

A Just Man

There once was a poor man whose wife had just given birth to a son. He wanted his son to have a just man for a godfather, and he set out to search for one. As he was walking, cane in hand, he met a man he did not know, but who had a good appearance. And this man asked him:

“So, where are you going, brave man?”

“To search for a godfather for my newborn son.”

“If you want, I will be your son’s godfather.

“It is just that,” answered the poor man, “I would like a man who is just.”

“Oh good! You could not do better.”

“How so? Who are you, then?”

“I am the Lord God.”

“You? Just?” said the poor man. “Oh no! Certainly not! I hear complaints about you everywhere on Earth.”

“Ah! Why?”

“Why? Oh, many reasons. Some complain about you because you have sent them to Earth with a bad turn: hunchbacks, lame, deaf, mutes, diseased, and others who have all good parts and are full of health. And yet, they are no better than the first. Others, who are honest, say that they are good workers and take pain, they are always poor and in need. Then we see their neighbors, the lazy, do-nothings, amassing jolly fortunes. No, I tell you, you will not be my son’s godfather.”

And the father continued on his way. A little farther, he met a great old man, whose grey beard was very long.

“Where are you going, brave man?” this one asked him.

“To search for a godfather for my newborn son,” answered the father.

“If you would like, I will be his godfather.”

“Maybe, but first I must tell you I want a just man for my son’s godfather.”

“A just man? Then I am he for whom you search.”

“Who are you then?”

“Saint Peter, my brave man.”

“Really? Saint Peter, guardian of paradise, the one who keeps the keys?”

“The same, my brave man.”

“Oh well! No more of you, you are not the man that I need.”

“But, do you by chance want to say that I am not just?”

“Certainly, you are not just.”

“And why, please?” asked Saint Peter.

“Why? Oh! I really want to tell you: because for the nothings, for the peccadilloes¹, you refuse the gate to paradise to brave men, honest men, men just like me, who after having worked all week, drink maybe one glass too much, Sundays, after the vespers² or have a taste for brandy, which made them sing a little too loud. Want me to say more? You are the first apostle, boss of the church, isn't that right?”

“Yes, I am so.”

“Oh good, in your church also there isn't any justice. There isn't any except for the rich, for those who have the money. The poor, we are left in the back of the church. No, I do not want you for my son's godfather.”

And he continued on his route. A little farther, he met another person who did not have a pleasant face at all. He had a very slim body and he bore a scythe on his shoulder. But, curiously, he was not bearing it like a reaper who goes to work in his field; he bore it upside-down.

“Where are you going, brave man?” asked the man with the scythe.

“To search for a godfather for my son.”

“If you want, I will be his godfather.”

“Maybe, but before, I must tell you I will only accept a just man to be my son's godfather.”

“A just man! Then I am who you are searching for, and you will not find a person who is as just as I.”

“They all say that. But who are you?”

“It is simple,” said the man with the scythe. “I am the Ankou.”

“Well there, that is different,” said the father. “Yes, certainly, you are just, because you do not have pity on anyone and you do your job well. Rich and poor, nobleman and peasant, king and soldier, young and old, strong and weak, you reap each one at their turn when the hour has come. Their lamentations, pleading, and

¹ Peccadillo: “A minor fault or sin; a trivial offence.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “peccadillo,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139401>. – Ed.

² Vespers: “Evening prayers or devotions.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “vespers,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/222856>. – Ed.

their prayers serve no purpose. You do not pay attention to their silver nor gold. You are really just, and you will be my son's godfather. Come with me."

The poor man returned to his cottage, accompanied by he whom he had chosen for his son's godfather.

The Ankou held the child on the baptismal font and then there was a small feast at the father's house. They drank cider; they ate white bread, which did not happen often.

Before leaving, the Ankou said to his godson's father:

"You are honest people, your wife and you, but you are very poor. Since you chose me to be your son's godfather and showed me respect, I want to repay you. I am going to show you a secret that will make you gain a great deal of money. You, my godson's father, you are going to practice medicine now, and here is how you will do it: when you have been called to a sick person, if you see me standing beside the bed, you can tell the sick they will be healed, as for the cure you can give them anything you would like, clear water for example. They will always get well. But conversely, if you see me at the foot of the bed, the sick will die infallibly and you can do nothing for them."

The poor man became a doctor then. He precisely followed the advice from his son's godfather, the Ankou. He always said whether the sick would survive or not, and never made a mistake. Since he always said the truth and that his cures were not expensive because he gave clear water to the sick, he became in high demand and rich in a short time.

When the Ankou passed by his house, he entered to see his godson and chat with his godson's father. The child grew in strength and wisdom. The father, since he was no longer young, he began to bear the weight of age.

One day, the Ankou said to his godson's father:

"Each time I pass here, I come to pay a visit, but you; you never come to my place. You must come to visit me at last that I will receive from you my turn and that you see my house."

"I will not go to see you too early," said the doctor. "I know well that when someone is at your place, they do not return as they want."

"Be calm about the subject, because I will not take you before your turn to come. You know that I am a just man *par excellence*!"

The doctor agreed to pay a visit to his son's godfather, the Ankou, and one day, he accompanied him to his house. They walked a long time. They crossed plains, mountains, great woods, streams, rivers and countries perfectly unknown.

The Ankou stopped all last before an old castle surrounded by high walls, in the middle of the forest. And he said:

"We have arrived."

They entered in the castle. The master of the place regaled his godson's father with an excellent meal. And when they got up from the table, he led him into an immense room where there were millions of candles in all sizes. The doctor looked at this spectacle, amazed and without believing his eyes: there were candles that were long, others that were medium, and others still that were short. And the flames of the candles were all different. Some were strong and brilliant, others were simpler, and others still were dull, smoking, about to go out. The doctor stayed a moment without being able to speak. Then he asked:

"What is the significance of all these candles?"

"These are the lights of life, my friend," answered the Ankou.

"The lights of life? What are those?"

"Everyone living currently on this Earth has a candle that is attached to their life."

"Really? There are medium, short, and long, of all sizes. There are some that shine brilliantly, dull or smoke, without doubt on the verge of going out. Why is that?"

"It is not difficult. The candles are like the lives of men on the Earth. Some are just born and they have a long time to live. Others are filled with strength and youth. Others are weak because their time approaches."

"This one here, for example, which is very long."

"It is a child that was just born."

"And that other, over there! How brilliant! What beauty is in the light!"

"It is the candle of a man that is strong in age."

"Conversely, that one there, over there, that is about to be extinguished."

"It is that of a man who is going to die."

Then the doctor turned close to his son's godfather:

"And mine, he asked in a hoarse voice. Where do you find it? I would also like to see it."

"It is not difficult," said the Ankou. "It is the one closest to you."

“This one there? But my God, it is on the verge of going out! It is almost entirely burnt up!”

“It is,” said the Ankou, “because you do not have more than three days to live.”

“What are you saying? I do not have more than three days to live? But, it is you that is the master here! Can you not make my life last a little bit longer by burning my candle for some years?”

“That is impossible,” said the Ankou.

“But,” insisted the doctor, “what if you add a bit from this other candle that is nearby and very long?”

“That one there? It is your son’s candle, my godson. If I did what you asked, you son would live a little less, and that would not be just.”

“That is true,” answered the old doctor.

And he lowered his head with a sigh.

The he returned home and called the pastor and parish. Three days later, he died, as predicted by his son’s godfather, the Ankou.

Told by J. Corbez, from Plourin, Finistère, 1876.

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