

A Wider Stream

By Christine Malec

Bordeaux France: 1554

Margarete watched Lise's hands moving up and down on the neck of the lute. Margarete had taught her the exercises for skill, but freely admitted that Lise had already far surpassed her in their execution. Lise held out the lute.

"Here, you try."

Margarete flung up her hands. "No more, I can no longer concentrate. Play the ballad of Jacque and Isobelle."

Lise shook her head. "Not with guests in the house. It's far too bawdy a song to be heard coming from the chamber of a jeune fille such as yourself."

Margarete made a face. She rose and prowled restlessly. "Let's go riding, Guy and those men have already begun the day's dicing; they won't see us."

Lise knew she should discourage this. Margarete dressing in her brother's cast off riding clothes and setting off into the countryside on horseback might be ignored when the family was alone, but Margarete's oldest brother Guy had several guests. It was one of the times when Lise felt her own inclinations battling wisdom and propriety.

Before coming into service with Margarete's family as a companion and governess to Margarete three months ago, Lise had got her living as part of an itinerant group of tumblers and players. Though always uncertain and sometimes dangerous, such a life had accustomed Lise to physical activity, and reliable variety. She was finding the essentially sedentary life as Margarete's attendant a challenge to her patience. Her own restlessness stimulated by Margarete's, Lise assented and set down the lute.

They were fortunate. Guy and his guests were indeed closeted indoors with several bottles of the best wine, and another day of gaming before them. The stable men were complicit, and Margarete played roughly with the dogs as they waited for the horses to be saddled. Most of the servants indulged Margarete: sorry for her because she had no mother, and charmed by her effortless kindness and ingenuous grace.

At 14, Margarete could no longer be mistaken for a child. She loved pretty clothes and ornament, but the chronically precarious state of the family finances, and her brothers' careless disregard meant that she seldom had much of either.

Lise, having grown up near the edge of survival, never missed them. Ten years older than Margarete, Lise often smiled to think what her long dead parents might have made of this, the role of her life. She and Margarete had met in the city of Bordeaux itself on a festival day. She had saved Margarete from an imminent danger into which the young woman had carelessly fallen. In return, and on a wild impulse she herself could still not quite believe in, Margarete, by guile, persuasion, and some outright lies, had rescued Lise from an uncertain future.

The seemingly guileless Margarete had, without consulting Lise because there hadn't been time, convinced her brother Louis that Lise was an experienced governess and lady's companion, recently discharged when her employer's daughter married. Margarete had clearly outgrown her elderly nurse, and Louis's natural laziness was served by this facile solution, so he agreed to take Lise into service.

The adaptability cultivated by her life so far was all that got Lise through those first few months: that, and Margarete's kindness. Margarete often covered up for Lise when the older woman made the kinds of errors a street performer is bound to make when thrust into the genteel daily life of a wealthy rural family. Lise was expected to know a lot of things she didn't know, and the complicity between herself and Margarete of keeping their secret, deepened the bond that had already existed between them since that fateful day in the city.

Both women inhaled deeply of the warm air as they rode away from the stables, and were grateful to be out of doors. They rode in companionable silence for some time, until they came to a small stream running between scattered trees.

"You've been getting better at jumping," Lise said. "That stream will be easy."

Without leaving time for Margarete to object, Lise spurred her horse into a canter and headed for the stream, jumping it with ease. On the other side, she slowed and looked back.

Margarete's face wore a set expression, but she dutifully sped her horse toward the water, and took the stream with success, but little grace.

Forbearing comment on the younger woman's poor form, Lise rode on, and Margarete caught up. When they came to a stream significantly wider than the first, Margarete hung back. "It's too wide," she said, her voice teetering on a whine.

"No it isn't, you can easily jump it."

Rather than try to argue, Margarete said, "Why don't we just go that way?" She pointed along the near bank to where the trees thinned out into an open field. She couldn't understand why Lise perpetually tried to frighten her.

"But what if you couldn't go that way?" Lise asked patiently.

Margarete shifted irritably. "Such as when? When might I not be able to go that way?"

Lise smiled. Something in her enjoyed seeing Margarete's discomposure at such times. "What if Guy's guests suddenly appeared in that field? Would you hide here like a rabbit because you were afraid of jumping a small stream?"

