

Cambrinus, King of Beer

I

In olden times, there was a glassmaker's assistant in the village of Fresnes-on-the-Escaut. His name was Cambrinus, or as some said, Gambrinus. With his fresh, rosy face, his golden beard and curls, he was one of the handsomest fellows you'd see anywhere.

More than one of the glassmakers' girls, bringing their fathers' dinners in, glanced teasingly at the handsome boy, but he had eyes only for Flandrine, the glassblower's daughter.

Flandrine, for her part, was a superb girl, with gold hair and red cheeks. The curate couldn't have given his blessing to a couple so well-matched, if only there hadn't been an unbreakable barrier between them.

Cambrinus didn't come from a glassmaking family and could not hope to master the art. For the rest of his life, all he'd be able to do was hand the unfinished bottle-shapes to the glassblower, without ever hoping for the honor of completing one himself.

In fact, as everyone knows, glassmakers are all gentlefolk by birth, and they teach their noble trade of glassblowing only to their own sons. Anyway, Flandrine was too proud to lower her eyes to look at a simple servant, as a glassmaker would put it.

And so it happened that the unhappy boy, consumed by a fire ten times hotter than the fire in the furnace, lost his fresh complexion and became thin as a heron.

One day, when he could stand it no longer, finding himself alone with Flandrine, he took his courage in both hands and told her what he felt. The haughty girl heard him out with such scorn that, in despair, he set his unfinished work down and never came back to the glassworks again.

As he loved music, he bought a violin to charm him out of his sorrow and tried to play it, even though he'd never been taught how.

Next, he took it into his head to become a musician. "I'd become a great artist," he said, "and maybe then Flandrine would have me. Surely a good musician is as worthy as a gentleman glassblower."

He went in search of Josquin, the old canon in the church-college at Condé, who had a marvelous genius in music. He told him all his troubles, and begged him to teach him his art. Josquin took pity on his grief and showed him the rules for fiddle-playing.

Cambrinus soon learned enough for girls to dance to in the meadow. He was ten times better than the other strolling fiddlers—but, sad to say, no one is taken for a prophet in his own country.

The people of Fresnes couldn't believe that a glassmaker's assistant could become a good musician that fast. So it was under a fire of non-stop jeers, one fine Sunday, armed with his viol, that he mounted the stage (if I can call his barrel a stage).

Although he felt their jeers keenly, he drew the first strokes of his bow with a sure hand, and led the dance with a strength and spirit that silenced their laughter. It was all going beautifully, when Flandrine appeared.

At sight of her, the unhappy boy lost his head, came in late with the tune, and wandered so far off key that the dancers, thinking he was making fun of them, pulled him down off his barrel, broke his viol over his shoulders, and, hooting and booing, sent him on his way with a pair of black eyes.

The worst of all was that it so happened that at that time there was a judge in Condé who handed out verdicts with all the precision of a grocer weighing out candles to sell—and making the weights on the balance lean to whichever side he might choose. He had a stammer, spoke almost entirely in Latin, mumbling prayers from morning to evening, and looked so much like a monkey that everyone called him Jocko.

Jocko understood the matter and had the troublemakers called up before his tribunal. The Fresnians hurried to the trial, each one carrying a couple of chickens to offer to the judge. He found the chickens were so nice and fat, and Cambrinus so clearly guilty that, even though the unlucky lad had already been given a beating in broad daylight, he condemned him to a month in jail, on a charge of assault and battery and raising a ruckus by night.

This was heart-breaking for the poor boy. He was so ashamed and overcome with sorrow that when he got out of prison he was determined to put an end to his life. He unhooked the nice new rope from his well and headed for the wood of Odomez.

When he came to the darkest part of the way, he climbed up an oaktree, sat down on the first branch, tied the rope tight around it, and wound the other end around his neck. With that done, he lifted up his head and was just going to fling himself off, when all at once he stopped short.

There before his eyes stood a tall man, dressed in a green coat with copper buttons, with a plumed hat on his head. He was armed with a hunting knife and carrying a silver horn on top of his game-bag. He and Cambrinus looked at each other for some time in silence.

“Don’t let me disturb you, sir!” said the stranger at last.

“Oh, I’m not in a hurry,” said Cambrinus, feeling a little less determined in the presence of a stranger.

“You may not be, but I am, my good Cambrinus.”

“Hey! How do you know my name?”

“I also know that you’re about to dance your final jig, my lad, because you were thrown in jail, and sweet Flandrine refused to enroll you in the great brotherhood of glassmakers.” And, having said that, the stranger took off his hat.

“What! So it’s you, Mynheer van Beelzebub! Well, well! Considering your two horns, I would have thought you’d be uglier.

“Thank you!”

“What good wind blows you here?”

“It’s Saturday, isn’t it? My wife is cleaning the house, and as I can’t stand all that mopping up—”

“You cleared out. I can see why. Anyhow—have you had good hunting?”

“Pooh! All I got was the soul of the judge in Condé.”

