**A Hero's Journey**

by Barry R. Taylor



Beneath the shadow of Mt. Sarmoné, that rose above the plains below like a wave on the ocean, along the valley of a small, twisting river lined with poplars and plane trees, lay the village of Pontneuf. In this quiet village, with its high-spired church and red stone houses, where the coarse, ochre soil resembles tiny fragments of shattered pottery and grape vines run in fat green lines across the hillsides, our hero's journey begins.

His name was Emmanuel and he was the only son of a vintner. Emmanuel worked in his father's vineyards and he went to school in the village, but the forest of Mt. Sarmoné was his second home. There he would climb the valley wall beyond the farms, where the land grew too steep for vines, where open stands of broad-limbed oaks gave way to stolid beech and birch draped in streamers of ivy, and higher yet to the realm of pine and larch and a slender tree with leaves shaped like diamonds, that no one had ever bothered to name.

As he grew older, Emmanuel grew restless. He longed to see the world beyond his father's vineyard, his peaceful village and sun-blessed valley. Every spring, the big wagons loaded with cases of wine would clatter away down the road, following the river around the broad flank of Mt. Sarmoné, then back through another, larger village called Aganel. Every spring Emmanuel watched the wagons go, and every year he wished he could go with them. His father discouraged him. "I need you here, Emmanuel," he would say. "You must take over the vineyard that your grandfather started when I am too old to make wine."

Emmanuel understood, though he did not like it. His older sister, Manon, would marry soon and leave her father's house. His younger sister, Lynnette, was bright and clever but not yet old enough to run a winery. So the burden fell on Emmanuel. But oh, how he wished he could see the land beyond the valley.

One day while Emmanuel was rummaging in the back of a horse barn he came across a long strap of coiled leather, hanging on a wall. It was a bullwhip. Emmanuel had never seen anything like it. The whip was more than three metres long, and dusty from age.

Emmanuel tried cracking the whip a few times. He almost hurt himself at first when the cracker at the whip end flew back toward his face. But when he tried a third time the whip made a satisfying snap! that startled the horses. He did not know it then, but it was at that moment, playing with a bullwhip in the dim light of the barn, rich with the smell of hay and horses, that Emmanuel's hero's journey began.

With his discovery of the whip, Emmanuel invented a new way to climb Mt. Sarmoné. He called it *voler-en-fouet*, which means whip-flying. While charging up the hill he would lash the whip at a nearby tree so the whip end wrapped around a branch like a monkey's tail. Then he would use his speed to swing upward on the whip as far as he could go. At the last moment he would flip a wave along the thong to loosen the cracker and free the whip. Then he would strike another tree, swinging the other way.

Thus he climbed the slope, zigging and zagging and running and swinging on the creaking, snapping whip. At last, when his strength abated and his breathing was laboured he would stop to rest, blowing out his breath in the cool of the old forest. Then he would turn about and whip-fly down the slope even faster.

Emmanuel's father did not approve of his new diversion. He insisted it was dangerous, and took his son away from his work. But Emmanuel didn't stop. He loved the challenge, and the sense of freedom, however momentary, that it gave him. With practice he grew stronger, and faster, and more precise. He ended each flight a little farther up the side of the hill.

His father was right, however, that whip-flying was risky. One day Emmanuel missed a tree with his whip as he was running quickly down the steep upper slope of the mountain. He fell, and tumbled down the slope, hitting a rock and hurting his shoulder. He had to rest in bed for several days afterward. His shoulder needed weeks to fully heel.

Emmanuel's father was angry. "This time it is your shoulder, next time it could be your head. Manon is getting married and your mother is gone. Who will run my vineyard if you are dead too?"

Emmanuel knew in his heart that his father was right. Yet when his arm was strong again he returned to the mountain. He couldn't give it up. He had set a new goal: to whip-fly all the way to the top of Mt. Sarmoné.

"Let me go with you," Emmanuel's younger sister said one day. "I want to learn how to whip-fly."

Her brother laughed. "Your name is Lynnette, which means little lioness, and you are very bold. But I have only one whip."

