

He Who Went to Carry a Letter to Heaven

Once upon a time, there was an old and wealthy lord who had lost his wife, his children, and his parents. Because only he remained, he wanted to travel, to try to distract himself from his sorrow. “I shall bring a domestic servant with me,” he said to himself, “to keep me company, and I shall take a child of twelve to fifteen years, who is poor and has no parents, like myself.”

He went walking on the highway and soon encountered a boy of about fifteen, completely ragged with a miserable air.

“Where are you going like that, my boy?” he asked him.

“To search for my dinner,” replied the child.

“Can you read?”

“No.”

“And tell lies?”

“Oh, yes, whatever you want.”

“Good. Would you like to follow me as a servant?”

“I couldn’t ask for better.”

“What is your name?”

“Joll Kerdruz.”

“Well then! My boy, come with me to dine at my château, and we shall see afterwards.”

Some time later, the lord wanted to go to Paris, and he said to Joll:

“The two of us are going to go to Paris, Joll. Me, I will go before you, and you shall leave a little later and pass by the same places as I have. I will give you money, and you will stay at the best hotels and eat at the same tables as travelers and guests. You will hear all sorts of conversations and about good trips, but, no matter what you hear, always say that you have seen better. Tonight, I shall dine and sleep at the hotel *Cheval-Blanc* in Guingamp, and you will dine and sleep there yourself, tomorrow night.”

“That sounds good, master,” replied Joll. “I shall do as you have told me.”

With that, the lord left on his horse, arrived at Guingamp around nighttime, and the table was well-furnished for dinner. The conversations took their course, and the guests talked of many wonders and many good travels.

“Bah!” said the lord. “Nothing is even close to what *I’ve* seen.”

“Then, what have you seen?” someone asked.

“This morning, as I was heading to Guingamp, the sun was shining and the weather was superb. Suddenly, at the moment that I passed the foot of the mountain of Bré, arose darkness, such as that I could no longer see the road. I believed that the end of the world had arrived.”

Everyone was stunned; no one had seen anything similar in Guingamp or anywhere around there, and they thought that the lord was either joking or lying.

The next morning, he left for Saint-Brieuc.

The same day, his servant Joll also took to the road on a good horse, and, at night, he arrived at the hotel *Cheval-Blanc*, in Guingamp. At dinner, like the previous night, the guests told about good trips. Joll’s master had lectured him, and, having listened to everything in silence, he suddenly said:

“Bah! Nothing is even close to what *I’ve* seen.”

“Then, what have you seen?” they asked him.

“This morning, as I was heading to Guingamp and arrived next to the mountain of Bré, I saw three men armed with poles who were working to move an enormous egg, and they were in shirtsleeves, all of them out of breath, and dripping with sweat.”

“What a lie!” someone said.

“Open the door the whole way!” said someone else.¹

“Personally,” said the owner of the hotel, “I am completely disposed to believe that this man is telling the truth. Yesterday, a traveler dined here who told us that, at the moment that he passed the foot of the mountain of Bré, in broad daylight with the sun shining, that darkness suddenly arose, so that he no longer saw the road. This darkness must have been produced by the bird that laid that egg, whose enormous wings would have blocked out the rays of sunlight.”

When the lord arrived that night at Saint-Brieuc, he checked in at the hotel *Quatre-Fils-Aymon*.

Towards the end of the meal, the happy words and the marvels came again, and the storytellers out-storytold each other.

“Bah!” the old lord then said. “*I* have seen much better than any of those things.”

“Then, what have you seen?” they asked him.

“This morning, when I passed by the pond of Chatelaudren while heading here, the water of the pond was boiling like a cauldron in Hell.”²

“Then, that pond must be directly on top of Hell,” someone said.

¹ When someone is suspected of having told a big lie, it is customary to say, if one is in a closed room, “Open a door or a window” to let the lie escape.

² In Breton stories, Hell is often depicted as being lined with cauldrons of boiling oil, where the souls of the damned are boiled alive for all eternity. – Trans.

The next day, the lord went farther, and his servant arrived around nighttime at the hotel *Quatre-Fils-Aymon*, and, as they talked of good trips and wondrous things:

“Bah!” Joll said suddenly. “I have seen much better than any of those things.”

“Then, what have you seen?” they asked him.

“This morning, when I passed by the pond of Chatelaudren while heading here, I saw four carriages pulled by four strong horses that were pulling fish cooked in the pond.”

And, as everyone gasped:

“That must be true,” the owner of the hotel said, “because, last night, we had a traveler who assured us that, when he passed by the pond of Chatelaudren, the water was boiling like a cauldron over a fire.”

When the old lord arrived in Paris, he went straight to the king’s palace. The king knew his father, and he gave him a good welcome and invited him to stay at his palace, and received him at his table. Towards the end of the meal, perhaps after having had a drop too much of wine, he said to the king:

“You certainly have a lovely palace, sire, but mine is still lovelier. The doors and the windows are made of ivory with sheets of yellow gold, the roof is made of white silver, and, at the top of the highest turret, there is a rooster made of gilded copper who flaps his wings and sings twelve times when noon sounds.”

“You insolent man,” said the king, who was angered. “How dare you mock me in this manner, at my palace and even at my table? Throw this man in prison.”

And immediately, his valets seized him and led him to the prison.

The next day, Joll Kerdruz also arrived in Paris, and went straight to the king’s palace. When he had said who he was, the king gave the order to give him a good welcome and feed him. Then he had him come into his study and asked him:

“Does your master own a beautiful château?”

“Yes, certainly, sire. My master owns a very beautiful château, and I have never seen any as beautiful anywhere else.”

“Is that true? Well! Give me a bit of a description.”

And Joll, to whom the master had lectured, repeated his master’s description, and added other marvels.

“This château must be very beautiful, indeed,” the king thought to himself, “based on what this man says, and I was wrong to throw his master in prison.”

And he gave the order to release the lord and bring him before him.

“You have,” he said to him, “a servant who is no fool.”

“You are right, sire, for my servant has no equal in this world. Ask him to do anything you like, be it even carrying a letter to Heaven, and he will do it.”

“Are you mocking me?” said the king.

“No, sire. I’m speaking nothing but the truth, and I shall prove it.”

“Well! That is what I should like you to do. I shall write a letter that he must deliver to Heaven, to Lord God Himself, and, if he does not bring back a response in a year and a day, that will mean death to your servant and to you as well.”

And the king wrote a letter, wrote the following as the address on the front: *To the Lord God in His Heaven*, and, giving it to Joll in his presence of his master, he said to him:

“You shall deliver this letter for me to its address, and, if you do not bring back a response within a year and a day, you will both be hanged, you and your master.”

Our two men were now very embarrassed. To go into Heaven alive, and return from there the same, when it is so difficult, they say, to go there after you die!...And then, what road to take there?

After having deliberated for a long time between themselves without deciding on anything, Joll, finally making a decision, said: “On the grace of God!” and left.

We shall now leave his master and the king to follow him on his voyage.

He went, he went, always ahead of himself. When he asked for the road to Heaven, some took him for an innocent pauper; others took him for a joker and injured him or threw stones at him. His clothes were already in tatters, and he no longer had either shoes or money to buy some. What to do?

“By God!” he said. “I’m going to blindfold myself; maybe then I’ll arrive there more easily.”

And he blindfolded himself and began walking again. Those who encountered him were stunned to find him walking in this state around the road; children followed him screaming and throwing stones at him. He did not pay attention and kept walking the whole time, neither complaining nor speaking to anyone.

He walked this way for six months, night and day, experiencing neither hunger, nor thirst, nor any other need, when one day, a soft and compassionate voice said something of this sort to him:

“Where are you going, my poor boy?”

“It is useless for me to speak to you,” replied Joll. “You can do nothing for me.”

“Maybe I can. Tell me, anyway.”

“Well, – because I suppose from your voice that you are good and compassionate – I shall say to you what I have not said to anyone else: the king gave me orders to carry a letter from him to God in His Heaven, and, if, after a year and a day, I have not finished my voyage and brought back a response, I shall be hanged, and my master as well.”

“Well! My boy, remove the blindfold that covers your eyes, and I shall give you advice and put you on the right road. You are approaching the end of your voyage; you are now at the foot of the hill of Calvary.”

Joll removed his blindfold and saw an old man with a white beard and a very pleasant appearance, who was walking in a garden full of beautiful flowers. And this old man said to him something to this effect, while presenting a ball to him:

“My child, here is a ball. Take it, place it on the ground, and it will roll by itself. Follow it, and it will lead you to my brother, who will tell you what you must do.”

“Thank you, grandfather,” said Joll, taking the ball, “but, tell me, I beg of you, before I go on my way, what do the things I see around me signify? I see three apple trees, one of them with beautiful, ripe apples, another with apples that are hardly formed, and finally a third, which is covered in flowers.”

“When you pass by here again,” the old man replied, “while you are returning from Heaven, I shall explain everything to you. My ball, as I have said to you, will lead you there; you only have to follow it. Soon, you will arrive next to a cross, where you will see an old man kneeling and praying. That is my brother, who has remained in that position for five hundred years. He will recognize my ball and receive you well, and give you advice that you will follow exactly.”

“Thank you, grandfather, and God bless you,” said Joll.

And he placed his ball on the ground. Immediately, it began rolling, and he began to follow. After some time, it bumped into the steps to a stone cross.

“Good day to you, my brother’s ball,” an old hermit who was praying on his knees said to it. “It has been five hundred years since I have last seen you. What is new?”

And, perceiving Joll, he asked him:

“Where are you going, and in what way can I be useful, my child? Speak with confidence, and consider yourself welcome, since you have come from my brother.”

“I have a letter to carry to Heaven, my father.”

“That’s good, my son. You don’t have much farther to go, but listen attentively to what I am about to say to you, and follow my advice point-by-point. Observe what you see on your passage very carefully; do not fear anything, no matter what you see or hear, and, especially, do not look behind you, or you will fall to the bottom of the pits of Hell. You will see strange things which you will not understand, but, when I see you again upon your return, I shall explain everything to you. You will need to climb that steep mountain that you see before you. After climbing the mountain, you will pass through an arid meadow, burned by the sun and where no grass grows, and yet you will see cows that are healthy and gleaming

with fat. Lying on the burning sand, they will watch you pass without being distracted, and will appear to you to be content and happy.

“Farther away, you will pass through another meadow with coarse, high, and abundant grass, yet you will see cows that are thin, gaunt, sickly, and sad, and, when one of them wants to graze, the others will throw themselves on top of it to stop it from grazing.

“After that meadow, you will find yourself in a beautiful avenue of tall trees with beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers, beautiful singing birds, and where young boys and girls richly decked out eat and drink and dance and laugh and sing happily. They will beg you to become part of their festivities and their frolicking, and the beautiful girls will flirt with and make advances towards you in all sorts of ways, but do not listen to them and continue on your way without stopping, or else you will be lost forever.

“At the other end of this beautiful avenue, you will see a straight and rising pathway, cluttered by shrubs and thorn bushes, and you must pass through it. In this difficult pathway, my son, you will be tested harshly – I shall not tell you about all the frightening things that you will see and hear there – but, no matter what you see or hear, do not fear, do not look behind you, and continue on your way with courage and resolution. If you succeed in passing through this terrible passage when the row of shrubs and thorn bushes ends, everything will go well, and you will have no worries for the rest of the voyage. Upon your return, when you pass through here again, I shall explain to you the meaning of all that you have seen and heard, without understanding any of it. Go now, by the grace of God, my son, and I shall remain here to pray for your adventure to succeed.”

Joll thanked the old man and went to continue his route. He happily passed through the meadow of fat cows, then that of thin cows, then the beautiful avenue where the people feasted and danced and laughed and sung. Here was the straight, arduous, rocky pathway. He entered it with resolution. But he advanced with such pain! Soon, he saw something that looked like a barrel of fire coming towards him. It was dreadful!

“Alas!” he said to himself. “If it hits me, that’s the end of me!”

But he did not step back. He remained firmly in the middle of the path, and, at the moment that he believed that he would be reduced to ashes, the fire passed over his head without harming him.

Almost immediately after, he heard a terrible noise, as though a stormy sea were at his feet and was about to engulf him. His hair stuck up from his head from terror, but he remained firmly in the middle of the pathway, without looking behind him, and fear once again left him. He arrived at the end of the pathway and was stopped by a high and tightly-packed hedgerow of shrubs and thorn bushes.

“My God,” he said to himself, “how can I ever climb over this hedgerow, as tired and weak as I am? But I must try, no matter what happens.”

He climbed over the hedgerow with much difficulty and fell from the other side into a moat full of shrubs and nettles, where he fainted, exhausted by the blood that he was losing. After some time, he recovered his spirits, and his first concern was to make sure that he had not lost the letter. He still had it; he regained courage and succeeded in climbing out of the moat, bloodied, naked or very close to it, and his body torn apart. He was a pitiable sight.

He then arrived in a place full of beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers, butterflies, and small birds with melodious songs. A clear river traveled through it. He approached the river, sat down on a rock, and dipped his feet into the water. He instantly felt relieved and fell asleep, and dreamt that he was in Heaven.

Upon waking up, he was surprised to have recovered his strength and to see that his wounds had become scars.

Before him was the hill of Calvary, and there he saw our Savior nailed to the cross, and blood was still flowing from his wounds. Upon arriving at the foot of the hill, he saw a crowd of small children busy climbing. They were charming with their white robes and their blond, curly hair. They climbed almost to the summit, but, at the moment that they reached it, they rolled back to the foot, holding handfuls of grass torn from the earth in their hands while falling. And they began to climb again, only to tumble down again.

Seeing a man approaching, they ran up to him, like a swarm of bees, saying: “Bring me with you! Bring me with you!”

He took three, one on each shoulder and the other by the hand, and climbed with them. He was only a step or two from the summit, when he, too, tumbled with the children back to the foot of the mountain. He began a second time, then a third, with three other children, but he was never successful. Seeing that he could not reach the summit of the mountain with children, he tried to climb there himself and succeeded easily.

There, he saw a beautiful Calvary, and knelt on the stone steps to pray. Our Savior was on the cross the whole time; He was not yet dead, and blood ran from his wounds and fell to the ground.

After having prayed and shed abundant tears, Joll stood to go farther. He noticed not far from here a beautiful house, like a palace.

“That’s Heaven, without a doubt,” he said to himself.

He went up to it and knocked on the door. An old man with a long, white beard wearing a bundle of keys suspended from his waist, went to open it and asked him:

“What do you ask for, my boy?”

“Heaven, and it seems that I have finally arrived there, after much trouble.”

“This is indeed Heaven, but not everyone can enter.”

“Here is a letter that I was given to carry to the Lord God in His Heaven.”

“Thank you. Give it to me, and sit down in an armchair, and I shall take it to the Lord God and bring you back a response, if there is one.”

And Saint Peter took the letter to carry it to its address. Joll sat in a beautiful armchair, and, seeing glasses on a small table nearby, he placed them on his nose, and then saw things so beautiful, so beautiful, that he was completely in awe.

When he saw the old gatekeeper returning, he quickly removed the glasses, fearing being scolded.

“Do not fear, my child,” Saint Peter said to him. “You have seen five hundred years through my glasses.”

“Jesus! What are you saying? I just put them on.”

“Yes, my child. It’s been five hundred years, and, like me, you found it to be a short time.”

“Good God! And I must return from my voyage of a year and a day, on pain of death.”

“Do not worry about it. Come, and I will let you see your king and your master as well, who were here for a long time.”

And he led him to Heaven’s door, which was half-open, and he saw his king and his master on golden seats crowned with glory and surrounded by a sparkling light. Above them, Joll noticed another seat that was more beautiful, but empty.

“Who is that seat above theirs that shines like the sun for?” he asked him.

“For you yourself, my son,” Saint Peter said to him, “and, less than a year from now, you will sit in it.”

“My God, is that true?”

“Just as I say, but let’s go now.”

“Oh, let me look at my seat some more.”

“You have looked at it for a hundred years, and it seems to me that that’s enough. Let’s go. Here is the eternal Father’s response to your letter. Upon arriving in your country, you will deliver the letter to the rector of your parish, who will give you a hundred *écus* for it. You will distribute all of that money to the poor, and, when you have given it all away, down to the last *denier*, you will die where you are and return to the beautiful seat that I have shown you, and you will remain with us forever. So, return to your country: you will not experience any difficulty, and will not encounter anyone on your voyage except for the two old men who aided you with their advice, and who will explain to you the extraordinary things that you have seen on your voyage.”

Joll left Saint Peter and went back on the road, to return to his country. Passing by the hill of Calvary, he knelt once again before the cross of our Savior to

adore and to thank Him. At the foot of the hill, he found the same old man in prayer, and as immobile as a stone statue.

“Good day, my father,” he said to him.

“You are returning, my child. Did you succeed in your adventure?”

“Yes, thanks to you and God, my father.”

“Excellent, my child; here is my ball, which will lead you to my brother, who will explain to you the meaning of all the extraordinary things that you have seen on your voyage.”

Joll said goodbye to the old hermit and continued his journey, following the ball that rolled before him.

He reached the other old man who was in his garden among the flowers, and sitting in an apple tree.

“Good day, my father,” he said to him.

“Is that you, my son? Has your voyage been successful?”

“I succeeded, my father, thanks to God and to your advice. But now, please explain, I beg of you, the meaning of the extraordinary things that I saw.”

“Yes, my son, I shall explain to you everything that stunned you, as I had promised you I would. What did you see first while traveling, after leaving my brother?”

“I first saw the fat and glowing cows and bulls in a place where there was only dry, burning sand, and not a blade of grass.”

“Well! My son, those fat cows and bulls in a place so desolate represent the poor who are content with their fate on the earth.”

“And the thin cows and bulls that I saw a little further, in a place where grass was thick and abundant, who were constantly fighting?”

“Those are the rich, my son, whom nothing can make happy and who are always going to war to possess more.”

“And the people that I saw after that, in a beautiful avenue, feasting and dancing, and singing happily?”

“Those are demons, my son, who wanted to turn you away from the path of righteousness and make you lose yourself like them, through the attraction of pleasures.”

“And the straight, arduous, rocky pathway, full of shrubs and thorn bushes, where I was in so much pain?”

“That is the path to Heaven.”

“And the barrel of fire that gave me such great fear?”

“That was the demons again, trying to make you turn back.”

“And the hedgerow of thorn bushes so thick where I lost my clothes and tore apart my whole body, and the moat full of shrubs and nettles, where I fainted?”

“Purgatory, my son. The shrubs, the thorn bushes, and the nettles that pricked and burned you, and that caused your blood to flow, were as many as the souls in trouble that you have delivered and who, at this moment, pray for you in Heaven, where you will go to join them, for you have gone through your own Purgatory.”

“And the beautiful garden full of sweet-smelling flowers and singing birds, with the river where I washed my wounds and found such relief?”

“There, my son, you were already in the entry to Heaven. That beautiful river was the Jordan, where our Savior often bathed while He was on the earth.”

“And the sweet little children who were climbing the mountain and rolling to the bottom upon reaching the summit?”

“Those were children who died without being baptized, and who cannot enjoy the sight of God. These poor children will never suffer again, and their sole punishment is to be deprived of the view of God.”

“Tell me now, my father, what the three apple trees in your garden signify.”

“The one that bears the beautiful red apples represents man in the prime of life and health; the one that bears the fruits that are hardly developed represents the children who have just been born; and the one with the flowers represents the seed, in the breast of the mother. Now, my son, I shall say farewell to you; we will see each other again in the kingdom of God. You will die less than a month from now, and I at the end of seven months, when I have finished my penitence. I know all of this. I have something else to say to you: you will not experience pain or suffering of any kind, until you place your feet on the soil of your parish. Then, you will feel fire burning in your flesh, but, once again, suffer with resignation and courage. Also, keep yourself from blushing over your clothes or your body, in whatever state you find yourself upon arriving in your country. And now, goodbye, until I see you again in God’s Heaven.”

Joll continued his journey back to his country. Placing his foot on the soil of his parish, as the hermit had predicted, he suffered pains throughout his body, as if his flesh were on fire. When he arrived in his town, it was a Sunday, and a procession was taking place. It took place and Joll recognized no one. But the faithful were frightened by his appearance and moved away from him. He was stunned and looked at himself. He then saw that he was completely naked, covered in blood and wounds, and reduced almost to the state of a skeleton. He entered the church. The rector followed him. Joll gave him the letter that he carried from Heaven. The rector read it and then exclaimed:

“Oh! How lucky you are, and how I would like to be in your place!” He gave him a hundred *écus*. Joll had all of the poor in the parish alerted that he wanted to distribute alms to them. They assembled around him in the cemetery,

and he distributed all of his money to them. At the moment that he gave the final piece, he showed it to the people and said:

“Here is my last piece, and she who receives it can say that she has my life in her hands, for, the moment that I give it to her, I shall die.”

He gave the piece to a poor woman and expired at the same time.

And then they saw four white doves and four white angels descend from the sky, who carried his body to Heaven.

Told by Jean-Marie Guézennec, sawyer, in Plouaret, January 1869.
François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne t.1*. Paris:
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