

*Pope Innocent*¹

You must know that, once upon a time, there was a king and a queen who had not had any children, something which greatly distressed them. Finally, through praying to God and to the saints, the queen was pregnant. She gave birth to a son now, as happy as they were once unhappy. They baptized the young prince with solemnity, and they searched for a wet nurse for him, who came to live at the palace.

Many nurses had the bad habit of not making the sign of the cross on their infants when they laid them in their cradles, and nothing was worse. One day, the nurse of the young prince did this, and the demon, who looks out for all occasions, profited from this forgetfulness by removing the child, transporting him to Germany, and disposing of him in a magpie nest at the top of an elm tree in an archbishop's garden. Then he put in his place in the cradle, one of his own, black, dirty, horrible to see, a veritable monster!

Everything was done without making a noise, and, the next morning, the nurse, upon finding in the royal cradle this being so ugly, so disgusting, and as black as Lucifer, let out a cry of horror and fainted. People ran up to her. Alas! The evil was done, and it was too late! And behold the king and the queen, devastated and unhappier than before. But they resigned themselves, because it was the will of God, and gave orders to treat the little monster like their child. But the child mistreated his nurses, wore them out, and then killed them, sucking their blood. Each day, they had to hire a new one, and the child did not want to hear talk of weaning. At the age of ten, he was still drinking from breasts. Meanwhile, the people were complaining, and the king gave the order to no longer hire nurses for him. He then let out awful cries and thrashed out like the veritable demon that he was. He demanded that they hire one nurse per month, then one every two months, then one every six months, but it was in vain.

"Give me at least one per year," he then exclaimed, "or I will set the whole town on fire and make blood flow!"

The king, terrified, promised to give him one per year, and he relegated him to a little house that he had built expressly for him, in the middle of a vast moor at some distance from the city.

But let us leave the demon incarnate in his little house in the middle of the vast moor, and occupy ourselves now with the true son of the king, who, as we

¹ The association of these two words ("pope" and "innocent") is singular to our Breton peasants who, ordinarily, attach to the latter the meaning of "poor" or "idiotic." There is a satirical intention in the title of this legend.

have already said, was transported into a magpie nest in the garden of a German archbishop.

One morning, the archbishop's gardener, while traveling through the garden, was stunned to hear cries like those of a newborn child. He searched all around himself, among the saplings and the flowers, and found nothing. He listened more attentively, and it seemed that the cries came from a magpie nest that was at the top of an elm tree, in the corner of the garden.

"That's strange!" he said. "Some cat that will, without a doubt, leave her litter in that magpie nest. I must reassure myself."

And he climbed the tree up to the nest, and his astonishment was great – you can believe me – to find a small child just born and as beautiful as the day. He carried him down with the utmost precaution, and hastened to go show him to his master the archbishop, who was so less astonished.

"It was God," he said, "who sent him to me. I want to raise him and instruct him as though he were my own son."

And he searched around for a good nurse for the child, and advised her to take the best possible care of him. He grew wonderfully, and the archbishop was completely happy with him. He went to see him every day at the nurse's house. When the child was five years old, the archbishop said:

"Now, the child will come live with me in my house, so that I can occupy myself with his education and instruction."

The nurse did not want to separate from him, because she loved him very much, but she was forced to obey.

The child's name was Innocent. They named him that because the gardener, while presenting him to the archbishop, had said:

"Here is the poor innocent that I found in the magpie nest, at the top of an elm tree in the garden."

"Innocent, indeed," replied the prelate. "I want that to be his name."

"Now, you must, my child," the archbishop said one day, "begin to learn your prayers."

"I have known my prayers for a long time, as well as you, and I say them every day and every night."

"That isn't possible, at your age! And who would have taught them to you, then? Your nurse?"

"No, it wasn't my nurse. I learned them myself."

"It can't be, my child."

"But it's the truth. It's also true that, ever since you became archbishop, you have never said a single good Mass."

"God! Who told you that?"

