

THE CHALICE OF CANA

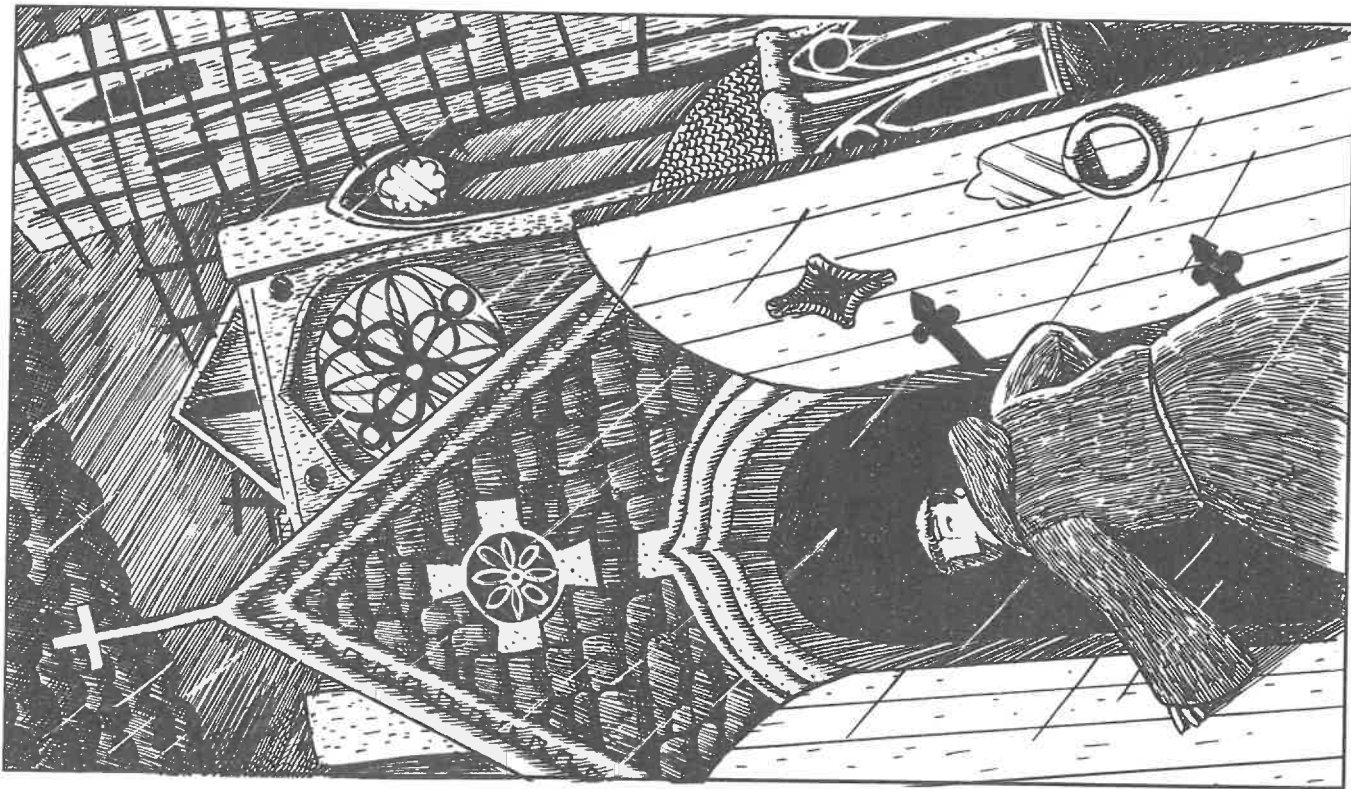
Medieval France, circa 1300

IT WAS A WONDROUS DAY when construction finally resumed on the town's pride and glory—its gift to God, main tourist attraction, largest building, largest employer, and the one thing that could catapult it to the forefront of all French market towns: its cathedral.

Seven winters before, the local chapter's purse had gone empty and a halt was put to the work. But Bishop Faisant was an enterprising soul and responded to this plight in an inspired way. He took the crypt, the first part of the cathedral to be finished, and opened it to the public. The finger bones of John the Baptist and the chalice of Cana were placed on display there, and the response was immediate. Well-paying pilgrims came from all over France and beyond to kiss these relics and pray for miracles.

And now, after seven years of saving every sou, after seven years of watching other towns come closer and closer to completing their own cathedrals, everyone in the ambitious market town was overjoyed to see the returning legions of stonecutters and masons crowding into the cathedral square and reopening their workshops.

