

*Matron
of
Paris*

Matron of Paris

The Story of Saint Genevieve

Phillip Campbell

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*To Jesse Griffiths,
In thanksgiving for her feedback, prayers,
and lively interest in this project*

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Introduction

Saint Genevieve of Paris was one of the most extraordinary saints of the Early Middle Ages. The dates of her life are contested—some place her birth around 419 and her death in 512, while others assign her a slightly shorter life from around 422 to 500. Regardless, it's certain that she lived during a time of profound transformation as the Western Roman Empire was collapsing. Born a citizen of the Roman Empire, she died a subject of the medieval Kingdom of France. Living in this part of the world at this point in history brought her into contact with powerful, infamous, and holy people, including Saint Germanus of Auxerre, Kings Childeric and Clovis, Queen Clotilde, and many more.

Authentic sources on the life of Genevieve are scarce. A hagiography was written after her death that contains the main points covered in this book: her upbringing as a shepherdess in the village of Nanterre, her influential meeting with Saint Germanus as a girl, her religious life in Paris, and the great deeds she facilitated during the transition of Paris from Roman to Frankish control. Anything else required artistic license to fill in the gaps. Thus, this book is not a

biography or history in the strict sense but a tale of historical fiction loosely woven around the few certain details we know about Genevieve (that her vocation was first identified by Saint Germanus, that she relieved Paris during a siege, that she was influential with the Frankish kings, helped build a church, etc.). But much of the specifics were the creation of my own imagination, with context supplied by what we know of the early days of the Merovingian dynasty.

Since so much has been filled in, please try not to get too hung up on dates and the convergence of different historical events. So little is known about the specifics of these events that it proved impossible to line everything up with rigorous exactitude. It is best to read this as a book of inspiration, for Saint Genevieve truly lived one of the most inspirational lives of her age or any age.

Saint Genevieve, pray for us!

CHAPTER I

All Is Quiet in Nanterre Tonight

The River Seine wound cross the bleak country like a gray serpent. Wind rattled the branches of the ancient oaks along the riverside, dropping the last of their colorful autumn leaves into the flowing current. Little Genevieve rubbed her fingers together and breathed on her hands. Her woolen shawl did little to keep out the cold, but she and her father, Severus, had not expected to be out this long. He struggled over the half-frozen mud along the Seine's banks, his eyes scanning the ground.

"The tracks lead this way," he grumbled, pointing to an embankment that jutted out into the river some distance ahead. He trudged forward, stumbling and falling into the mire, his legs now browned in mud from the knees down. "When I catch him, he'll be dinner!"

Genevieve could not help but snicker. Her father was prone to grumbling and bouts of anger, but at heart he was a good man. "You're not going to butcher him," she said. "We need his wool to sell to the duke."

"Depends," shrugged Severus. "If I have to stay out here much longer, Duke Victorinus's army is going to be a few tunics short this spring."

"Papa, I think I see him!" Genevieve pointed. "Look past the embankment there, on that sandbar in the river."

Severus squinted into the distance. His daughter was right. A few hundred yards up, the embankment stuck out into the Seine like a finger pointing, it seemed, to the wayward sheep.

"How did he get out there?" asked Genevieve.

"Who knows? I've been a shepherd all my life, and I cannot figure them out. Well, let's go get him."

Father and daughter pressed through the partially frosted mud toward the embankment. The wind had picked up a bit and was stinging cold. The sky was a foreboding gray blanket of cloud. Genevieve walked with her hands tucked into her armpits, her blond hair whipped by the sporadic gusts. Severus seemed unperturbed by the cold, focused only on retrieving the animal.

As they approached the bank, they could hear the creature's bleating. The sandbar was about twenty feet out into the river, but the water was only ankle deep.

"Dumb animal!" Severus scoffed. "It walked out to the sandbar and is too stupid to walk back."

"That's why sheep need a shepherd," Genevieve said calmly.

Her father nodded. "Well, now I must do a shepherd's duty. Wait here, child."

He waded out into the shallow waters. Despite the muck and the cold, Genevieve was disappointed at being left behind. Trudging out to the sandbar looked like a fine little adventure. Nonetheless, she watched from the bank, her

father growing more and more frustrated with each muddy step. The earth made a deep sucking sound every time he pulled one of his legs out. The animal looked blankly at Severus, bleating at him.

