

Carefree, or the Farrier and Death

Once upon a time, there was a Breton soldier named Carefree¹, because of his good humor and his happy character, who was returning from the army to his country in Louargat, at the foot of the mountain of Bré.

Some said that he was given permission to take a holiday; others said that he had deserted, but whichever one it was matters little to us.

After a long day of walking, he found himself outside the walls of an old, fortified château at around sunset. He was tired, he was hungry, and he did not have any money. As a result, he resolved to ask to stay at the château.

He knocked on the door. The door opened, and the gatekeeper asked him: “What do you want?”

“I would like to stay for just one night, because I walked the whole day and I am exhausted.”

“Wait there a bit, and I will ask my master if he would like to let you stay.”

And the gatekeeper went to the owner of the château, and told him that a soldier worn-out with fatigue was at the door and was asking to stay.

“Tell him to come see me,” replied the lord.

The gatekeeper let Carefree inside and led him before the lord, who was warming himself before a good fire, in the great room of the château.

“Good evening, *monseigneur*,” said Carefree upon entering.

“Good evening, my boy,” replied the owner of the château. “What do you ask of me?”

“I would like to stay, because I am tired, and also, I am hungry and do not have any money.”

“I am willing to let you stay, and I shall even serve you a good meal, if you are not afraid and if you want to pass the night in a room of the château that is haunted by revenants, devils, or I don’t know what. There is always such a racket and such a demonic Sabbath every night, that no one can bear to stay in there, and they must all leave that room. If you succeed in chasing away the revenants or the devils and render the room livable, you will not have wasted your efforts, for I will compensate you well.”

Carefree replied:

¹ Called “Sans-Souci” in the French text, presumably a translation of an equivalent word in Breton. – Trans.

“I shall try to brave it, no matter what happens. I have never been a coward, and I should not even be angered to see the Devil next to me, of whom I’ve heard people speak so often and whom I have not known yet. Maybe he is not as bad as people say, after all.”

“Splendid!” replied the lord. “You seem to me to be a determined boy. I shall lead you to the room. There, you will find some wood to light a fire, and I shall give you as much bread, meat, and wine as you want. Then, you can prepare your food however you please.”

Carefree installed himself in the haunted room, and servants brought him a chunk of raw mutton, a loaf of white bread, and six bottles of aged wine. Then they left, and he remained there alone. He began by making a fire and placing his chunk of mutton on the spit. Then he sat in a large armchair next to the fire, lit his pipe, uncorked a bottle of wine, and drank a full glass. He then went back to smoking peacefully, while watching his mutton cook, and saying:

“What is there to fear! They imagine that there are revenants in here, or devils, what do I know?...And see how silent and peaceful it is! As for me, I can live with this dwelling, especially with how they’re treating me...”

And he poured himself a second glass of wine and was about to drink it, when he heard a loud noise in the chimney, and soon, without appearing the least bit inconvenienced in the world, a strange being, without doubt a devil, fell onto the fire, who seized Carefree, threw him to the back of the room as easily as if he were an ordinary log, and sat in his place in the armchair.

“Oh!” said Carefree to himself. “It appears that the devils’ Sabbath is about to begin. But, no matter. We shall see how it ends.”

And he stood up and sat, boldly facing the newcomer in another armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace. But he had hardly sat down when he heard the same noise once again from the chimney, and a second character, similar to the first in every way, fell into the fire then lifted itself up agilely, threw Carefree once again to the back of the room, and then sat in the second armchair, facing the other.

“Here are some singular companions!” said Carefree to himself, lifting himself up again, “but my meat must be cooked, and I must retrieve it from the fire, lest they decide that they want to eat it.”

He went back to the fireplace and was about to remove his meat, when a third character, similar to the first two, tumbled down from the chimney and threw him once again to the back of the room: him, his spit, and his meat.

“Oh, this game is beginning to annoy me,” he said to himself, lifting himself up and scratching his behind. “But I’ll let them warm themselves at their ease, for

they appear to like the fire, and enter into the closed bed² that I see over there. I'll take my leg of mutton with a bottle of wine, and maybe they will let me dine at my ease."

He then went into a bed at the back of the room. But he had hardly entered it, when the three devils (for they were really devils) went over to him and said to him things like:

"Oh! Carefree, fearless man, do you believe that we will just leave you to eat, drink, and sleep in peace in our house, as if you were at yours? You're fooling yourself, friend, and we are going to finish you off!"

"*Messeigneurs*," Carefree replied, "I hope at least that you won't kill me in the bed, like three cowards, and that you will let me stand up, so that I can defend myself. You are three against one."

"Sure, stand up," they responded.

Carefree jumped out of the bed. The previous night, not having found anywhere to stay, he had passed the night in a church, and that morning, while parting, he filled an empty bottle that he had with him that he had bought full of cider, with holy water. As soon as he was on his feet, he uncorked the bottle and began to spray the devils with holy water. They jumped onto the ceiling, looking to flee and letting out awful cries.

"Enough! Enough!" they cried. "Let us leave now, Carefree! Take pity on us! Enough! Enough!"

"Yes, if you promise not to return to this room ever again."

"Yes, we promise you, we will never return to this room!"

"Sign, then, with your blood."

"Yes, we'll sign with our blood."

And all three signed with their blood on a piece of parchment that was nearby, and then Carefree let them leave through the place from whence they came: that is to say, through the chimney. After that, he was able to eat in peace, then he went back into the bed and slept very well.

The next morning, the master of the château came to see him, and was astonished to see him still alive.

"How are you still alive?" he said to him.

"Yes, *monseigneur*, I am still alive, as you can see, and I am not even in pain."

"And you passed the entire night in here?"

"I passed the entire night in here."

"And you saw nothing extraordinary?"

² A traditional Breton bed, elevated and inside a cabinet resembling an armoire. For more information and images, see "Box Beds in Brittany," Old & Interesting, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/breton-box-beds.aspx>. – Trans.

“Oh! As for that...I had business with some singular characters, but rest assured that I rid you of them for good.”

“I cannot believe you. Where is proof of what you are saying?”

“Take that parchment, and see what is written on it.”

And he presented the parchment that the three devils signed with their blood to him.

The lord examined it and cried with great joy:

“Oh! What service you have performed for me! Ask me for anything you want, and I shall award it to you to repay you. Would you like the hand of my daughter?”

“*Monseigneur*, I do not deserve such an honor, and I do not aspire for something so high. I am the farrier of my estate, as was my father, and, if you would like to make me happy, have me build a smithy next to the highway, and provide me with iron and coal, because I don’t have one *sou*. I shall shoe your horses and those of your farmers, as well as those of the travelers who pass by, and live off my work, as all honest men must do.”

The lord had the small smithy constructed along the highway. Soon after, Carefree installed himself there and, all day and often at night, one could hear his hammer bang against the anvil, for he liked to work. He did not lack clients, and he was content and happy.

One day when he was at work, as usual, in shirtsleeves, sleeves rolled up and his face completely blackened from coal and smoke, two passers-by, two strangers, one old and one young, stopped to look at him.

“You work heartily, Carefree!” the younger said to him.

“One must work, *messeigneurs*, to make a living,” he replied.

And he put the iron in the fire, then he took it out and banged it against the anvil, and drop after drop of sweat fell from his forehead. The two passers-by stood in admiration of him.

“I like workers like you, Carefree,” the stranger repeated, “and, to prove it to you, make three requests of me, your choice, and I will grant them to you.”

Carefree smiled and looked at him out of the corner of his eye, like a man without much confidence.

“Ask for Heaven first,” said the elder of the two travelers.

“Heaven, my brave man,” he replied, “is for those who earn it, and I don’t think it is given away.”

“You are right, Carefree,” replied the other, “but give me your three wishes, and I promise to fulfill them, no matter what they are.”

“Well! I’m often thirsty from beating the hammer against my anvil, and the fountain is rather far away. I would like it if an old pear tree that I have in my garden behind the smithy bore fruits in all seasons, even in the winter.” “It’s granted,” said the young traveler.

And, in an instant, Carefree’s old pear tree was covered in beautiful white flowers, and, a moment after, it succumbed to the weight of beautiful pears, all of them golden, although it was the middle of the month of January!

“Make your second wish, Carefree,” said the stranger.

“Ask for Heaven, now, at least,” the old man said again.

“Then, leave me alone about your paradise, old man,” Carefree said to him. “Heaven is for those who know how to earn it – you know that well – and I hope that they will not refuse it to me, after my death, if I have earned it.”