Jean Blacksmith stood at his forge as a parade of oxen-pulled carts passed by, buckling under the weight of freshly quarried limestone. There was almost a carnival atmosphere to the holy enterprise, he thought. And he smiled.



Jean's grandfather had been the master smithy here when the foundation stone was laid half a century before. Jean, a young man, had every reason to hope that he himself would still be alive to witness the first holy mass in the monumental house of worship.

At the nearby docks, Bishop Faisant and his assistants were overseeing the unloading of sixty-foot roof beams that had been shipped from the land of Scandinavia. Here, as elsewhere, the cathedral's master architect had been ordained a bishop. What better way to see that the edifice was erected according to God's great plan.

"A glorious day, brother Jean."

Jean waved to the man in the brown robe. Friar Germain was kindly and stout, an elderly member of the Bishop's household. "Indeed glorious," Jean replied. A single raindrop touched his nose, signaling the approach of a spring storm.

At the workshop next to Jean's, doors flew open, startling the timid friar. It was a chill morning, but Robert the glassmaker was already sweating from the heat of his fire. The short, barrel-chested man hailed the smithy and the friar and then asked the smithy how big his workload might be. "My blowing pipe has a hole that won't stay plugged. If you have the time..."

Jean nodded. "I can make you another."

"Good. If we're to have a rose window to outshine the wonder at Rouen..." The glassmaker broke into a mischievous grin. "Look at this." He opened his pouch and poured out a handful of sparkling light. "Imagine the sun coming through these colors."

Jean inspected the finely cut bits of glass and had to agree. He had never seen glass with this kind of brilliance. "Truly, they rival any gems in the Bishop's palace."

"I shall be the judge of that," came a new, deep-throated voice.

Jean glanced behind him and was surprised to see Pierre of Chantilly. A decade earlier, Pierre, a master goldsmith, had

been employed here, constructing the gilded and jeweled container that held the ancient wooden chalice believed to have been used by our Lord at the wedding feast of Cana. From here, Pierre had gone to find work at Bayeux.

A few years later, a fire destroyed much of Bayeux's cathedral, and there was a scandalous story—there were always such stories—that the gold of Bayeux's relics had melted into impure puddles, more dross than gold. Pierre fled Bayeux, or so the story went, just one step ahead of the Bishop's men.

The rumors must be false, Jean thought, for Pierre was back here, as boastful and brazen as ever, to work once again on their cathedral's treasures.

Pierre admired the bits of colored glass, then returned them to Robert. "Your work is too good to waste on windows," he said, half chidingly.

Friar Germain was aghast. "Too good for the Lord's windows?" Before he could say more, fat drops of rain began pelting the square. "Oh, dear," he sighed. "The Bishop wants the treasury lit and prepared for visitors. I thought I had hours yet, but this rain will speed up their plans, I'm sure." Germain brought a long wooden key from beneath the folds of his robe. "Excuse me, kind sirs. Duty calls."

From the shelter of the smithy workshop, the three men watched the portly friar puff his way across the square toward the treasury, a single-storied stone hall connected to the rear of the half-built cathedral.

The downpour was quickly sweeping the square clear of the bustling throng.

Robert raised his hood and prepared to brave the pelting drops. "I must get my beechwood logs out of the rain," he said. "Or I won't have ashes to mix with the sand." The ingredients for glass were simple and well known, although every glassmaker had his own secrets.

As soon as Robert disappeared around the edge of his workshop, Pierre also took his leave. With a sigh, Jean returned to his forge, keeping an eye on the worsening weather.

The storm was at its height when a deafening bolt of lightning hit the cathedral. Instantly, the spire towering above the one completed section of roof caught fire. A gash in the lead shell exposed the wooden under-structure and the town watched helplessly as the flaming steeple collapsed, falling into the square and onto the treasury roof.

Jean thanked God for the torrential rain. It did a fair job of dousing the fire. Dozens of workmen ran to the section of fallen spire in the square, smothering the flames with burlap and anything else handy. Several tried to open the treasury door, only to find it locked. "Enter from the cathedral," someone shouted. But this proved impossible, due to a wall of stone that was being stored against the door. "Get the Bishop," someone else shouted.

One of the stonecutters—Jean recognized him as young Louis—mounted the apse scaffolding, climbed like a squirrel, and swung himself onto the treasury roof. The town watched breathlessly. "Very little fire," he shouted down to the thankful crowd. Then young Louis disappeared from view behind the black, broken spire. Seconds later, he reemerged, looking pale and stricken.

The storm had nearly passed now, leaving only a soft sprinkling of mist. "The roof is broken through," Louis shouted. "I looked into the treasury. There's a friar inside. He's..." The man's voice quavered. "He's dead."

In more cases than not, a lightning strike would have set the whole roof ablaze. The heat would have cracked the stone walls and sent decades of work crumbling to the ground. In that sense, the town had been lucky. The spire could be rebuilt in perhaps six months.

But no one felt lucky.

Minutes after Louis had shouted down the news, the Bishop's men broke through the treasury's bolted door. The interior was illuminated by patches of colored light from the narrow windows and by daylight through the hole in the roof. Kindly old Friar Germain lay in the middle of the single

room, a knife imbedded in his stomach. And the chalice of Cana, the gilded, bejeweled pride of Normandy, was missing from its place of honor.

Jean and his friends sat by the cold forge, mourning the loss and marveling over the impossibilities. "The only way into the treasury was through the door from the square," concluded Pierre the goldsmith. "And that was bolted from inside. Did Friar Germain let anyone into the treasury with him?"

"No one recalls," said Robert the glassmaker. "I myself went back around my workshop to the stack of beechwood. My apprentice had already covered it with an oilcloth. We stood together under the rear awning until we heard the shouting."

Jean knew Robert's apprentice, an unctuous boy of thirteen with a passion for glassmaking. He would say or do anything to further his life in the craft.

"That chalice was my masterpiece," moaned Pierre. "Generations of pilgrims would have come on their knees and been overwhelmed. Now it's gone. Some greedy fool will melt the gold and sell the jewels."

Jean eyed the goldsmith darkly. Perhaps some greedy fool had committed an even worse sin. Perhaps he had crafted a chalice of impure gold and glass jewels. It would be worth the fool's while to steal back such a fraud, before the forger could be found out.

"You left here to go to the Bishop's palace?" Jean asked cautiously.

The goldsmith nodded. "We had an appointment to discuss the gold pieces for the altar. I waited for him under the yew tree by the palace doors, trying to stay dry. I didn't hear of the disaster until after the rain stopped." Pierre's nervous hands played with a pair of silver coins. "Perhaps it is the work of Beelzebub, jealous of our devotion. The demon strikes the cathedral, murders a friar, and then steals the Lord's chalice."

"Perhaps," Jean replied. But he suspected otherwise. Curiosity had always been his failing. In an age of faith, curiosity was a dangerous thing, sometimes even deadly. In an hour they would all be blaming the Devil. In a week, this would be the gospel truth, told in song and spoken in ballad.

All the same, the master smithy suspected a more earthly explanation.

(1) Who stabbed Friar Germain? (2) How did the culprit escape detection? (3) What was the motive?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 131.

To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 107.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON CATHEDRAL CONSTRUCTION

FROM THE BEGINNING of the Christian era, the building of churches was a vital element in European life. For centuries, Romanesque architecture was the dominant style. Based on ancient Roman construction principles, the resulting buildings featured round arches and massively thick walls.

The building of a new east end of the Cathedral of St. Denis, just outside Paris, heralded a new era. Advances of this period—the pointed arch, the ribbed vault, the flying buttress—made it possible to build taller than ever before, with fewer interior supports. A few years later, these innovations came to Paris and the cathedral of Notre Dame became a benchmark of the new style.

With the advent of this Gothic style of architecture (1150–1550), the obsession with building monumental houses of worship reached a new level. For 400 years, the towns and cities of Europe vied to build the tallest, longest, most impressive cathedrals.

Civic pride fueled this competition. Local merchants and guilds (trade unions) gave generously to each town's efforts,

while peasants volunteered their labor in exchange for blessings and indulgences. Teams of trained craftsmen went from town to town, contributing their specialty and then moving on to the next. A cathedral could take anywhere from twenty to a hundred years to complete, depending on financing, politics, and disasters, both natural and architectural. The actual construction was presided over by a chapter, a group of clergymen who, along with the bishop, made all the decisions.

Economics also played a role in these cathedral competitions. An obscure market town could become a bustling center of commerce due to a tall spire, a beautiful window, or some other ornament to attract visitors and pilgrims.

Constructional innovations thrived and were eagerly stolen and adapted, giving the world architectural advances that remained unmatched until the advent of the skyscraper.

Changing tastes and the upheaval of the Reformation brought an end to the era of great cathedrals. The name Gothic wasn't coined until the 17th century to describe this old style that seemed, by then, primitive and barbaric.

Gothic architecture continues to inspire. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, the largest Gothic structure in the world, was begun in 1892. Construction was halted in 1941, re-started in 1972 and halted again in 1997. At this point, over a century after its cornerstone was laid, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine remains unfinished.