Lynnette smiled in return. She pulled out the bullwhip she had been hiding behind her back. "It was in the horse barn," she said. She flicked the whip and crack! – a piece of bark flew off a nearby tree as if struck by a bullet. "I've been practising," Lynnette said. "Teach me how to whip-fly."

So now Emmanuel climbed up the side of Mt. Sarmoné with Lynnette, brother and sister swinging and snapping through the ancient forest together. Lynnette learned quickly. She was smaller than her brother, and not as strong, but quick of mind and limb. She wore her hair in two long braids that flew out behind her as she swung on the whip.

Climbing up the mountainside, Emmanuel was always faster than Lynnette. When she fell behind he would stop and wait for her to catch up. But on the way down, Lynnette was unstoppable. Running like a hare and leaping like a deer, she careered down the slope, skirts swirling and braids flying as she locked onto one branch after another. Emmanuel was faster climbing up, and he could always go farther. But petite Lynnette was always faster coming down.

That autumn, Manon married the son of another local vinter, as everyone knew she would. She and her young husband Guillhaume moved to a house in the village. Soon Manon was carrying her first child. Emmanuel's father beamed with pride, eager to be a grandfather. "Soon the time will come for you to find a husband too," he told his second daughter. "There are many good young men in the valley. Or you could find a husband in Aganel."

Lynnette didn't argue with her father. But she did not envy her sister's happy, simple life. Like her brother, she dreamed of travelling to lands far beyond the valley where she had been born.

One day in late summer, Emmanuel and Lynnette lay on their backs, leaning against their elbows, high on the flank of Mt. Sarmoné, where the beech and the ivy gave way to pine and larch and the slender tree with diamond-shaped leaves that had no name. They were winded from a long, fast assent. Their whips lay by their sides, curled like black snakes basking in the sun.

Lynnette said, "I don't think we have ever been this high before."

Her brother looked about. "This forest isn't familiar," he said. He looked down into the forest sloping away below them, then up, toward the peak. He said, "If we keep going we can climb all the way to the top." The sun was still high in the summer sky.

"Father will be angry," Lynnette said.

"Father is always angry. He is angry because he is worried. He will be worried until Manon bears her child."

Lynnette did not reply. She well knew the sacrifice her mother had made to bring her into the world. She picked up her whip. "Let's go to the top," she said.

They set off again, snapping their whips up the hillside, but slower now because the slope was steep and the trees were smaller, with fewer strong branches. Emmanuel waited for his sister at the base of the rock-strewn cliff that capped the mountain like white foam atop an ocean wave. They scrambled up the last length hand over hand. Shortly they topped the cliff and stood triumphant on the grassy summit of Mt. Sarmoné.

They stood there for a long time, winded and tired, grinning at each other. "We did it," Lynnette said. "And look what we can see now."

From the top of the mountain, above the trees, a new world was revealed. Below them lay another broad valley, larger than their own, with the village of Aganel at its centre, flanked by vineyards and farmland like a jewel set in a cloth of green velvet. The river wound its lazy way through the valley, meandering this way, then that, so that the road had to cross it twice, over two old stone bridges called Pont Michel and Pont Sarève. Beyond Aganel, with its church spire piercing the summer-blue sky, the hills and valleys faded to the west in a restful patchwork of brown and green.

Behind them, the nearer village of Pontneuf and the farms about it were laid out across the valley like a map, between the forests of Mt. Sarmoné near at hand and steeper Mt. Gregoire on the far side. "It seems so small," Lynnette said.

"The world is so much bigger than that," her brother agreed. "I've never been anywhere. Not even Bordeaux. I want to see Paris one day."

"and Rome," said Lynnette.

"Geneva," Emmanuel replied.

"Amsterdam. And Naples. And London. Why are you rubbing your shoulder?"

He shrugged. "A long climb. It gets sore."

Eventually they picked up their whips and made their way down the hill. Emmanuel used his left hand because descending was easy and his right shoulder hurt. They hung their whips on a post by the edge of the vineyard. Their father was angry, of course. There was work to be done. Manon was heavy with child, and unwell. Yet sister and brother were both smiling as they fell asleep that night.

