

Translated excerpt

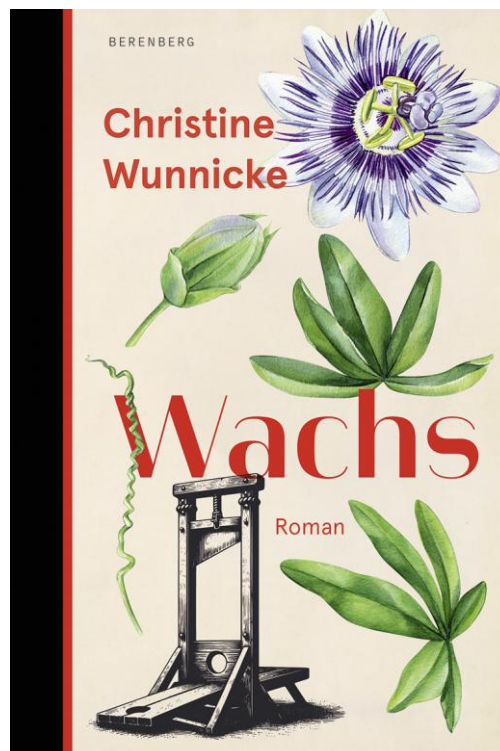
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## WORD HAS IT

On a November evening in 1733, long after darkness had fallen, a small person was tramping across the meadow that separated the Rue des Filles Angloises from the barracks of the Black Musketeers. Several days of rain had turned everything into a quagmire. The tramper's shoes sank in the mud, and her cloak, which was too long for her, got caught in the clumps of overturned earth, and kept slapping her around her legs. Undeterred, she made her way towards the barracks' back gate, with access to the stable yard. She had shuttered the lantern she was carrying, leaving just a crack of light, and could barely see her own hand. Without breaking her stride she quietly recited a prayer, in a single steady tone, as if she were counting her steps: *Lord, grant my heart true repentance, and my eyes a fount of tears to ever mourn my sins.* And then again, over and over, from the beginning.

It smelled of horses. The ground beneath her feet grew firmer, and from somewhere came a bit of light. After a brief hesitation and a deep breath she put out her lantern. She pressed her lips together, to keep herself from praying, and next she was standing by the wall and then at the gate. The gate was large, probably big enough for two horses to pass through, with a small wicket door. Her right hand worked its way out of her cloak. Very cautiously, as though she were probing something delicate, she extended a black-gloved forefinger and tapped on the wood. It yielded. And indeed,

the wicket had not been locked. Nothing and no one was preventing the unknown person from gaining entrance to the stable yard of the Black Musketeers. She crept alongside the stalls, past a gigantic pile of manure that was not in its prescribed location, then along an arena marked off for training, a well for drawing water, a few horse hurdles, the hostler's workshop and the master armorer's lodging, until she arrived at the center of the garrison and the passageway that led to the central building and the front courtyard.

This time the door did not give way when she pushed it with her finger. She was about to take hold of the handle when something inside began to whimper. It was a pitiful whimpering—a high-pitched, nasal, breathy lament that kept breaking off and then resumed with renewed fervor. She stood there, frozen, and listened. Whatever it was making such pitiful sounds in the night, there inside the musketeers' rooms—which she hoped lay behind this door—she could not determine. But it didn't seem menacing enough for her to turn around. She held her breath and pressed down on the door handle, then found herself standing inside the building.

The whimpering was coming from off to her right, where there was a door, beside which was a small window, and behind that a tentative flickering. The door was half-open, and she slipped through. There was one stairway leading up and another leading down, and various things had been stowed there: garden tools, a wheelbarrow, all manner of horse tack, and someone's dirty boots. The whimpering was coming from below. Slowly she climbed down the steps and reached a low-ceilinged vault. A man

was standing there, lit by a tallow stub, with his back turned to her, so absorbed in what he was doing that he didn't notice her.

A tall, burly cadet in shirtsleeves was practicing his oboe. He did that here every night. His playing did not sound good and it never improved. Day after day saw the same spectacle of despair. The cadet hailed from Normandy, and he longed for home. The others always laughed at him and punished him for his poor oboe playing, which is why he was secretly trying to improve, so they would be amazed at his progress, but he did not improve, and did not amaze anyone. One of his forbears had once played the oboe—or whatever it was they played back then—in the royal guard, and so his descendant, too, was meant to play. And once the cadet had been a happy boy. Wild as a highwayman he would gallop bareback around the castle where his family lived, though hardly wealthy, and from time to time would whistle using a blade of grass. The maidservants had been fond of him, and the birds had sung for him. Then his father had bought him everything required for a Black Musketeer, the black horse, the rapier and unfortunately also an oboe. His fingers were too fat for the instrument, and his lips were not the right shape. People treated him badly. They called him nasty names and had him perform lowly duties. The cadet would have gladly gone to war and fallen in battle. Now he was playing a scale. He'd been playing it for two hours. It consisted of five notes, and each one was false, and the more he puffed up his cheeks, the more false they sounded. He was in the process of adding a sixth note to the

scale. It was far too high and mewed like a kitten taken from its mother.