“A fine mess you’ve caused us today!” he yelled as he stumbled onto the sandbar. Taking the animal by the collar, he dragged it into the water. The sheep resisted, hesitant to set foot into the current. “C’mon, you blasted animal!” Severus called. But the more he pulled, the more the sheep dug its feet in.

“Be gentle, father!” called Genevieve. “He’s scared!”

“He’s right to be!”

Severus placed both hands on the animal’s collar and yanked. But the cold had stiffened his fingers, and he could not maintain a firm grip. Severus slipped and fell flat into the water. “Arghhh!”

Genevieve hiked up her tunic above her knees and stepped into the river. She was light and small; thus, she did not sink into the mud as her father had. She reached her father quickly, helping him to his feet.

“Cursed animal!” he growled.

“He’s not cursed. He’s just confused.” She turned to the animal. “Isn’t that right?” The sheep bleated in agreement. “Poor sheep. Look at his wool, Papa! He’s covered in thorns and mud. He must have had quite a day.”

“Poor sheep? Look at me!” He gestured to his mud-drenched body.

“And poor Papa!” Genevieve said, smiling at her father. “Shall we try again?”

Genevieve remained in the river, now taking the lead from her father. Together, they were able to coax the sheep slowly to follow them. Genevieve's tunic eventually became as muddy and wet as her father's clothes, but they finally reached the shore.

"Let's hurry," said Severus, shivering. "It's starting to get dark, but maybe we can still get back to Nanterre in time for supper."



Father, daughter, and sheep gravitated away from the river in search of firmer ground. The road home ran parallel to the Seine, a crushed gravel path connecting Nanterre with Paris and the towns beyond. Genevieve's feet were soaked and painfully cold. She tried to distract herself by looking at the scenery, the land stretched up from the Seine in a broad, sloping field dotted with shrubs, lined at the crest with cypresses.

"I don't think I've ever been this far down the road," Genevieve said, looking up to her father.

"I think not. And that is the way it should be. This road is no place for an eight-year-old girl to be."

"Why, Papa?"

"Let's just keep moving."

Genevieve knew when to not press her father too hard on something. She pulled her shawl over her head as she'd seen the old peasant women do, to calm her hair flapping in the wind and shield her from the cold.

I can't wait to sit by the fire at home and eat some hot dinner, she thought.



Several minutes later, a low rumble came up the road from behind them. Genevieve started to turn, but Severus grabbed her by the arm. "Get off the road."

"Why?"

"Just move," he ordered. With Genevieve's arm in one hand and the sheep collar in the other, Severus dragged the party off the road as the rumbling came closer. It soon became clear it was the sound of horses galloping.

"Who's coming, Papa?"

"Hush, child!"

He pulled his daughter down behind a thick patch of brambles and tucked the sheep under his arm, trying to keep it still. The sheep acquiesced, munching quietly on some brown grass.

The galloping grew louder . . . louder . . . louder.

Through the weeds, Severus and Genevieve saw a column of horsemen speeding up the road, riding two-by-two. They were helmeted, wearing long tunics covered in scale mail, and bore circular shields upon their backs. They rode with determination, heads down and red cloaks billowing behind them.

"About a dozen of them," Severus mumbled. "*Vexillationes*."

"Who?" whispered Genevieve.

"*Vexillationes*. Roman cavalry officers. Seen a lot of 'em on the road these days. At first, I thought they might have been Goths or Franks."

"So, they're not bad?"

"No, no," her father said reassuringly. "They're on our side. They're here to protect us from the barbarians."

The horsemen sped past Genevieve and Severus, oblivious to their existence behind the bushes. A moment later, they were out of sight.

"All right, let's go," said Severus. The three returned to the road and resumed their journey.

"Will they come to Nanterre?" asked Genevieve.

"I doubt it. There're more important things afoot than anything going on in a little village like Nanterre. The emperor just appointed a new *magister militum*. Troops are being shuffled around. New commands being assigned. Barbarians on the move. Everything is all mixed up."

"What's a . . . *magister*?"