“Certainly,” replied the young stranger. “Make your second wish, Carefree.”

“Well! I would like, in that corner of my smithy, a good armchair, and, every time that someone sits in that armchair, I want them to be unable to get up until I permit them to.”

“It’s granted.”

And, in an instant, the armchair was in the corner of the smithy.

“Now, make your third wish.”

“Don’t forget to ask for Heaven, at least this time!” the old man said again.

“I repeat, leave me alone about your paradise, babbling old man! Now, I ask for a pack of cards with which I will always win, no matter whom I play against.”

“Granted again! Wait, here are the cards.”

And, in an instant, a brand-new pack of cards was on top of the anvil.

The two travelers said goodbye to the farrier, and continued down the road. I doubtlessly do not need to say to you that the younger man was Our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who was then traveling in Lower Brittany, and the other Saint Peter, who accompanied him on all voyages.

It had been several years since Carefree had received the visit from our Savior and Saint Peter, and he was living happily and contently, always working despite his old age, when he received another, less agreeable visit. He was visited by the Ankou himself. He did not have trouble recognizing him with his scythe and his thin, white bones. However, he did not worry, and continued to work and beat the hammer against his anvil, as though he were an ordinary client. But the unwelcome visitor, brandishing his scythe, said to him:

“Let’s go! Carefree, prepare to follow me, for your time has come.”

“My time for what?” replied Carefree, pretending not to understand.

“You do not know me? I am the Ankou, my friend!”

“Oh! You are the great Reaper? Well! Well! I have often heard people speak of you, but, excuse me, I do not know you, by God!”

“There is nothing wrong with that, but let’s go! Come quickly; I have no time to lose.”

“Yes, yes, certainly, since my turn has come, you say. But, I will not leave like this, before having shod the horses that you see over there, at my door. Sit down a bit in my armchair. It will take a moment, then I will follow you where you want.”

“I am in a hurry, and I do not have the time to wait. I’m going to give you the final blow.”

And he lifted his scythe to hit him.

“Have a bit more patience, I’m saying to you. What harm will it cause you? You know very well how to win back lost time. Let me at least finish shoeing the rector’s *haguenée*. I have already put three shoes on him; he is only missing one, and, for the honor of my name, I do not want to leave the last horse that I shoe in such a state, especially the rector’s horse! What would the blessed Saint Eligius³ say when I am presented before him up above? Sit down in the armchair over there, I’m telling you; it will only take the blink of an eye!”

Death sat down in the armchair. Carefree was then reassured, and he went back to work, whistling and singing. He placed the iron in the fire, blew on it, then beat it against the anvil, and did not hurry at all. He finished shoeing the rector’s horse, and then others’ horses after that. Death, seeing this, said to him again:

“Let’s go! I have to leave, and I still have many roads to travel today. I cannot wait a long time.”

“You annoy me to the end! Give me peace and let me finish my work in peace!” replied Carefree, when he was sure that Death could not leave his armchair.

And he continued to work the rest of the day, then the next, then the day after that, then for months and for years after that, and Death always remained stuck in his armchair, and when he spoke to him of leaving, Carefree contented himself with whistling and taunting him, and this lasted for a long time.

To make a long story short, Death was Carefree’s prisoner for a hundred years. No one had seen the Ankou in all that time and they began to worry about what had become of him. On top of this, they pitied and beseeched the Ankou

³ The patron saint of metalworkers. See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s. v. “Eligius, Saint,” accessed October 18, 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05386a.htm>. – Trans.

everywhere now, as they hated and spoke badly of him before. No one died anymore, and they came to see life as the greatest evil. Finally, God took pity on the poor humans (it was, without doubt, an experience which He had wanted to have), and he sent the Angel of Death after Carefree to tell him to set Death free.

When the angel arrived at the smithy, he found Carefree peacefully shoeing horses as usual.

“How, Carefree,” the messenger of God said to him, “can you hold Death prisoner for so long at your smithy? It has been a hundred years since anyone died, and souls are complaining everywhere: in Hell, in Purgatory, in Heaven, and especially on Earth! Everyone wants to die now. They call on Death as a remedy for all evils, like an angelic liberator. The Good Lord has sent me to you to tell you to set him free.”

“That is true,” replied Carefree. “He has sat there for a long time in his armchair, and, because he is asleep and doesn’t make a noise, I had forgotten all about him. I’m going to free him and let him leave with you, but I am busy at the moment. See the horses at my door! I only have to nail horseshoes on the back hooves of this white horse whom you see, who belongs to the lord of the nearby château, and I am yours. Sit down and wait in the armchair next to the great Reaper; there is room for two.”

And the angel, too, sat down in the armchair, next to Death. So Carefree shut the smithy door on Death and the angel, put the key in his pocket, and left with the cards that the Good Lord had given him and that he had not yet used. It was not long before he encountered an unknown lord with a strange appearance, who, seeing a pack of cards in his hands, went to his side and said to him:

“Would you like to play with me, comrade?”

It was Lucifer himself, who, having nothing to do, was growing very bored.

“I could not ask for better,” replied Carefree.

And they sat on a large rock in the middle of a large moor to play. The cards were dealt, so Carefree asked:

“What will be at stake?”

“Well! Let’s play soul against soul, yours against mine,” replied the Devil.

Carefree, stunned by this response, examined him from head to toe, and, having noticed that he had cloven hooves for feet, he realized that he was doing business with Old Guillaume⁴ himself. But, because he had confidence in his cards, he said:

“No matter! You don’t know what awaits you, you whom they call the clever one.”

And they began to play. Carefree easily won the first hand.

⁴ The Devil.

“Let’s continue,” said the other. “Two other souls against the two that you now possess, yours and the one that you won.”

“That will do!” replied Carefree. “Deal the cards.”

The cards were dealt for the second time, and Carefree won again.

“Four other souls against your four!” said the other, a bit vexed.

“Let’s go! Four other souls against the four that I’ve already won,” replied Carefree.

And he won again.

Finally, to make a long story short, they played for a hundred years, always doubling the wager, and Carefree always won. Think of the number of souls he won! He won so many that he emptied Hell! As the souls were saved, they passed from Hell into Purgatory, and there were so many there that, to make a space for them, the souls that were in Purgatory when the game had begun had to be sent to Heaven.

The unfortunate player then let out a terrible scream. He kicked the rock – and the mark of his foot is still visible there – then he disappeared into an abyss that opened to receive him.

Meanwhile, Death was still a prisoner at Carefree’s smithy along with his angel, and, because no one died anymore, the people were more and more unhappy. Everywhere, one could see them lifting their hands towards the sky and crying:

“Just to die! To die! Death, have pity on us!”

Carefree, touched by such great desolation, said to himself one day:

“By God! I’ve lived long enough like this! It’s always the same thing in the world: the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, full of misery and evil everywhere, and no one is happy with their condition. I want to go see what is happening on the other side now. I shall free Death.”

And he returned to his smithy. As always, Death was there in his armchair with the angel next to him. He awoke them, for they were in a deep sleep, and said to them:

“It has been a long time since you have had anything to do. Leave, now, and work hard, for they complain of your laziness, on Earth as well as in Heaven.” Immediately, they got up without waiting for him to speak again, and Death, brandishing his scythe, having been inactive for so long, began by hitting Carefree. Then he left and went after everyone else, working at awe-inspiring speed, to make up for the lost time. He multiplied his cuts at a frightening rapidity like a madman, and mortals fell and piled up one on top of the other, like the grass and flowers of

fields fall, thickly and quickly, with reapers' cuts during the months of June and July.

Meanwhile, Carefree's soul had risen to Heaven, and he went right to knocking on the gates to Heaven: Knock! Knock!

"Who is it?" cried Saint Peter, behind the door.

"Carefree! Please open up."

"Carefree?...Pass by. There is no room for you here."

"Why not, *monseigneur* Saint Peter?"

"Remember the day when, while traveling in Basse-Bretagne with Jesus Christ, we found you courageously beating the hammer against the anvil in your smithy on the side of the road? The Lord said to you to make three wishes, to ask three things of him, and he would grant them, no matter what they were."

"Yes, I remember very clearly."

"I advised you three times to ask for Heaven. But, you did not listen to me. You asked for an old pear tree that you had in your garden to bear fruit in all seasons, then for an armchair that no one could get up from after sitting in it without your permission, and finally for a pack of cards with which you would win every time. All that was granted to you. But you did not speak of Heaven despite my advice; you treated me like a babbling old man. Is that not true?"

"That is definitely true, *monseigneur* Saint Peter, but I beg you to please forget about all that and let me in! You don't lack a place for me, I presume?"

"No, no, Carefree, you cannot enter."

"Then, where do you want me to go?"

"Where you want; to the Devil, if you would like."

"The Devil? I know him very well, and I have had business with him before. Where does he live?"

"Go through the second door on the left."

"That's good. I shall go find him, for I do not fear him."

And Carefree went to knock on the door to Hell, which was the second on the left: Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Who's there?" cried a voice from inside.

"Me, Carefree," he replied.

"Carefree! Well! Don't get your hopes up on entering! Don't forget how you treated us in the old château that you chased us from. And then, you emptied Hell and prevented others from coming here by keeping Death imprisoned for so long in your smithy. Go away, quickly! Go away!"

And they shut the door in his face.

“Oh! This is quite amusing!” said Carefree. “They don’t want me in Heaven, nor in Hell! I must knock again, on that other door there in the middle. Maybe they’ll receive me there?”

And he went to knock on the third door. It was the door to Purgatory:
Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Who’s there?” cried a voice from inside.

“Me, Carefree.”

“Carefree! Go away, go away quickly, unhappy one! You sent us all of Hell! Go away quickly! Get away from here!”

“They definitely don’t want me anywhere!” Carefree said to himself, embarrassed to not know where to go. But I can’t remain here alone, outside...I have to find lodging somewhere, needless to say. I’m going to knock again on Saint Peter’s door; in spite of everything, he seems to be a good man, and I shall very well find some means to make him open the door.”

And he went to knock once again on the door to Heaven: Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Who’s there?” cried Saint Peter.

“Me, *monseigneur* Saint Peter,” replied Carefree.

“‘Me’ is not a name. What is your name?”

“Carefree, *monseigneur* Saint Peter.”

“Again!...But I told you that I will not open the door for you. Try elsewhere.”

“But, *monseigneur* Saint Peter, no one wants to let me in anywhere. Let me enter your place, I beg of you.”

“No, no! You cannot enter here. Go away; you’re annoying me.”

“I entreat you, *monseigneur* Saint Peter, at least open your door a crack, as small a crack as you want, so that I can take a look inside and get an idea of what Heaven is like.”

The Good Lord was currently in the lodge of Heaven’s gatekeeper; He had come out to see his old friend and talk with him, as he often did. He took pity on Carefree, being turned away from everywhere, and he said to Saint Peter:

“Open the door a bit, Saint Peter, and let him take a look at Heaven.”

And Saint Peter opened the door slightly. Immediately, Carefree threw his cap into paradise, as far as he could. Then he said to Saint Peter:

“Let me in, my good Saint Peter, I beg of you.”

“You will not enter, and, if you want, take a good look inside while you are here, because I am about to shut the door.”

“Well! Will you at least let me enter to search for my cap?”

“Yes, because it is too dirty for me to want to touch it, but hurry.”

And Carefree entered, without waiting for another word. And he went quite a distance into Heaven and started running.

“Stop him! Stop him!” cried Saint Peter.

Three or four angels flew after him to stop him. But then Carefree sat on top of his cap and said to the angels who wanted to force him out and to Saint Peter, who had run up to him, armed with a baton:

“Don’t you touch me! I am here, on my property, and no one has the right to chase me from it.”

And, as Saint Peter threatened him with his baton:

“Don’t you touch me, I’m telling you, Saint Peter.”

And, turning towards our Savior, who was watching this scene smiling:

“Good Lord, you who are just and know the rights of each person, is this not my right, to remain on my property, which neither Saint Peter nor anyone else can chase me from?”

And the Good Lord said:

“Carefree is right. Leave him alone, for he is not doing wrong to anyone.”

“Oh, have you heard, you others? The Good Lord is telling you to leave me alone, because I am acting within my rights, and you must obey Him.”

And that is how Carefree entered into Heaven, where he no doubt still is today. Maybe someday we can all go there to see him for ourselves!

Amen! replied the other storytellers.

Told by Jean Le Person, shoemaker, in the town of Plouaret.
François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne*. Paris:
Maisonnette, 1881.
Translated by Michelle Collins.