"I'm sorry to bother you," someone chirped to his back. The cadet spun around. His mouth dropped open, letting out all the air that was supposed to go into the oboe. Standing behind him was a grim-looking dwarf with neither legs nor a face. Like a pitch-black triangle the dwarf stood motionless in the shadows at the end of the stairs, while a small black hand held out a doused lantern, just the way the transience of life was depicted in paintings.

"Oh God," the words slipped from the lips of the cadet. Then he let out a curse. Then he shouted: "Go away!"

"I truly regret barging in here when you were intent on playing music, but please don't send me away," the figure said, in a small voice. The dwarf pulled back his hood, and a child emerged, female and pale and looking hardly more than twelve years old. Under her hood she wore a tight-fitting black coif. A pale strand of hair had come loose on the left and was sticking out like the antenna of an insect.

"I beg to be allowed to speak with someone in charge," the girl said, her voice growing firmer, "about an important matter, which is why I've entered through this back way, so I won't be turned away up front."

She examined the oboe in his hands with a certain interest, and—so it seemed to the cadet—with some repugnance.

"I don't believe that you are the one in charge." Then she curtsied and bowed her head. "Good evening to you, and thank you for helping me!"

"I did not let you in!" the cadet cried out.

"I know. And I will tell that to everyone. You will not be blamed. Take me to someone who is responsible for... who knows what to do in this..." – she searched for a word and then added, uncertainly: "undertaking?"

"No!" exclaimed the cadet.

"I would be more quiet."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If I were you I would conduct myself a little more quietly, so as not to awaken the entire house."

A picture began to form in the mind of the oboist: a cadet of the Black Musketeers caught in the act of smuggling a girl into the cellar during the night.

"I have put you in an awkward situation." There was no regret in her voice. She had taken off her cloak and draped it neatly over her forearm. "And here I'm tracking in all this mud."

She was wearing a plain gray woolen dress and a dark apron on top of that. An old-fashioned white collar graced her neck. The cadet had difficulty determining her circumstances. Was she a little runaway nun? Had she torn the veil from her head when she escaped the convent, and only kept this coif? Was that what they wore beneath their veils? What would happen with a cadet who conferred with nuns in the cellar at night?

"Shall we go?" asked the girl.

"Go where!" – He again grew loud.

"Unfortunately I can't tell you," she said, at last with a ring of pity, "because I don't know how your company is

structured. Do you have a staff physician? A company clerk? A paymaster? A scribe? Someone for inventory, or perhaps in charge of refuse, or else a priest? Best would be the Field Marshal General, in case you're allowed to wake him."

"Who?"

"The captain? The general? I don't know what he's called. I mean: the commander." She smiled. The cadet stared at her. It was as if the pale figure had suddenly transformed. Her smile was innocent, warm, slightly teasing—the most delightful smile in the world.

"We only have a horse doctor here," the cadet stammered. "Are you sick? May I accompany you into town?"

"No thank you. Would you kindly take me to someone who is a little older than yourself?"

The oboist put on his coat and brushed back his hair, which in his distress with the oboe had become completely disheveled. He took apart his instrument and placed the parts in the case. Then he declared loudly: "Let's go!" and could hardly believe it.

He led the girl out of the cellar and up to the second floor. There he began shouting: "I'm bringing a child in need of help! I found her and don't know to whom she belongs!" He thought it advisable to shout so as not to give any impression of secrecy. "A child!" he went on shouting. "Help! I don't know what to do! Help!" A curse sounded from someone's door. The barracks were large. The corridor was long. It led to the billiard hall. There the cadet pushed the door open and burst inside. The girl followed.

In the room, five men were still up and about. They were perched on armchairs, silently drinking beer. Three were smoking. One was playing with a cue stick. The cadet recognized two officers. They weren't the friendliest officers, but also not the worst. Rarely had the cadet felt so happy at the sight of officers. He called out "Here you go!" as if someone had ordered a girl and he was now delivering her. In a quiet voice he added: "Be good to her."

"What?" asked one of the officers.

"Good evening," said the girl.

The cadet, who was now standing behind her, waved her to a chair without touching her. He was of the opinion that females needed to sit down and not have to stand all the time. One of the smokers called him by an ugly name that connected his stupidity with Normandy. The second officer repeated the "What?" of the first. The girl took a step forward.

"I am the daughter of Monsieur Biheron the apothecary, God rest his soul, from the Rue Saint-Paul just behind the city gate," she recited. "I beg you to excuse my untimely visit and thank you most humbly that you have nevertheless received me. Is it all right if I ask a question even though you might possibly find it disconcerting, in case you are not the one in charge here?" She turned to the older officer and stared at him with a look that was almost threatening.

"Why don't you sit down!" the cadet called out. The other men said little more than "What?" They were not entirely sober. The girl curtsied, then handed the cadet her



dirty cloak and sat down. She had left traces of mud on the carpet. The cadet stood behind her holding her cloak like a lackey.

"I know that apothecary of the Biherons," said one of the musketeers.

The girl's eyes remained fixed on the older officer. He rose from his chair and stood over her, his brow furrowed, without saying a word. She tilted her head back, swallowed, and made a speech.

"I would like to purchase a corpse, provided that you have one for me. I have the money on me, I can pay right away, provided it isn't too expensive, and my mother approves. And I would gladly book a subscription—in the event that is possible and affordable—for the whole autumn and winter season and all the way until it turns warm again. I would arrange for the first corpse to be picked up tomorrow. Should you have several in storage, I would prefer to have that of a woman or a child, because as you see I am a girl, but I cannot be overly particular. You would need to explain to me all the formalities, especially regarding the burial, and who is responsible for what, and how I should return it once I am finished, because unfortunately I do not know these things."

A heavy silence spread across the billiard hall. Most of the men had risen, one after the other, and were now standing at an appropriate distance around her chair. Only the cadet had retreated somewhat farther back.

"The corpse will look the same as it did before, I promise," Mademoiselle Biheron added. "I won't take anything away. I'll

put everything back for the burial and the resurrection of the body."

The older officer could not suppress a burp. He bit his lips but it was heard nonetheless. Then he repeated, as though it was the only word he knew: "What?"

"She'd like to buy a corpse," explained the musketeer who knew the Biherons' apothecary.

"A subscription?" asked the musketeer with the cue stick.

"You'd like what?" asked the younger officer.

"The body of a deceased person," said Mademoiselle Biheron, "for anatomical purposes. Surely this isn't the first time you've been asked this. Usually though it must be men from the university. You may be surprised by my youth, but..."

"This is the first time we are being asked this!" exclaimed the older officer.

"The child would like a corpse for anatomical purposes," explained the musketeer who occasionally purchased something for his stomach in the apothecary. Since the death of her husband, Madame Biheron had maintained it by herself. She was an unfriendly woman and her stomach tonics were too expensive.

"People do purchase corpses from the military," the girl stated.

"What's that?" the older officer shouted.

"Where do we get these corpses?" asked the younger officer.

"I don't know. From the war?"

"There isn't any war," said the one with the cue stick.

"If a man falls in battle he is buried with the highest

honors," the cadet called out from a ways off.

"I don't know," the apothecary's daughter repeated. "Word in Paris has it that corpses can be found at military garrisons. And I don't know any other place where so much military is assembled as here with you. Now and then one can see soldiers in the streets who likely have private lodgings, but I can hardly go up and ask them, considering they may not be on duty. And they certainly aren't allowed to keep anything in their quarters that requires safekeeping and isn't exactly easy to store. So I thought it would be better to visit some barracks. Your own is very large and impressive, and I happen to live nearby. So I thought it would be best to ask you. Please don't send me away. My older sister recently took the veil. Now I, too, wish to contribute something. I have a talent for this. I've learned all there is to learn. You can test me if you'd like to make sure. I've also just watched an autopsy and even assisted some with the dissection. I'm still in school but I'm not a beginner. However, I need the experience. Books alone are not enough. And it's urgent. Winter is flying past and come spring it will be too warm."

"Contribute something to what?" asked one of the smokers, whose pipe had gone out in the meantime.

"To the glory of God and the livelihood of the family."

"Of God," echoed the younger officer. His voice sounded somewhat misty. He took a step back. Everyone followed his example. The older officer, on whom Mademoiselle Biheron continued to fix her gaze, withdrew the farthest.

"Word has it," she repeated stubbornly.

"Madame Biheron the apothecary from the Rue Saint-Paul

has sent us her daughter to buy a few corpses,” explained the man who enjoyed explaining, “but we still don’t know why, and we’re gradually feeling frightened.”