"*Magister militum*. Master of soldiers. He is the head of the army. It's his job to fight the barbarians."

This talk of soldiers, battles, and barbarians filled Genevieve's head with images of wild adventure. She turned and looked behind her, down the road whence the soldiers had come. The mundane gravel path now looked perilous. She wondered what other exploits were waiting at the road's end.



As darkness enveloped the land, the world seemed to grow silent, save for the crunching of their feet on the gravel. Genevieve liked this sound; it was earthy, wholesome. But the cold was terrible, her wool tunic offering little protection against the November chill, and her feet ached, covered in nothing but some leather wraps, soaking wet and chaffing against her raw ankles.

The sheep, too, was sluggish. Severus stopped several times to goad it on before finally heaving the beast up upon his shoulders. The sight of her father carrying the sheep brought an image to the little girl's mind.

He looks like the mosaic of Christ the Good Shepherd in our church.

Her father was a hulk of a man—not too tall but broad shouldered with bulky arms and legs as thick as tree trunks. Severus's neck was a single chunk of muscle, such that his pace did not slacken one bit with the sheep upon his shoulders. To Genevieve, his power seemed infinite.



The first stars were twinkling in the deep blue firmament when they crested a hill, bringing a small village into view. “Ah, there is home,” said Severus. “I can’t wait to get out of these clothes and drink some warm broth.”

Nanterre was a small assemblage of mortared stone houses with thatched roofs clustered upon a plain east of the Seine. Nanterre looked quaint and peaceful under the starlight, little white wisps of smoke ascending from rows of chimneys, the fires beneath them shining with an orange glow from within the homes.

Father, daughter, and sheep finally passed a large stone that marked the edge of the family's field. Genevieve and her parents lived in a cottage on the outskirts of town. As shepherds, they required more space for pasturing their flock. The family's fields were bounded by a fieldstone wall that ran along the length of the road from the boundary stone into town.

As soon as they reached the wall, Severus unceremoniously dumped the sheep over it.

“We’ll clean him up tomorrow,” he grumbled.

The family homestead was a squat stone structure nestled on a hillside. It was a poor place, little more than a hovel, but it was home—and Genevieve adored the view, where one could see all the homes of Nanterre huddled beside the Seine. In the summer, the colors of the fields and forests beyond were radiant, colorful wildflowers bursting up among the grasses, and the Seine sparkling blue, not gray like it was today. Behind the cottage, the hillside sloped up to the heights of Mont Valérien, the mountain that cast a shadow over the town.

Genevieve threw open the cottage door. “Mama, we’re home!” she cried.

Her mother was busy stirring a pot on the hearth.

“Genny!”

Mother and daughter ran to embrace one another. Feeling Genevieve’s dampness, she asked, “What on earth happened to you? Where is your father?”

“Right here,” groaned Severus as he stumbled through the door.

“Mommy, we had an *adventure!*” said Genevieve, eyes beaming.

“Is that so?”

“More like we froze half to death dragging that stubborn sheep out of the Seine,” Severus huffed.

Severus and Genevieve were soon clothed in fresh garments, and everyone huddled around the fireplace to warm themselves and relax. Genevieve loved her nightgown, a soft

white garment of woven linen. She felt like an angel wearing it. Severus sat in a chair, soaking his feet in a basin of warm water while slurping from a steamy cup.

“Fine broth, Gerontia,” he said to his wife.

“There’s not much to it,” she said. “Just a little salt, and I used the rest of the turnips.”

“To a frozen man, this might as well be the nectar of paradise.” He gulped down another mouthful.

“Here you go, dear,” Gerontia handed Genevieve her own cup. Genevieve made the sign of the cross over the broth and drank it gratefully. Her mother, meanwhile, sat behind her, grooming her matted hair with a bronze comb. “I can’t imagine what you two got into today,” she said while she struggled with the girl’s knotted locks. Genevieve didn’t seem to mind; she was content sipping her broth and watching the flames cast dancing shadows about the cottage walls.

“Mama, did the Romans come here tonight?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I went to vespers earlier, and I didn’t see anything. Did something happen out there?”

“Just a routine patrol,” Severus said. “Some officers on the move from here to there. Nothing to fret about.”