“I’m still telling the truth, because, ever since you became archbishop, you conceived them all full of pride and vanity, that you hardly see the world as worthy to carry you.”

“What you are saying, my child, is not far from the truth, unfortunately. But then, what extraordinary sort of child are you? God Himself must be speaking through your mouth.”

Innocent remained at the old archbishop’s house, where he was the object of astonishment and admiration for everyone, because of his wisdom, his piety, and his knowledge, although he had never gone to school.

When he reached the age of twenty-one, he had the desire to return to his country, to his mother and father’s house, to see what had happened to them. He thanked the archbishop for the generosity that he had showed him, embraced him tenderly like a father, and then he left alone on foot.

After having walked a long time, a long time, through the countryside where the people speak neither Breton nor French, he finally arrived at Paris, and went straight to the king’s palace. He asked to speak to the king, saying that he had something important to communicate to him, and he was immediately introduced in the king’s presence.

“Good day, sire,” he said with assurance.

“Good day, young gentleman.”

“I have heard it said that you have a son who causes you much grief, and who does not resemble most men, and I would very much like to see him.”

“Oh! Don’t speak to me of my son, because nothing in the world is more disagreeable to me.”

“It’s the will of God, sire. What can you do? The best is to resign yourself. But permit me to see your son, I beg of you, and I am convinced that you will not regret it.”

“He is held captive in a little house in the middle of a vast moor, and no one may see him save for once a year, when we bring him a new nurse, because he spits fire like a veritable demon, and everything is arid and burned around him.”

“That doesn’t matter! I want to see him, without delay. I also want you to accompany me. Have no fear, for I assure you that he will be more pitying and more peaceful when he sees me coming.”

The king and queen decided, although with pain and as though struck by a mysterious sentiment, to accompany Innocent on his visit. When they entered into the area, they were very surprised to see that the inhabitant of the little house did not put his head to the window and did not spit any fire, as was his habit. They arrived at the door of his house, without having seen or heard what on earth had inspired such fear in them.

“Enter in front of me,” the king said to Innocent.

“No, you are his father, and he first agreed to enter for you, because, if he obeys someone, it must be you.”

“I wouldn’t dare. I’m afraid...”

“Enter, I’m telling you, and do not fear anything. I say that nothing bad will happen to you.”

And the king entered in front, trembling, and Innocent and the queen followed him. They saw the host of the little house curled up in the corner of the foyer, completely ashamed, completely trembling, and making himself as small as he could.

“Oh! Satan, do you recognize me?” Innocent said to him. “Look at you, ashamed and trembling! Are you afraid of me, then? You are right to be, because you have taken my place. Let’s go! Get out of here, and quickly!”

And, in an instant, the demon left through the chimney, in the form of a lightning bolt.

“Well! My father,” said Innocent, turning towards the king, “have you ever spoken to him?”

“Your father, you say? Oh! I would very much like to be him. Don’t mock someone who is unhappy, for I am very unhappy!”

“Yes, you are my father, and you,” he said while turning towards the queen, “you are my mother!”

And he threw himself into her arms and covered her in kisses. Then he told them everything, and the substitution that took place in the cradle, and his journey to a German archbishop’s house, and all of the special graces that he received from God.

The king and queen cried from joy and happiness. They spread the word through the entire kingdom that their son had been found, and, for fifteen years, there were public feasts at the palace, where the poor were as well received and treated as the rich, who did not see each other every day.

Meanwhile, Innocent, who did not like parties, ceremonies, etiquette, and all of the intrigues of the court, went as soon as he could escape to walk into a neighboring forest. He encountered an old coalman whose conversation pleased him very much. Every day, he slipped away to go chat with the sage whose knowledge had not been learned in books. As a result, the princes, the princesses, and the courtiers complained to the king, expressing to him their concerns that it was not decent that the young prince disdained their society in favor of that of a coalman!