“I’m not frightened,” boasted the cadet from a ways off.

A sudden noise came up from the stable yard. The cadet, who was standing closest, ran to a window. Then everyone ran to the windows except the girl, who did not move. A horse had broken out of the stalls and was charging across the yard. It ran in a circle and nearly crashed into the wall, then kept running in circles, more and more terrified. A groom who had been sleeping chased after him, waving his arms, and spooked the beast even more. It reared up and twisted its neck. A high-pitched, continuous neighing came up to the windows.

“It may be that I’m the victim of a misunderstanding,” Mademoiselle Biheron whispered, but no one heard her.

“He’ll manage to catch it,” said the older officer. He memorized the groom’s face and stepped back from the window. Everyone followed suit. The cadet secretly crossed himself. As he did so he noticed the cloak was gone. The girl was gone along with her cloak. She had pulled it off his arm and he hadn’t noticed.

Everyone stared at the chair where she had been sitting. Then they ran into the corridor, but she wasn’t there either. They ran to the stairs and didn’t find her. Suddenly it seemed to the musketeers that the most important thing in the world was to catch her and confront her until she explained everything. They woke the entire barracks up with their running around. But the girl had vanished.

Marie Biheron had long since arrived at the Rue de Charenton. She had slipped past the barrack conciergerie like a ghost. She had discovered that she could easily find her way even in unfamiliar buildings. She possessed an inborn ability to quickly match parts of a whole and piece them together, and took much pleasure in doing so. When she was little this had occasionally produced strange results: she had had a compulsion to completely disassemble whatever she could lay her hands on, such as pharmaceutical tools. She would work herself into a near frenzy, and would furiously defend herself if someone tried to take the half-dismantled things away, or even attempt to put them back together. There was something peculiar about the mind of Mademoiselle Biheron.

Now she was standing there in the night and fighting off tears. It was all so horrible and so new to her. She had never before been out of the house at night. Never before, not once, had she been outside the gates of Paris. She marched blindly in the direction of the Porte Saint-Antoine. If they caught her walking here, Marie thought, they would probably take her to some evil place where they took runaway girls to be interrogated and tortured. In three days she would be fourteen years old. She had wanted to have had a corpse by then, but now that seemed a long way off, and all her hopes seemed shattered. She still had a hard time believing how bewildered the musketeers had been. Perhaps she just needed to send a man, she thought, and the chamber where they stored the corpses would open up. In her head she ran through the various men she knew to see if they were suited for such a mission. She thought about the baker, the neighbor boy – sadly

only eleven years old—and her brother. But he had run away and no one knew where he might be. Meanwhile she had almost reached the city wall. At night the Bastille looked hideous beyond words. But Marie knew that even there she would find her way, if she ever needed to. She asked herself if they took runaway girls to the Bastille, and was angry that she didn't know the answer. Every girl, she believed, should be given lessons on how to pass through life safely and securely. There was a lot one could learn on one's own, but the facts were often missing.

Someone stopped her at the Porte Saint-Antoine—another thing she was not prepared for. Was it a soldier, a tollkeeper, a highwayman? How can you tell what's going on when someone accosts you at the city gate?

"I am the daughter of Monsieur Biheron the apothecary from the Rue Saint-Paul, God rest his soul," she sputtered, before the man could say anything more than "Halt." "My light has gone out, and I'm in a hurry and I'm afraid and I have to go home right away."

He let her pass. Suddenly she felt that the Bastille was protecting her. No one and nothing, thought Marie, could harm her so long as this edifice is always there to shelter her as she journeys through life, this mighty block of stone with its mighty towers. If you squinted you might think it was a church. By day, and especially by night. You might think God lived there inside. God, too, has no windows in his abode, thought Marie, because his ways are inscrutable. A feeling of elation that had nothing to do with God arose in the girl who had been so disappointed. The night, the world, Paris belonged to her—it

would all come in good time, and sooner or later, if she persisted enough, a corpse was bound to come as well. She walked past the church of the Visitandines and up to the Jesuits, and then she was already home. She took the key she had filched, unlocked the door, and hung it back in its place, then she took off her shoes and crept up to her room. She stowed the dirty cloak beneath her bed and knelt and uttered a prayer of thanks for her deliverance and a prayer of supplication—with a dose of reproach—followed by a longish passage from St. Augustine. Already half-asleep, she crawled into bed. She dreamt she was recruiting no one but men—the baker, the neighbor boy, and a dozen musketeers—whom she gave shovels and directed to dig up the ground all around the Bastille, to see what might lie beneath. She woke up in a state of surprise, then slept dreamlessly until the morning.