The tone of his voice seemed more concerned than he let on. Both his wife and daughter noticed but said nothing.

Suddenly, their repose was interrupted by a loud thud at the door. “Gerontia? Severus?” a voice called. “It is Mucianus.”

“Ah, Deacon Mucianus!” Gerontia said with a bit of relief. She rose to open the door.

“Peace and grace to you in Christ Our Lord,” the deacon said as he walked in. All rose to greet him—Severus standing in place with his feet still in the basin.

“Please, won’t you sit and stay awhile, Mucianus?” said Gerontia.

“You’re too kind!” said the deacon, an older man with curly wisps of white hair sitting like a crown upon a tonsured head. “But I’ve only come to drop off some food.” He threw back his cloak to reveal a large sack.

“We’re much obliged, Mucianus,” said Severus.

“I know things are a little tight for plenty of us now. I’ve been taking up a collection, and people have been generous. Let’s see, what do I have here? A few strips of salted pork, a loaf of bread. A cluster of olives . . .” He pulled each item from his sack and handed them to Gerontia and Genevieve as he spoke. “. . . and a few leeks. Not much, I know.”

“It’s more than enough,” said Gerontia gratefully. “We are very blessed by your visit.” Genevieve dutifully took the food and put it away while the adults talked.

“Things have been hard for me as well,” the deacon told her parents. “Nanterre has been nine months without a priest now since Thaumastus died.”

“Have you spoken to the bishop recently?” asked Gerontia.

The old deacon sighed. “Marcellus of Paris is a holy man, but he has much to deal with. The wars of the Goths and Franks. The political chaos of the empire. Rumors of the Huns massing on our eastern borders. Outbreaks of plague. Feeding the poor and caring for the orphans. Not to mention the Pelagian heretics causing trouble out west. It feels like the Church is carrying the burden of the entire world these days. I’ve written him, but Nanterre is just not a priority with all that’s going on. Hopefully, by Christmas I’ll have news.”

“Mucianus,” said Severus, “I saw a troop of *vexillationes* on the road this evening. Have you heard of any goings on in the region?”

“The cavalry officers are out and about, are they? Thank goodness they didn’t come through the village. The last thing anybody wants is Nanterre mixed up in any trouble. There’s plenty going on—the emperor just made Flavius Aetius *magister militum* of the west. But that’s far away from here. No, all is quiet in Nanterre tonight.”

“God keep it so,” prayed Severus.

“Indeed!” agreed Mucianus. “Well, I must be on my way. Shall we pray?”

The deacon made the sign of the cross, prompting the family to do the same.

“Let us beseech the Lord to prosper our days, keep us in grace, and remember our spiritual and temporal needs: *Pater noster, qui es in coelis . . .*” he began the Lord’s Prayer in Latin. The family prayed along with folded hands. Genevieve had learned this prayer when she was very little and recited it every day since. While praying, she glanced at her father. The powerful man who had carried a sheep home on his shoulders only hours ago now looked docile and meek, his head bowed, his eyes closed, his blistered hands folded.

“Amen!” said Mucianus, concluding the prayer. “Good night, everyone. Sleep in the grace of Christ.” With that, he disappeared into the night, making his rounds to do good elsewhere.



An hour later, Gerontia lay Genevieve down for bed on a small straw cot in the corner. It was not much, but it was

cozy. Beside the bed there was a little notch hollowed out of the stone wall. There Genevieve kept a small carved statue of Christ with a candle. Her mother struck the flint and lit the candle for the girl. "The light of Christ keep thee this night," she said, pulling the woolen blanket up over Genevieve. "You had quite a day today, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mama. But it was fun!" The girl paused, her countenance dropping a little. "Although, I'm not sure if Papa had fun."

ACHOO!

Severus's sneeze boomed from across the room. "Blasted animal," he muttered to himself. Gerontia and Genevieve snickered.

"Goodnight, darling," her mother kissed her forehead.

"Goodnight, Mama."

Genevieve rolled over on her side, facing the wall. It was so good to finally stretch out under a warm blanket. Her tired eyes were fixed on the candle's gentle glow and the crudely carved image of Christ that it illumined. As her mind drifted off to sleep, she whispered, "Lord, I liked the adventure we had today. I want to have more adventures."