The king told his son about these concerns. He replied that the coalman was not an ordinary man; he was a real sage, and their conversations were more profitable than those of princes and of courtiers – and he continued to frequent and enjoy his society.

The king, obsessed with the same men, reprimanded his son, and this time vivaciously. The prince did not want to change his habits, so the old man unduly lost his temper and formally ordered him never to see the coalman again, threatening to draw and quarter him if he disobeyed.

“Bah! My father,” he replied calmly. “You are wrong to get so angry over so small a thing. But remember very well that, far from being able to do me any wrong, there will come a day when you will be happy to pour water for me to wash my hands, and you, my mother, you will be happy to present me with a handkerchief to dry them off!”

These words made the old king furious.

“To speak this way to your father and your mother!” he exclaimed. “Tomorrow morning at ten, you shall be drawn and quartered, before all of the people of the court!”

His mother was also outraged. However, this torture displeased her. She went to find the old coalman herself in the woods and promised him a large sum of money, if he wanted to throw the prince in his furnace the next morning when he went to see him as usual.

The coalman promised, but he had resolved not to do anything to him.

The next morning, when the prince went to the forest as usual, he found the old coalman completely sad and anxious. He asked him the reason. The coalman told him about his mother’s visit and her request.

“I knew that,” replied Innocent, calmly. “When my mother goes to see whether the deed has been done, respond to her affirmatively, and you will receive the promised compensation. As for me, I shall now say goodbye to you. I’m going to travel far away, and for a long time no one will know what has become of me.”

At this time, the Pope had just died in Rome, and the word spread throughout the whole world that they would give him a successor. The date of the election was fixed. So, it appears, that things were not passing like today, where everything is done, they say, through protection and through favor. Then, it was the will of God that manifested itself through visible signs and that the people always followed.

Innocent, having heard of the great solemnities that took place for the election of the next Pope, wanted to go to Rome, like everyone else.

No one encountered him anywhere on the road, but bishops, monks, and priests who were proceeding to Rome, and everyone nourished in their hearts a secret hope. As Innocent was alone and on foot, he encountered an old friar accompanied by a young one, who were also on foot, along the way. Others

passed, some on horseback, others in carriages, and seeming to taunt pedestrians. He walked up to the two friars, greeted them graciously, and said to them:

“Good day, my fathers, and God help you! Where are you going, if there is no indiscretion in asking?”

“We are going to Rome, my child,” replied the elder.

“I’d like to go to Rome as well, but I do not know the way, and if you would allow me to accompany you, I would be obliged to you.”

“Willingly, my child,” said the old man.

“You are wrong,” the young friar then said, “to welcome a man whom we have encountered on the highway and who does not know you in any way so easily as a traveling companion. You may regret it later.”

“Bah! Don’t think like that, my friend. We will talk, the three of us, while walking, as good friends, and time will seem shorter to us.”

And the three of them continued their journey, the old man chatting with Innocent, and the young friar walking alone off to the side and appearing ill-humored.

During this time, the Capuchins, when they traveled, did not stay in hotels, but they received the most attentive hospitality in *châteaux* and noble manors.

A little after dusk, our three travelers encountered a *château* next to the road.

“Let’s stay there,” said the old friar.

They were very well received by the lord and ate with him at his table. The next morning, when they were about to leave, a servant said to them:

“My fathers, if you would like to be well-received on your return, you only have to kiss the little child that is there in his cradle.”

And the two friars hastened to kiss the child and wish him a thousand blessings from God. After them, their companion, approaching from the cradle, stabbed him three times in the heart and killed him, without hearing him make even one cry.² The two friars knew nothing about it, having already turned their backs to leave, nor did the servant. The three of them continued their journey.

At some distance from the *château*, Innocent said to his two traveling companions:

“If only you knew what I did at the *château*!”

“What did you do, then?”

“You others, you kissed the child and called God’s blessings upon him.”

“Well, what did you do?”

“I stabbed him three times in the heart, and I silently killed him.”

“The poor thing! Why did you do that!” exclaimed the old man.

² While translating this story, I strongly considered leaving out this shocking incident, but retained it in order to keep my translation as faithful as possible to the original story. – Trans.

“I would tell you about him,” he said to the young friar, “that you were very wrong to have such society with the first to come. We will be fortunate if he does not have us hanged, before we arrive at Rome!”

“It isn’t possible,” replied the old friar, “for you to have done what you just said you did.”

“But nothing is truer, and I do not regret it at all.”

“Then, why not?”

“Ever since those people had a child, they have no longer prayed to God, who sent him to them. They do not even think about Him, and their child is now their god, and they will have been damned because of him. That is why, in taking him away from them, I believe that I have done good, because they will return to God and they will be saved.”

The old man shook his head and said nothing; the young friar, on the contrary, continued to grumble, and refused to walk next to this adventurer, this criminal. Around evening, they encountered another *château*. They were tired. They went inside and asked for hospitality. They were well-received as usual, and ate at the lord’s table. After supper, the old friar, who was exhausted, said:

“Let’s go to bed, because, tomorrow morning, we will have to go back on the road early.”

“No, let’s not sleep anymore,” said Innocent, “but, if you believe me, we will all stay up, and they will send archers to the house.”

“Why?” asked the lord.

“You will see soon.”

The old friar said that it was prudent to follow the advice of his young companion, and they sent archers.

Some time later, a stranger arrived who asked to stay, he and his horses. He had several horses loaded with mannequins, and appeared to be a wealthy foreign merchant.

“This is not an inn,” they said to him.

“I see, but, as I am lost and my horses are richly loaded, I am afraid of thieves. Be kind enough to let me pass the night in your *château*, and you will save me from a great embarrassment and do me a singular service.”

They welcomed him; they put his horses in the stable, and they transported his mannequins, which were very heavy, into a room in the *château*. They served him at supper. The lord and the two friars interrogated him on his business and his voyages.

“Buy something from the merchant before putting us to bed,” said Innocent.

“Wait till tomorrow,” said the merchant. “You can better appreciate my objects in the light of the day.”

“No, no, tonight,” replied Innocent, “because, tomorrow, we are continuing our journey at a very good hour.”

The archers had arrived and were waiting in an adjacent room. The merchant, who did not at all suspect them, reluctantly agreed to Innocent’s wishes, persuaded that his people – the friars’ young companion and the people of the *château* – had hardly coped with the two friars. As soon as they discovered the mannequins, a dozen brigands came out, who started to raise hell in the *château*, when the archers threw themselves on top of them and disarmed them. They locked them up in the dungeon, and, the next day, they were hanged in the crenels³ of the *château*.

The three companions continued their route after assisting with the execution, and the old friar was marveled by the wisdom and the talent for divination of his friend. The young friar sulked the whole time. On foot, they arrived at a village named Sicily⁴. They found no *château* there to stay around the city, and, as they were forbidden to stay in hotels, they were very embarrassed.

“I’m afraid that we will need to sleep under the stars tonight,” said the old friar.

“No, no, my father, don’t worry,” said Innocent.

At that moment, they were passing by a goldsmith’s shop. Innocent picked up a stone on the road, threw it at the display case, and destroyed it. People rushed towards the three strangers from all sides, and they threw them in prison.

“Did I not tell you, Father,” said Innocent, “that we would find somewhere to stay?”

But that did not reassure his companions at all, especially not the young friar, who was ranting and raving and insulting Innocent.

“Bah! Rest assured,” replied Innocent, “before daylight, we will be freed.”

Indeed, around midnight, they heard a huge racket in the city. Everyone was on their feet, and they ran confusedly everywhere, the cannon fired, and fire was at all four corners of the city! An enemy prince was at the city walls with a huge army, and threatened to reduce everything to fire and blood. In this plight, they freed all of the prisoners. As soon as he was free, Innocent went straight to the senior general of the besieging army and said something to this effect:

“What do you plan to do?”

“Completely destroy the city.”

“No, no, you won’t do that. You will fire your cannons no more, and, because you have better things to do, you will leave and go home as quickly as possible.”

³ Crenels: “Battlements, embattled parapet.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “crenel,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44215>. – Trans.

⁴ Possibly a geographical error on the original storyteller’s part. – Trans.

“Fire, gunners!” the general cried in response.

The gunners performed their duty, but nothing fired from their cannons, to the astonishment of everyone. “He’s a sorcerer!” they said, speaking of Innocent.

They made the enemy general pay for all the damage caused by the soldiers, then they must have believed themselves fortunate to return without any more harm, but not proudly, I assure you.

“What a man our companion is!” said the old friar.

“He’s a sorcerer!” said the young, “and we will be lucky if he does not get us hanged or burned before we arrive in Rome.”

And the three of them continued their journey. They were nearing Rome. They had just passed a pond along the roadway, where there were an infinite number of frogs, and the frogs croaked harmoniously, that they stopped to listen to them.

“Do you know what the frogs are saying, Father?” Innocent asked the old friar.

“No, my son, I do not know, but I want to.”

“Well! Not far from here lives a woman with a bad life who is presenting herself at the holy table in a state of mortal sin. She took the holy wafer into her handkerchief and brought it to her house. Then, this morning, no longer thinking about it, she went to wash her linen at the pond: the wafer fell from her handkerchief into the water, and a frog swallowed it immediately. And now, all of the other frogs have surrounded it, singing praises to their creator and our own. Listen to how harmonious their chants are!”

“Good Lord!” cried the old friar. “What must we do?”

“Go to the nearest town. Tell the rector to assemble a procession, to come with it to the pond with crosses and banners, and to bring along the ciborium⁵ to receive the holy wafer. Then, if they can get the unhappy woman to receive communion – who is currently blind, deaf, and mute – she will receive the grace of God and will immediately be cured.”

The old friar hurried to the next town to tell the rector. The rector had the bells rung; everyone in the city came outside, and they went in a procession to the pond with crosses and banners, and the rector under the dais carrying the holy ciborium. But the priests sang so beautifully on the road to the pond, that the frogs stopped their singing.

“It’s not only the singing,” Innocent said to the rector.

“What else must I do?” he asked.

“We must beseech the frog who carries the holy wafer.”

⁵ Ciborium: “Applied to a receptacle for the reservation of the Eucharist.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “ciborium,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/32936>. – Trans.

And the rector began to recite orations in Latin and make signs of the cross following the ritual, but in vain.

“Let me do it,” Innocent then said.

He made the sign of the cross on the pond, and then he recited an oration. And, immediately, they saw a frog swim to the surface of the pond and, followed by all of the other frogs of the pond, went to dispose of the holy wafer in the ciborium, which had been placed on the edge of the water. Then the chants ceased, and all of the frogs returned to the bottom of the pond.

“Now, let us go to the house of the unfortunate girl,” Innocent then said.

And they went to her house. They succeeded, not without difficulty, in getting her to confess and take communion, and she was instantly cured of all of her infirmities.

Our three companions then continued their journey. A little before arriving in Rome, as they were climbing a hill, they were delighted by the singing of a flock of birds in a hedgerow on the edge of the road, and they stopped to listen to them.

“Do you know, Father, what the birds are saying?” Innocent asked the old man.

“No, my son, and do you know?”

“Yes. The birds are saying that, out of the three of us, one of us will become the Pope in Rome. What will you do about me, if one of you becomes him, because that is probable?”

“I will make you my first cardinal.”

“And you, Father?” he said, addressing the young friar.

“I will make you God’s dog⁶ in my cathedral.”

“Oh!...that’s always an idea.”

Then he went to the hedgerow where the birds were singing, and cut a willow branch from there with his knife, which he began to remove the bark from while walking.