“Really! So Jocko’s dead! And you’re carrying off his soul! Oh, but you don’t want to lose any time, Mynheer. Why are you waiting here?”

“I’m waiting for yours.”

“Mine, my God!”

“Anyone who’s hanged goes into Hell’s gamebag.”

“What if I don’t hang myself?”

“That would be a living hell.”

“That’s hardly any better. That’s really not fair, it isn’t, godverdom! Look, Sir Devil, be a good devil and save me from that!”

“But how?”

“Make Flandrine want to marry me.”

“Pooh!—that’s impossible. What a woman wants—”

“God wants, too. Yes, I know. But suppose it’s something she doesn’t want—”

“When she really doesn’t want something, the devil himself could lose his horns trying.”

“Well, then, make me stop loving her.”

“I agree—on one condition, that you give me your soul in exchange.”

“Right now?”

“No. In thirty years.”

“Done and done. I’m so miserable—but if you’ll help me out, to top off the bargain, I’ll get even with the Fresnians.”

“Let’s think first about getting you well, and the rest can wait. One nail drives out another. There’s no passion so strong that it won’t yield to a stronger passion. Try gambling night and day, and the love of gaming will replace the game of love.

“I’ll try it,” said Cambrinus. “Thank you, Mynheer.”

He untied the rope, bowed, and took his leave.

II

The following Sunday, there was a great archery contest at Condé. Cambrinus went to see it, and so did the rest of the townfolk.

The brotherhood of the archers of Saint Sebastian had put up, as a prize, five dishes and three tin coffeepots, as well as six silver spoons for hitting the bird. Cambrinus all by himself won four dishes, two coffeepots, and the six silver spoons. People had never heard of such skill.

Then, a week later, they were going to play tennis on Green Square in Condé, and in Fresnes they put together a team of players. Before that time, the Fresnians had hardly ever shone in the game, but even so, they felt no fear at competing against the teams from Valenciennes and Quaregnon, the two strongest teams in the country. The Valenciennes and Quaregnon teams were beaten by the Fresnians. They were angry, and fist-fights broke out in all the streets.

Cambrinus then bought a blind finch and carried it around with him everywhere, as the custom was among the Walloons. When he heard tell that there was going to be a great finch show at Saint Amand, he took his little travelling companion and set out.

As he drew near the town, he met up at Croisette with some finch owners, about three hundred of them, all going to the contest, two by two, each one carrying in his hand a little wooden cage, decorated with iron wire. The procession was headed by a drum-major, flourishing his baton, and two drums and six hams decked with flowers and ribbons, which were going to be a prize worth winning in the competition.

Cambrinus fell into step with them, and when the cages were set up in lines ready to compete, all the length of the abbey grounds, a lovely concert began. Each bird called out its cheerful notes as loud as it could, and its master, monitored by the judges, took a slate and a piece of chalk and conscientiously wrote down the notes coming from the bird's throat. The noise was so loud that you couldn't even hear the big bell in the clock-tower ring.

The Fresnians had laid a bet of three thousand florins that Cambrinus's virtuoso of a bird wouldn't get mixed up with the *p'tee-p'tee-p'tee recapio-placapio* that the second-rate artists were singing, and that Cambrinus's bird would repeat nine hundred times in an hour its rat-a-plan-plan-plan-biscuity-basket, the true solo, the only one that counted.

The bird kept singing nine hundred times right through, and its master took first place and the three thousand florins, after which the Saint-Amandians triumphantly paraded their man and his bird, the one carrying the other.

Cambrinus set about traveling all over Flanders, beating even the most famous finch-trainers with his bird. And that's why ever since then the Flemish are as devoted to finch-fights, as the English are to cock-fights.

From Flanders, he went into Germany, and traveled from town to town playing in every game of chance or skill. Everywhere he went, the luck was with him. He was admired by all, but he wasn't healed of his love the least bit.

His never-failing luck at first enchanted him. Later, it only amused him. Then it left him feeling cold, and soon it bored him. In the end, he was so tired of this perpetual winning that he would have given the world to lose just once—but his good luck pursued him relentlessly.

He was beginning to feel himself just as unhappy as before, when, one morning, he woke up with a brilliant idea: "Good luck is a good thing," he said to himself, "and perhaps Flandrine will consent to marry me, now that I'm rolling in riches."

He went to offer his treasure at the feet of his cruel beloved, but Flandrine—an incredible result that would astonish maidens nowadays—refused him.

"Are you a gentleman?" she said.

"No."

"Well, then! Take your treasure away. I'm not going to marry anyone but a gentleman."

Cambrinus was in such despair that one fine day, as the light was failing, he returned to the wood of Odomez, climbed an oak, sat himself down on the first bough, and tied his rope tightly around it. He had already put the noose around his neck, when the green huntsman appeared.

"Humpf!" Beelzebub exclaimed. "I'd forgotten the old proverb: unlucky in love, lucky at cards. Do you want me to tell you a way to deal with love?"

