They could use an extra hand around their inn. Plus, they have a soft spot for young, widowed mothers."

"And you're sure I won't be a burden to them?"

I thought about my cache of silver. Ah well. Always more where that came from.

"None at all," I said.

Author Biography

K. R. Wilson's novel *Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia* (Guernica Editions)—in which a self-described immortal takes a police interrogator on a wry, anachronistic tour of 3200 years of Western history—was longlisted for the 2022 Leacock Medal for Literary Humour. "The Feast of the Ass" is a new story about Stan written specifically for this issue.