The stream in question didn't look particularly small to Margarete, but she resented the implication that she might resemble prey. She had always

been of an adventurous disposition, but something in Lise's steady regard and inscrutable expression made Margarete doubt herself just a little. She didn't want to seem a coward to Lise, Lise who had survived on her own in a world whose dangers Margarete couldn't even imagine.

Looking grim, Margarete walked her horse back some distance in order to approach the stream at a good clip. She made it over, but her horse landed sloppily on the far bank, and Margarete slid dangerously, almost landing on her head in the water. When Lise jumped her own horse over and came back to Margarete, it was to find her white-faced and shaking with nerves. She was methodically stroking Nuit's mane, trying to soothe the spooked horse, and looking as though she might cry.

"You did well," Lise said bracingly. "You just need to be more confident, and attend more carefully to how you hold your shoulders and knees."

Not reassured, Margarete gathered up the reins and urged Nuit to a walk, saying nothing as she led their way among the trees.

When they came to a still wider stream, Margarete shook her head firmly. "There's a perfectly good ford not far upstream," she said, "We'll use it."

"You could jump that you know," Lise said unargumentatively, following behind Margarete's black horse. Margarete didn't answer.

They returned to the stable to find that luck had deserted them. Guy was leading two of his companions in an inspection of the riding horses preparatory to a short ride, no doubt to clear their heads for more drinking, Lise thought cynically. A paragon of propriety when it came to the conduct of others, Guy chose to be outraged by Margarete's attire.

"You look like a stable hand!" He barked at her. "Where is that black haired attendant I pay to teach you how to be a lady?" Lise had slipped unobtrusively behind the shielding wall of the tack room, and listened unseen as Guy continued to berate Margarete long past the point necessary to make his meaning clear. Conscious of the amused gaze of

his companions, Margarete's posture became progressively more defeated, and she didn't try to defend herself or forestall his attack. Lise felt her own anger rising at Guy's careless bullying. She knew Margarete to be kind and gracious. It infuriated Lise to see her abused by a person Lise considered a morose wastrel. Margarete was, Lise believed, worth ten of either of her older brothers, and Lise thought hard as she made her way back to Margarete's rooms, the younger woman trailing disconsolately behind her.

When they had washed and changed their clothing, Lise remarked with apparent indifference, "You know, when you're jumping, you need to keep your shoulders straight, your head up, your back straight, and your posture confident. If you believe you will do it, Nuit will believe it too."

Margarete nodded mutely. The encounter with Guy had driven the afternoon from her mind, and she felt impatient with Lise for going on about it. When she happened to chance a glance at Lise however, she was startled by the older woman's expression. Lise's face showed a concern greater than that warranted by instruction on horsemanship. Lise's eyes had lost their typical neutrality, and she seemed to be trying to tell Margarete something, but the younger woman didn't know what.

They didn't ride again while Guy's guests remained in the house. The family's unpredictable finances currently permitted the engaging of a tutor for Margarete's younger brother Armand, and Margarete sat with them at Lise's insistence. Margarete's education had been spotty at best, and Lise strongly encouraged her in private to take advantage of the opportunity to learn from the mild-mannered old man. Afterwards, the two women would sit by the open window in Margarete's chamber, and Margarete would impart what she could of reading, geography, history, and rudimentary mathematics to the older woman. For Margarete, education was an indifferent activity. For Lise, it was a hither-to unattainable privilege.

For physical activity, they had to content themselves with rambling walks through the fields, woods and vineyards of the family lands. Lise encouraged Margarete to prolong these rambles significantly past the

younger woman's threshold for exertion. Though her social superior, Margarete was a little in awe of Lise in some respects, and was content to do as Lise wished.

On one such walk, Margarete asked idly, "Why do you encourage me so strongly to jump Nait? You are supposed to be teaching me the qualities of being a lady. I know this isn't your forte, but surely even you know that jumping my horse over rivers won't get me a husband."

There was a long silence while Lise considered her words. Living in surroundings so alien to anything she had ever known, caused her to think more deeply about many things she'd never really paused to consider before; a diffident demeanor and proper etiquette at the table barely scratched the surface of the strangeness.

Finally, Lise said reflectively, "I always supposed I would marry as most women do, but I never had the luxury of waiting around passively for that to happen. As you know, my parents both died when I was still a child. People were kind, but I've always known I had to take care of myself somehow, woman or not. You've never had to worry about your next meal or a roof over your head; I don't suppose you'll ever have to. Still, maybe I wish I'd had someone to teach me..., I'm not sure what exactly."

She bit her lip. She didn't feel comfortable telling Margarete just how strongly she felt about this. Margarete was so gentle and loving, so vital and energetic, so sweet and good. Lise's feeling of protectiveness when Margarete's brother's bullied their younger sister surprised Lise. She longed to armor the younger woman against harm or hurt.

"You are beautiful, and you lack for nothing in the world, but..., maybe someday your safety or wellbeing will require you to jump a wider stream. Who else is there to teach a woman these things? You've been taught music and the deft use of a needle, but women like you seldom are taught really important things."

Lise had observed on a few occasions the way Margarete would retreat into mute docility when confronted with an idea or experience that

overwhelmed her. Processing the new and challenging seemed to demand all of Margarete's inner resources. For the rest of their walk Lise said no more, leaving Margarete to her silent introspection.

They spoke no more of jumping or courage in the days that followed. When Guy's guests had departed and Guy with them, they returned to a relaxed regime of doing more or less as they pleased. On their first ride after Guy's departure, they found themselves retracing the course of their last ride. As they approached the stream where Margarete had nearly been unseated,

She wordlessly sped Nuit towards the water. Margarete's carriage was not perfect, but she bore in mind all Lise's admonitions, and woman and horse sailed over the stream, landing safely on the far bank. When Lise caught up, she said nothing, but gave Margarete a smile of such joy that Margarete needed no words. Margarete still balked at the wider stream, but Lise did not encourage her.

They took advantage of Guy's absence to ride out every day. It was a welcome change from study or practice on the lute. They seldom had a destination, and wandered widely. On the day before Guy's return however, Margarete led them determinedly on the familiar path to the widest stream. Lise noticed, but didn't remark on it. Margarete jumped the narrower stream with the ease of habit, but with a still sharp exhilaration. She stopped them some distance away from the wider stream, ostensibly to drink from the flask of heavily watered wine she carried. Lise could see clearly that the younger woman was steeling herself. Lise made idle remarks about the meadow flowers they had passed earlier, giving Margarete space to compose herself, not making too much of Margarete's fears.

At last, tense but determined, Margarete picked up the reins and set off. Lise followed more slowly. Margarete raced towards the stream, seemed to pull herself and Nuit upwards into a tight column of force, and leapt the horse over the water, letting out a cry mingling exuberance and

terror in equal measure, then landing gracelessly but safely on the other side.

Laughing in delight, Lise leapt her own horse over, and came to a halt beside Margarete. The younger woman threw one leg over and slid to the ground, leaning against her horse, laughing with excitement. Lise dismounted also, and came to her side. Spontaneously, she took the younger woman into a fierce hug.

"I told you you could do it!"

Some days after Guy's return, they had the ill chance to encounter him as they returned to the stables. He was engaged in a grumpy survey of the tack room. Saddlery was one of the many commodities in scarce supply in the household. Perhaps the knowledge that the reckless indulgence of vice on the part of himself and Louis was to blame for this state of affairs gave a sharp edge to his dissatisfaction.

The sight of Margarete, flushed, disheveled, and wearing Louis's castoffs, gave him an easy target for his irritability, and he began to reprove her again, particularly for having been seen by his guests. Having paused in the stable yard to ask an unnecessary question of a stable lad so as to keep out of the way, Lise saw Margarete tense. Instead of cowering however, Margarete drew herself up, and lifted her head.

"I have heard you," she said clearly. "You have said this before. I will be careful not to be seen by your guests again."

Guy was startled into silence, then he grumbled, "I should forbid you entirely, it's not seemly." But Margarete knew this for an idle threat. Forbidding required enforcing, and Guy was far too disinterested in her to bother. He knew this too, and turned away, exiting the stable.

Margarete stood where he had left her, not moving. Lise strode in easily, and said with elaborate unconcern, "It will be nice to be indoors out of this hot sun."