Cambrinus pricked up his ears.

"Yes, you can lose, and you can do even better than losing your gold. You can lose your memory, and, along with that, the torments of remembering."

"But how?"

“Drink. Wine is the father of forgetting. Pour out floods of joy for yourself. There’s nothing better than a bottle of wine to drown your human sorrow.

“You might well be right, Mynheer.”

And Cambrinus rolled up his rope and went back to Fresnes.

III

Without delay, he had a wine-cellar built, made of big stones from Tournai. It was forty feet high and six hundred feet long. He stocked it with the finest wines.

He had casks set against the walls in parallel rows and he put into them to age hot burgundy, sweet Bordeaux, sparkling champagne, cheerful malmsey, bubbly marsala, ardent sherry, generous tokay and the tender johannisberg that opens the golden doors of dream to thick-headed Germans.

Night and day, Cambrinus drank the fruit of the vine in glasses from Bohemia. The unfortunate young man thought he was drinking to forget, but he was drinking nothing but love. How could this be? Alas! That’s how good Flemish-folk, more than people in other lands, are defeated.

Among us, when the fumes of wine rise inside the brain, when the divine liquid fills the skull, like the lava in the volcano’s crater, then the imagination catches fire.

At the sixth glass—it never fails—a Flamand would see before his eyes a crowd of dancers at his side, myriads of Flandrines jeering at him as they dance wildly, in endless farandoles.

So Cambrinus next tried to forget his sorrow in Norman cider, perry from Le Mans, Gallic hydromel, French cognac, Dutch gin, English gin, Scottish whiskey, and found that drink only fed the fire. The more he drank, the more it roused him—and enraged him.

One evening, he could no longer resist it. He ran without stopping to the wood of Odomez, climbed the oak, tied the rope, and, without looking at the world around him—to make sure he wouldn’t change his mind—he flung the rope around his neck. But the rope snapped, and the hanged man fell into the arms of the green huntsman.

“Let go of me, you cursed imposter!” cried Cambrinus hoarsely. “What! Can’t a fellow hang himself in comfort?”

Beelzebub burst out laughing. “I wanted to see,” he said, “just how far a good Flamand’s strength of will would take him. But now, after all your trouble, I’m going to cure you. Come, now—look here!”

All at once the trees drew apart, some to the right and some to the left, leaving an empty square, and Cambrinus saw tall poles of chestnut wood line up in long rows, encircled by delicate plants bearing green, sweet bell-flowers. A bunch of stakes lay on the ground, and three or four hundred women, squatting down, seemed to be picking the makings of an immense salad. This strange forest was shut in by a neat wall of bricks.

“What’s that, myn God!” said Cambrinus.

“That, my fine fellow, is a field of hops, and the house you see down there is the brewery. The hop-flowers are going to cure your love-sickness. Follow me.”

Beelzebub led him down to the building. Inside were giant vats, furnaces, casks, and boilers full of a golden liquor that gave off a tart perfume. Some men in blue aprons were engaged in an odd task.

“With hops and barley,” Beelzebub explained, “following the example of these men, you are going to brew the Flemish wine—otherwise known as beer. The hop-flowers will give their scent and flavor to the barley-wine. Thanks to this sacred plant, beer, like the fruit of the vine, will age in the casks. It will come out as golden as a topaz, or as dark as onyx, and turn the good Flamands into gods on earth. Come, drink!”

And Beelzebub dipped a big pitcher into one of the casks and drew it out foaming with beer. Cambrinus obeyed him, and made a face.

“Drink some more, more!”

He took another swallow and another, and felt a sort of calmness descending little by little on his nerves.

“Aren’t you as happy as a god, now?”

“Very much so, my lord, except that the supreme pleasure of the gods is missing.”

“Which one?”

“Vengeance! The Fresnians weren’t willing to dance to my fiddle before. Give me an instrument that will make them jump when I tell them”

“In that case—listen!”

At that moment, the clock of Odomez struck nine.

“What of it?” said Cambrinus.

“Quiet! Listen again.”

The bell of Fresnes rang again, followed by the bell of Condé, and then the bell of Bruille.

“What of it?” Cambrinus said again.

“You’re asking me for an instrument that forces people to dance. Here it is, ready-made. Have you noticed that each of these bells has its own particular sound? Put them together, put them in tune with each other, get their chimes ringing from two boards, one the keyboard and one the pedalboard, and you’ll have a fine carillon.”

“A carillon! I’ll baptize this marvelous instrument with that name!” cried Cambrinus. “Thanks, Beelzebub, my friend, and—goodbye!”

“No, not goodbye, not forever—just till we meet again. In thirty years. Also, as I like to have affairs all in order, be so kind as to sign this paper with a drop of your blood.”

He handed him a pen and a piece of parchment covered with cabalistic marks. Cambrinus pricked his finger and signed. At once, the hop-field, the brewery, and Beelzebub all disappeared.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK