

THE HARE - 1316

A Historical Beast-Fable by Eleanor Grandin

Notes

Gwenllian (1282-1337) was the daughter of Llywellyn ap Gruffydd and Eleanor de Montfort. She was born at Llys Garth Celyn, across the strait from Ynys Mon, the daughter of the reigning Tywysog. Orphaned in 1283 she lived, on the orders of Edward I, all her life in the Gilbertine Priory at Sempringham, Lincolnshire.

Unfortunately the story below is fiction.

In the real world I have no idea what the effects, on hares or humans, might be of eating the wild plants mentioned in the story. They may be poisonous!

The Hare was in thrall to the moon, she felt that her spirits waxed and waned with its slow rhythm. She knew the stars loved her because at night they thronged to gaze at her. But *her* love was for the many plants of her fields and hedgerows. A herbalist by nature and necessity, she had moved beyond the needful. Slow years of thinking, and remembering the effects of each, had increased her love of plants and her knowledge, beyond her foodplants, into medicines and mind expanders. Eglantine, melilot, selfheal and pellitory had many uses for injuries, fevers and mood enhancers. But her soul lay in the mental effects of elecampane and asphodel. Both produced many pleasurable effects on her mood, but each had a specific practical use for her.

Elecampane connected her thoughts to those of other animals. On first discovering the delights of reading the thoughts of other hares, rabbits and cows, blackbirds, swallows and crows, she had thought it was only a one way connection, that she could read their thoughts but that they were unable to read hers. Recently however she had been surprised to hear a voice in her mind, speaking to her. With some difficulty, at first, she isolated the voice and found that it came from far away in the West. By concentrating hard she found that she could speak back to the speaker, who introduced herself as the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd. The Owl was a far greater adept than she was herself, as the hare found out slowly, and needed no herbs to help her see the thoughts of others and project hers to them. She said that she was very old and her skill came with long experience. The hare wondered if she herself was old. Thinking back she tried to remember how many Springs she had lived, how many leverets. After about three it became hard for her and she found it unpleasant.



This morning she was lying in her form, on the edge of a large field, feeling the slight warmth of the Autumn sun as the compost scents of soil and leaves came to her almost unawares. Sunshine was a good change from the almost continuous recent storms. The thought following from all her alert senses was 'no danger'. She chewed a little elecampane and settled her fur while waiting for the effects. The

elecampne reminded her of times using her asphodel which was much more powerful. Her first experiment with it had been an almost overwhelming shock. She had found the asphodel near a brook and in her enthusiasm ate too much. The feeling was of all her senses merging, sounds and colours all over the place. When her picture of the world re-assembled it was considerably bigger and she found herself in water, swimming. Only then did she realise that she had become a water vole. Dread came that she would be unable to change back to being a hare. Her fear was beyond even that felt on the sudden appearance of a predator. She swam for the bank and scrambled up it with short legs. They were perfectly adequate to the task but didn't feel that they were. Shortly after reaching the top of the bank the reeds and grasses began to shrink to their normal size and she was a hare again. For a long time she avoided asphodel. But gradually the realisation that she could use it to avoid being killed by her enemies overcame her fear and she cautiously learnt to control it.

Another shock was the cause of her first willed attempt. A fox came upon her unawares from downwind. Her usual guard was down as she had been replaying a conversation with the Owl in her head. Probably because of previous practice-runs with asphodel she instantly became a dog and barked loudly, though springing into her flight dash at the same moment. The experiment could be called a success as the terrified fox ran and she didn't see it again. But in her exhaustion she was forced to creep under a thorn bush to recover. She lay as a dog for a much longer time than it had taken her to come back from being a water vole though less disorientated this time because she felt sure she would soon change back. She had chosen the breed of dog with care, a deerhound to run fast out of trouble. Her practices had included watching how the Lord of the Manor's hunting dogs moved. As her energy returned she wondered if meat was a better food than grass. The deerhound seemed to be well-fed and she was recovering faster than she would have done if she had run that far as a hare. She decided to compare experiences with the Owl to see if they could work out between them if there was a difference.

More thinking and practising led her to a scheme which she decided was less risky and less energy-consuming. When she next saw a predator it was upwind of her and she had time to think clearly. The dog was a mongrel from a nearby human homestead and she zoomed in tunnel-vision on it. It was snuffling around harmlessly and plainly had no picture of her in its mind. Taking her time and concentrating, she called on her asphodel powers. The dog vanished and only by touching its mind could she tell that she had produced a totally confused mouse. She left its mind quickly before she could be infected by fear. Pleased with inventing a better scheme, she allowed herself some pleasure in the thought of discomforting the local predators.



When the elecampane had taken effect fully she heard the Owl say
“You are lying comfortably in your form plotting the confusion of your enemies.”

“Well... I am. But I think you have none.”

“I have to be careful by day.”

“Owl - you are a predator.”

“Not big enough to take you!”

“That’s not what I meant. I was thinking that it must be hard for you to have to kill other animals. I am so glad I only have to eat grass.”

After a pause the Owl replied

“Yes, you’re right, it is hard. But it is not as bad as you might imagine. The action is automatic, when I see a mouse the next thing I know it is in my claws dead. I do not have to think ‘I will kill that mouse’ at all. And then it stops the pains of hunger.”

“Yes, I get those too. Particularly this year, it’s so cold and wet, nothing is growing now and winter hasn’t

come yet.”

“Another winter like last would bring famine for us all.”

“Owl - there is a beautiful sound in your mind. I have no words for it. So lovely. How do you make it?”

“It is music. I suppose that you have never heard it?”

“Never. I don’t understand.”

“I am not making it, Hare, to my regret I am unable to. You are hearing in my mind a human playing an instrument called a harp which I am listening to.”

“Humans play instruments to make these sounds to give themselves pleasure?”

“Yes, and me too - and now you.”

“It is something beyond all my experience.”

“Mine too ... when I first heard it.”

“When was that? How did it happen?”

“It would take a long time to tell you. How comfortable are you? Are you sure of your safety?”

“I am re-chewing old grass and as safe as I ever am. Are you willing to tell me about it, Owl? You look settled, holding a branch and leaning against a tree trunk.”

“A very relaxing tree. Do you know anything about humans, Hare?”

“Very little. Some live near me. The woman and children seem to stay near their homestead. I often see the man using two cows to plough his field or doing other things to make food. There won’t be much for them this year - there wasn’t last either. But there is another man that I sometimes see hunting with dogs. He seems quite different in a way I can’t easily describe. Well, for one thing he seems to hang dead stoats around his neck, always winter-dead stoats. He smells very different from the homestead people.”

“That agrees with what I have found out about them. The ones I’ve seen around here seem to have stoats on their clothes and they ride around on horses a lot. They use sheeps’ wool to keep themselves warm because they have no fur themselves. That is hard to understand but it can only mean that they come from somewhere far south of here where it is much warmer. But then, why did they not stay there? They are territorial and quite aggressive, perhaps the ones up here had to come North when they were driven out by the southerly living ones. I think they organise a hierarchy so that they won’t all kill each other.

The weaker ones grow the food and live in muddy places. The stronger ones take food from the weaker ones and do all the fighting for territories. And the stronger ones live in the kind of places you or I would choose. ”

“The man from the homestead near me, the woman calls him My John, wears fur as well as sheeps’ wool. When the weather’s bad he covers himself with a dead wolf. What are these sounds they make though Owl?”

“Years of looking into minds have shown me many humans and some of them make music. The clearest and loveliest I ever heard came from a good distance North West of my valley. It was a very small child among a group of these stronger, fighting humans. They called her Gwennlian. It is many years ago now, there was a lot of fighting at that time, even more than usual I mean. Some fighters from

the East took Gwennllian away with them. It was hard for me to follow her in my mind, but I managed to find her at last. She was at the edge of the world in the East, far to the East even of where you are Hare, where the world becomes water."

"A huge water and flat, flat land. I see it through your vision, Owl. There is a loud sound of the wind blowing through reeds and the land is very wet. Too wet for me, I love good fields. Even your beautiful valley wouldn't suit me. Too steep and too many trees."

"I love my valley, but it wouldn't do for you. You need man-made land."

She returned to her theme.



"So many years ago. Gwennllian is a woman now. The music in her mind grew and grew. She lives now in that big building you can see with many other women, but they can't make music like she does. She makes it in her mind and all the women sing it together. You and I can listen together next time they do it, you will love it."

"I loved the harp playing."

"Gwennllian is the only one living in the building who plays the harp. She has tried to teach the others but they do not do it well."

The winter came on early and very cold. The Hare woke one morning to find frost on her outer layer of fur and her ears were numb. The moon was still in the sky and she tried to make music to it. But it was not a success and instead she made it her usual greeting of stroking it with her front

paws while resting her weight on her back legs. Sitting up had revealed green unfrosted grass where her body had lain and she breakfasted on that rather than chill her insides with frozen plants. Since learning to speak with the Owl, other voices had begun to come to her. Nothing very coherent, but she could understand odd phrases. The rooks were the clearest to her as they chattered in the tree tops. She spent a few minutes looking at the images in their minds of places they had flown over. The world was much bigger than she had thought. In one rook's mind she even saw herself, looking a very small thing in an overview of the local area.

Her failed efforts to sing to the moon reminded her of her human neighbours and she moved closer to their homestead. She often listened to the man's thoughts as he worked the land with his two cows. He called them Grace and Beauty. But she had been disappointed to find no music there, nor in the woman's either. The children occasionally produced a musical phrase or two but not very exciting ones. Her ears hurt her now as body movements warmed them up. She took shelter under a bush to see what was in the minds in the household. The man had taken the cows into the house to keep them and the humans warmer overnight. But their combined body heat had not done much to warm the place.

Through Beauty's eyes the Hare saw Grace's breath and smelled the wonderful warm ruminant scent of it. The walls were rough but sound and the thatched roof kept out water. The central fire had been allowed to go out and the smoke-hole in the thatch was closed off. Beauty felt warm enough and was contentedly relaxed in the straw. She could see the humans huddled together, wearing all their clothes,

with a woollen blanket over them and the wolfskin covering all. They were still sleeping so, with nothing to interest her, the Hare moved away to look for unfrozen food in the copse. She remembered that, when My John thought about his wolfskin, memories of an old man came to him and then vaguely another old man's face. Thinking of it as she searched she wondered if the wolf had been killed by My John's father, or even his father's father.

Later in the day she contacted the Owl. But the Owl was too sleepy to talk. She had caught a small rat in the early hours, her first catch for a while, and digesting it was making her dozy. They agreed to talk that evening.

In the fading light the Owl shook all her feathers and spat out a pellet of bones, fur and rat's tail.

"Now I feel better. How are you, dear?"

"Cold mostly, though I found good feeding today, good compared with recently. And I listened to the rooks. They say that the Eagle of Gwernabwy has asked you to marry him."

"Oh! They say so many silly things. Who would look at an old bird like me? I look as though I'm permanently moulting!"



She sounded pleased though as she said

"The rooks must have heard that from the ravens. You should hear the stories the ravens tell. They gather together on Ynys Mon to tell them to each other. I love raven-stories."

The Hare asked if they might listen to Gwenllian.

"There is only silence there at the moment" replied the Owl.

They both looked through the nuns' minds at views of cold stone. The Hare puzzled over it for a while then asked

"Why is Gwenllian shut in behind those high walls?"

"It is because of a disease that afflicts humans, power-hunger you might call it."

"Gwenllian is ill?"

"Oh no, she is completely free of it. The music may keep her healthy. No, I mean a disease of the mind which makes the sufferer obsessed with gaining power and dominating others. The strong men from the East walled her in so that she could not breed. They feared she would have mighty sons."

"So these men from the East had this disease you spoke of?"

"Yes, they seemed to be particularly badly affected, though it is not uncommon. It must be a dreadful affliction for them, to have all the good things of life pushed out of their minds by this lust."

"It sounds a foul disease. I know My John has not got it. He does not want power at all. He thinks such kind and respectful thoughts about his cows, he wants them to be happy working with him. Though he

is rather blinded by love of them, he has named them Grace and Beauty in spite of all the contrary evidence. They are contented and think well of him. I wish I could put into his mind Grace's picture of him. They sometimes feel alarmed about predators, as I do, but they always feel safe when he is with them."

"He sounds like a good one. What is his woman like?"

"I can't really tell. Her mind is so dark and slow that I think she must be dying."

"Many will in this cold. But she is young and adult. It is usually children and the old who die in famines."

"Owl... you ... "

"Oh no dear. The Eagle and I are made of tough stuff to have lived this long, we will be fine. There are other Ancients like us, the Salmon and the Stag are even older. It is for us to remember the things that were. I remember a time before there were any humans here. Perhaps they lived away in the south then. But the memories of the Salmon of Llyn Llyw I can barely grasp."

The Hare's voice was shaky as she said

"The stars are different. What has happened? Owl, I don't want the stars to change."

The Owl closed down her memories at once on feeling the Hare's deep fear.

" Please don't be anxious, my dear. The stars won't change for you, I promise."



The winter continued hard and if anything got worse. One day the Hare heard the sound of My John chopping coppiced wood for the homestead fire. Normally she would have ignored it, but the sound was louder than usual and she thought he was hitting the sapling trunks with unnecessary force. She hopped surreptitiously closer, the sound of the hard, swift blows, though not frightening to her, was unsettling. His thoughts were split apart by anger and trying to follow them was upsetting hers. At first she thought it was the hunger of his children and wife that was causing it, but gradually pieced together a recent conversation he had had with another human. The person was referring to 'the lord' and saying that his income was very low due to poor harvests. The lord was eventually revealed to her as the man who was to be seen on horseback hunting with dogs. Realising that My John had asked the person he was speaking to, a servant she thought, if he could give the lord less this time as his family had no food, she heard the servant answering 'No, he must give more' because the lord was suffering so badly.

The horror of it made her run as fast as she could, back to her form, to escape from My John's mind. When she had calmed herself by sorting her thoughts from his she was still angry but able to overcome some of the despair. She chewed up some elecampane but the wait for its effect seemed very long in her anxiety.

"Owl, Owl are you hearing me?"

"Are you in trouble Hare?"

"Yes... no ... it's My John. He has no food and the lord says he must give him more. What will happen? There is very little grass, but I don't think they can eat it anyway. Has the lord got no food either? He hunts so much I thought he had plenty, and his dogs are full of meat."

"Slow down. Lick your fur for a moment, and then tell me exactly what has happened."

The Hare put the story as best she could from the tossed about scraps she had found in the man's mind, using her inadequate understanding of the way humans behaved and spoke. When the Owl had the sequence of events clear she told the Hare she would leave her for a while.

"I am going to look in that large building the lord lives in and hope I can find out something."

The Hare was very restless. Her early life had been spent on edge always half expecting a predator attack on her or her leverets. But recently she had felt so confident, with the help of asphodel against her enemies, that her past bad experiences were fading memories. Then, quite beyond any expectation, with elecampane she had found a wise friend in the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd. Her life had expanded so much with, she felt, herself in control. But that had been an illusion, she was helpless again. She would have shared her grass with My John, but knew it was useless to him or he would already be eating it. The Owl was strong and clever, she had shown her so much and been affectionate and kind, but even **she** could not feed the man's children.

"I've missed you Owl. You are too sympathetic to tell me the truth. I should not have tried to understand humans. If I had chewed my own grass, my happiness would not have been overthrown by My John's despair."

"It is not sympathy that would prevent my saying that, just good sense. None of us can be happy by being ignorant and insensitive. You continue to chew other people's grass, dear!"

"What did you find out?"

"I have been there before, I went just now only to check that nothing had changed. It is as you thought, he has plenty of food".

"But if he has got a strong shelter and all the food he needs, why does he want more?"

"He wants to buy more men with weapons to use in expanding his territory."

"Oh. He has got the power-hungry disease you told me about?"

"That seems to be it exactly. I don't think he is one of the men who took Gwenllian away - but so, so similar."

"There is nothing I can do is there?"

"No. I can see nothing to help My John. Perhaps to help you though. The women in Gwenllian's building will start singing soon. They are going to sing a new piece of music she has made. She is looking forward to it."

They joined the nuns in Sempringham and listened together.

"Thank you, Owl. I feel more peaceful now."

"Would you like to see what Gwenllian does for most of the day? I could send you a mind-picture. It is interesting I think."

"Yes, is it making food for them all?"

"No, she makes clothes."

The Owl sent a picture of Gwenllian working a loom.

"She is making sheeps' wool into the black clothes they wear instead of feathers. They don't make the white part over their heads."

"Gwenllian looks rather beautiful with that white around her face."

"Do you think so? I never saw any beauty in humans. Their eyes perhaps. The beauty of humans seems to me to be produced in their minds."

"The music - yes - the loom looks rather like her harp."

"She thinks so too. She makes the music while she weaves the clothes. There is an idea in her mind that the music is like the strands of wool becoming one piece."

"I don't understand, sounds are not like clothes."

"I don't either. Though I think it may be like raven-stories."

"Are their stories about music?"

"Oh no, ravens are completely unmusical. The strange thing is though that, just now and then, they make a lovely musical sound, very like the bell on the top of Gwenllian's building. They don't hear it as music though, they are only contacting each other."



“ I have just thought. The confusing of things like that, the music and the sheeps’ wool I mean, happens to me when I eat tormentil. Like dreaming when I’m awake. It’s not unpleasant, but I prefer to think of things as they are in the real world.”

It was hard to tell the moment of sunrise the next day, low cloud obscured the sky and mist the fields. As the morning went on the haze lifted somewhat but left the distance looking grey. It was less cold, but hardly felt so. The hare had been putting off moving because of anxiety about the increasingly desperate predators. Her own food was getting scarcer and she knew she must go further than usual to find it. Her worry was that on less familiar ground her enemies would be at an advantage. She had taken some large bites of asphodel to be prepared to defend herself by shapeshifting, but thought she needed an extra edge.



Eglantine, as well as asphodel, was what she needed. It was energising as well as making her mind very alert. There was plenty growing in the nearby hedge and she didn’t stint herself. A trackway ran on the far side of the hedge which she decided to follow because predators generally avoided it and there was good cover in the hedgerows beside it. To her right it led past the homestead, so that was not the direction to take. Fond as she was of the man who lived there she could not trust him not to eat her in such a winter as this. Also, from her right she could hear a group of horses on the track. The sound surprised her, as that many horses must be the lord and his retinue, but he didn’t hunt in such weather as this.

It was not alarming though as the sound was a good warning for when to slip through the hedge. Turning left she decided to follow the track through the copse and investigate the feeding on the far side.

Some way into the trees the noise of footsteps coming towards her warned her to take cover. She could see the man from the homestead approaching and smell both him and his wolfskin cape. Staying still had caused her to feel chilled at first, but the eglantine was not only sharpening and heightening her senses it was also causing her to start to glow warm. The lord’s party was coming noisily up the track and her acute sense of smell brought the horses’ breath and warm hair to her. Not quite so strong was the scent of men with their wool and leather clothing. The clean smell of the lord’s skin contrasted with the acrid high note of the ermine neck-facings of his thick warm riding cloak.

The man stood aside to let the horsemen pass and not one of them even glanced at him. The watching hare pictured My John’s family’s food turning into armed servants for the lord and anger took control of her. To her eyes, a large moon appeared and through it she saw all the species, horses, men, wolf and stoat begin to merge with each other. She rose on her back legs, grasped the moon in her claws and thought with all she had

“I must do something.”

And she did. She turned My John into a very angry wolf and the lord into a white stoat.

The reaction of the horses to a wolf in their midst caused confused uproar. They reared and shied and some tried to bolt but ran into others in the confined space. The men tried to control the horses but were very shaken themselves. The first thought of the winter-coated stoat, finding itself on the back of a

rearing horse was to get to the ground. It found it could grasp the horse's hide with its claws and took a swift route over the horse's rump and down a rear leg. On reaching the ground it became aware for the first time of the cause of the disturbance, an open-jawed wolf. The wolf crunched its jaws shut on the stoat, gave it one violent shake to make sure it was dead, then dropped it on the track and ran away fast through the trees.

By the time the retainers had controlled their horses, the lord lay dead on the track and his horse had bolted. The hare was too amazed to move at first, but no-one had seen her so she was safe in her hiding place. The good sense of self-preservation soon returned and she loped away fast, carefully taking the opposite direction from the wolf.

Later in the day one of the lord's servants turned up at the man's homestead door.

"Ho, there."

"Here" John called back to him, walking round from behind the building. The servant asked whether he had heard about the lord's death. Taking some time John replied

"They say it was a wolf."

"Yes, I heard it appeared from nowhere. Apparently it frightened the lord's horse into throwing him and they say the wolf fell on him with peculiar savagery."

John watched the servant carefully and said

"There's not been a sighting of a wolf round here for many a while."

"The new lord has sent me round to everyone to tell them to guard their livestock."

"Oh, yes." Their eyes met for a moment.

"He's young..." said the dejected servant but, brightening a little, "There's a reward for the wolf's body."

"I'll be watching out for it."



THE END