Later that year, as the autumn nights grew cool and the last of the grapes weighted the twisting vines, Manon had her labour. From the front hall of the little house Manon shared with Guillhaume, Emmanuel could hear his older sister crying out.

"She is in pain," said Lynnette, who was waiting beside him, along with their father and Guillhaume and others from the village. The room was crowded, but there was no chatter. Worry hung in the air like smoke on a windless day.

The old sage-femme, the village midwife, came out of the bedroom, and oh! her face was grave. "The baby is entangled in the umbilicus," she told the room. "And Manon is bleeding. I can save the child, perhaps. Mais pauvre Manon . . . ." She did not finish. There was no doctor in Pontneuf.

"I lost a wife to bear a child and now I will lose a child too," said Emmanuel's father.

"I am losing my wife!" Guillhaume declared. "Is there nothing to be done?"

The sage-femme said, "Dr. Richoux, he is a surgeon. He could help. But he is in Aganel."

Everyone understood what that meant. Even on a fast horse, it would take hours to reach Aganel, following the old road around the base of the mountain. And hours more to return to Pontneuf.

But Emmanuel spoke then. "There is a way," he said. "We can get word to Dr. Richoux much faster – I can whip-fly up Mt. Sarmoné. I can go straight over the mountain instead of going around."

The sage-femme said, "No one could climb that hill fast enough. We have no time for nonsense."

"It is not nonsense," said Emmanuel's father. "It is bravery." He said to his son. "Can you do it?"

"I can try," Emmanuel replied. "But still the doctor must ride around the mountain to Pontneuf. Father, you and Guillhaume, you must help." He quickly explained what he wanted them to do.

"My father keeps strong horses," Guillhaume said.

Emmanuel turned to Lynnette. He said, "You must come with me."

She was surprised. "I'll only slow you down," she said.

"Together we are faster," her brother insisted. "Come, we'll gather the whips on the way."

Minutes later, as the clock in the tower chimed twelve times, Emmanuel and Lynnette rode hard down the village street, he on a black stallion, she on a chestnut mare, their horses bridled but unsaddled, brother and sister pressed against the horses' manes as they clattered across the old bridge that gave the village its name. Eight flying hooves threw up earth and fallen leaves as the siblings hurried down the road toward their father's vineyard. They thundered up the path between the long rows of grape-burdened vines, past the startled, shouting farm hands working on the harvest.

Where the vines ended Emmanuel slowed his horse only enough to reach down and grab the whips off the post as he rode by. Then he plunged on into the forest, following an old lane that angled up the hillside, whispering in his horse's ear to urge it on. Lynnette's braids flew out behind her as she pressed her mount up the hill behind him.

Finally, when the trail became too overgrown for the horses, and the land too steep to ride farther, Emmanuel pulled in the reigns. He and Lynnette dismounted, winded and rattled. Emmanuel slapped the wet flanks of the horses to let them know they could go home. He handed Lynnette her whip.

"The horses gave us a head start," he said, "but we must climb quickly, faster than we have ever gone before." He lifted his whip and dashed up the slope. "For our sister!" he shouted, as his cracker snapped around a branch.

Fuelled by equal parts devotion and desperation, the pair charged up the mountainside. Their whips flew. They ran and they climbed and they swung themselves upward, ever upward, through the oak and the beech, then the pine and larch and the nameless, slender tree with the diamond-shaped leaves, until the ground grew too rocky and the trees too small and they could use their whips no longer.

Lynnette tried her best too keep up with her brother. Again Emmanuel waited for her at the base of the brief cliff below the summit. Together they scrambled up the rocks until they topped the cliff and collapsed on the wind-swept grass.

They lay there for a few minutes, recovering their strength. From the hilltop they could see Aganel and it's high-spired church beyond the forest. Emmanuel lifted a flask from his side. He drank deeply, then handed it to his sister. "The hardest part is done," he declared. "The descent will be faster."

"We can be in Aganel in an hour," Lynnette said.

Her brother shook his head. "I cannot go on," he said. "I am sorry. You will have to climb down alone."

"What! Me? By myself?" Her eyes were wide.

Her brother abandoned hiding his pain. He cradled his right arm in his left. "Climbing up so quickly, I hurt my shoulder. I can't whip-fly fast enough now, not with my left hand. But you are fast, Lynnette. Always faster than me climbing down."

Lynnette was terrified. "I've never gone down this side," she cried. "I don't know the way. I can't go alone!"

Her brother held her by the shoulders. He looked her in the eye. "Your name is Lynnette, which means little lioness," he reminded her. "You must be bold."

Lynnette got to her feet and regarded the slope below. "It looks steep."

Emmanuel came up beside her. "Climbing down is easier. Remember you have two hands and two feet. Move one at a time. As soon as you get to the forest you can use your whip."

Lynnette drew a deep breath, gathering her courage. "I will be bold," she said. "For our sister."

Emmanuel helped her over the cliff-top until she had her footing on the rocks. His face was solemn as he watched her climb down the cliff. It was indeed steep, and at first she had to move carefully. She quickly grew impatient with the slow descent. Every minute passing meant less chance for Manon. Whip-flying was impossible among the bare rocks and scree.

To one side, among the rocks, Lynnette noticed a tree. It was one of the slender trees with diamond-shaped leaves that no one had ever bothered to name. It was stunted and gnarled, no more than a metre high, stubbornly clinging to the mountainside. The tree was too small to

bear her weight. It would surely uproot in seconds. Perhaps, Lynnette reasoned, seconds were all she needed.

She snapped her whip around the tree, pushed herself off the rock face and swung down on the whip. At once the little tree bent and began to tear free of the thin soil. Yet its roots, corkscrewing deep into the crevices among the rocks, did not give way. At the bottom of her swing, as she began to slide down the slope, Lynnette released the whip and snapped it around another tree. This one was a little taller than the first, but equally well anchored in the scree. Swinging and sliding and snapping her whip, Lynnette rappelled down the slope. Gradually the trees around her grew stronger, and taller, and more abundant, until she was whip-flying through shadowed forest down the far side of Mt. Sarmoné.

Lynnette wound her whip around one branch after another, swinging through the forest in great leaps as she raced pell-mell down the mountainside. Now she was less like a deer or a rabbit than a partridge startled into flight; her long braids were like tailfeathers and her skirts swirled about her like beating wings. She was moving too fast to look ahead or find the best route. Vines tore at her clothes and branches scraped her arms and face. She crashed through brambles and dodged mossy rocks as she flew on her whip down and down the hill.

Lynnette's strength began to wane and she hurt in a dozen places, but she ran on, heedless. She missed a branch with her whip, fell to the ground, got up, ran five paces and felt the earth vanish beneath her as she tumbled over a three-metre cliff. Yet even as she fell she swung the whip-end about so the cracker wound around a tree-branch below the cliff. Her fall became a long, swinging leap. She struck the ground, painfully and ungracefully, but upright. She gathered her whip and her courage and kept on running.

At length she was into the lower forest, far below the larch and the pines, where beech and ivy and birch were giving way to massive, wide-branching oaks. The slope was more gentle here, the ground more even. Lynnette wound her whip around strong branches and lept through open air as she charged down the hill. Gradually the oak trees became more widely spaced, presenting fewer branches for her to swing on.

Lynnette was very tired. She mis-timed a release. She felt a painful jerk on her shoulder as the whip handle flew from her hand. She tumbled to the ground, crying out, but she climbed to her feet again and ran on without the whip. She didn't need it now.

Lynnette's boots stirred a swirl of new-fallen leaves as she pressed on through the open forest. Her breathing was becoming laboured and her dirty hair was damp around her scratched and bruised face. She was vaguely aware that she was bleeding somewhere, her left eye was swollen, and the pain in her right arm was growing worse with every step. She wondered how much farther she could go.

As if a curtain had been lifted, the forest disappeared and autumn sunlight startled her eyes. A staked row of vines laden with clumps of purple sprang up in front of the her. Lynnette ran along the top row until she found a laneway, then plunged down into the vineyard, though now her breath was rasping, the ache in her legs was fire, and every leaden step was an act of will. Off in the distance, the church-spire of Aganel rose in front of her, almost a mirage in her wavering vision. A blood stain was spreading on her skirt.

There were workers in the field, harvesting the grapes. Lynnette tried to call out to them. All that came out was a breathless gasp. She stumbled forward, waving her hands above her head, although her right arm hurt horribly. In the distance, she heard someone shout. She became aware of people moving toward her, but her vision was blurred and rimmed with a ring of black, growing steadily wider like a camera lens being closed. She managed another dozen faltering steps, then collapsed into the arms of a gentle woman with hair in a red bandana, whose apron smelled of grape must and earth. The ring of black closed completely.

A measureless time later, Lynnette became aware of blue sky moving above her. She was lying in the back of a grape wagon rolling quickly through the unfamiliar streets of Aganel. A farm worker in the seat was urging the surprised horse to greater speed. Lynnette was wrapped in a tarp, with her head in the lap of the woman who had caught her. She sipped water from the jug held to her lips. Every lurch of the wagon brought stabs of pain.

The rocking of the cart stopped. She heard voices and commotion. "What have we here?" said an older man with a caring face.

"She came out of the forest," said the woman who was holding Lynnette. "She was running from something. She is almost dead, pauvre p'tit."

The man said to a woman nearby. "Get her into my surgery. At once."

But somehow Lynnette found the strength to rally. She raised her head. "No," she croaked. "Dr. Richoux. You must – you must come to Pontneuf. My sister. With child. Bleeding."

Dr. Richoux stared at her. He said, "By all the saints girl, did you climb straight over the mountain? I cannot do that. I couldn't get to Pontneuf before nightfall."

Lynnette took a drink from the water jug. She said, "Ride – ride fast. My father will meet you at Pont Michel with a fresh horse. Manon's husband will have another at Pont Sarève. Please go. Je vous en pris."

Those last words – "I beg of you" – were all she could manage before the darkness claimed her again. Poor Lynnette, she did not hear Dr. Richoux say to his wife, "Get her inside and bandage her wounds," and then to his son: "Saddle my horse."

So Dr. Richoux came to Pontneuf. By the time he arrived at the little house where Manon lay bleeding, the sage femme had already delivered a baby girl. Dr. Richoux was almost as tired as the exhausted horse he galloped in on. Yet his hands were steady and his sutures were quick and Manon did not die. She and Guillhaume named their daughter Catherine Lynnette, in honour of her noble aunt who was willing to sacrifice everything to save her sister. In time Manon bore two more children, sister and brother to Catherine.

As for Lynnette, she too did not die, although at first everyone thought that she would. It was many days before she could even rise from her sick-bed in Dr. Richoux's surgery, and many weeks before she could make the long journey around the flank of Mt. Sarmoné, along the winding river, back to her home in Pontneuf.

But what of Emmanuel, who ended his hero's journey standing like Moses on the windy peak of the mountain he so longed to cross over? His desperate climb up the slope permanently damaged his shoulder. He hung up his whip in the horse barn and never went *volant-en-fouet* again. In time, he did leave the valley, but only to travel to Bordeaux, to attend school and learn more of the art of wine-making. He returned with many new ideas and a pretty young woman named Josephine, with whom he started his own family. A few years later he took over his father's vineyard, as everyone knew he would.

In fact, it was Lynnette who left the valley of her childhood to see the world. It was she who travelled to Naples, and Rome, and Geneva, and finally Paris, where she made her home. And it was she who, many years later, finally gave an official name to the slender tree with leaves shaped like diamonds.

Yet the hero of our story remains Emmanuel, whose name means messenger, and this is still his hero's journey. Emmanuel's heroic moment came, not as he whip-flew up the slope of Mt. Sarmoné in a desperate bid to save his older sister's life, but at the summit, high above the forest and the village of Aganel, where he convinced his younger sister, Lynnette, that she had the heart of a lioness and the courage to carry on alone. Because sometimes the true hero is the one who knows when to step up and help someone else be a hero.