Finally, they also arrived at Rome. When they entered the holy city, a procession was going on. It was the first, because they must hold three. There was an immense crowd of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monks, and simple priests, who had come from all the countries of the earth. They had infinitely varied costumes, and each one of them carried an unlit candle in his hand. Of these

⁶ The Bretons call the Swiss guards of their churches “God’s dogs,” because their principal function consists of policing the church, and especially chasing away the dogs that show up. [In the French text, *chiens de Dieu*. – Trans.]

candles, some were very thick and long, and others were very modest, following, without a doubt, the rank of each person.

There were three processions required here, one per day over three consecutive days, and the pilgrim whose candle lights by itself was designated by God to become Pope in Rome. Our two friars took their places in the procession, each holding his candle in his hand. Innocent, who did not have enough money to have one, slipped in next to them, holding in his hand, in the guise of a candle, the white stick that he had cut in the hedgerow where the birds were singing, on the edge of the road. They looked at him, and they said about him while shrugging their shoulders, "Look at that poor innocent!"

The procession slowly took place throughout the city, and each person's eyes were fixed on their own candle, with the secret hope that it would be lit miraculously. But neither the cardinals' candles, nor those of the archbishops or the bishops and other greats of the Church, lit, and nor did those of the abbots, the monks, or the simple priests. But behold, a flame lit on Innocent's white stick!

"See who!" they said. "It's certainly trickery! A poor innocent! Therefore, we have an innocent Pope!"

The second day, Innocent's stick lit up again, and again the third day! Needless to say, it was he whom God designated visibly to be Pope in Rome.

The first cardinal then advanced towards him, and knelt in his presence, saying to him:

"Give me your blessings, Holy Father, for you are now Pope in Rome."

"A poor innocent like me!"

"God gave you the necessary lights. His will had manifested itself visibly, three times."

Thus, Innocent became Pope in Rome, by the will of God!

He did not forget his two traveling companions, and, as soon as the next day, he had them called to him.

"You, Father," he said, addressing himself to the old friar, "who have always been good and benevolent to me, and who wanted to name me your first cardinal if God had designated you, you yourself will become my first cardinal. And you," he said, turning to the young friar, "accept the functions that you yourself wanted to give me, as God's dog in my cathedral!"

The word resounded throughout the entire world, that there was an Innocent Pope in Rome.

Meanwhile, the King and Queen of France were very unhappy. They were convinced that the coalman had executed the queen's order punctually and that

their son was no longer alive. Remorse tormented them, and they could not find a priest anywhere who would agree to absolve them of such a crime. They addressed themselves everywhere, but always in vain. When they learned that there was a new Pope in Rome, a Pope Innocent, they said to themselves:

“We must go to Rome. Maybe the new Pope will take pity on us and absolve us.”

And so, they went to Rome, and, upon arriving, they went straight to the Pope’s palace.

“Is the Pope at home?” they asked upon entering.

“Yes, but he is dining,” was the reply.

“We shall wait for him, but tell him, we beg of you, that there are a mother and father here who are unhappy, who have come from far away, and who wish to speak with him.”

The servants repeated these words to the Pope.

“Yes,” he replied. “I know them. Receive these people well, have them eat in a room to the side, and serve them like me.”

The servants conformed to these orders, and the two visitors were confused by the reception and the warm welcome that was given to them.

When the Pope rose from the table, he went into the room where they were. Upon seeing him enter, they threw themselves at his feet.

“Lift yourselves up,” he said to them. “You must only prostrate yourselves that way before God.”

And they lifted themselves up, stretching their hands out to him.

When the Pope left the table, a valet always poured water on his hands, then another valet presented him with a towel to dry them. In his eagerness to appear before the two travelers, he had neglected on this day the customary ablution. But, in the room where the King and Queen of France were, he had already placed a ewer full of water and towels for them. The Holy Father then said, addressing himself to the king:

“Do you have, lord, the generosity to pour me a bit of water for my hands?”

And the king hastened to pour him some water.

Then he addressed himself to the queen:

“And you, *madame*, would you do me a favor and bring me that towel?”

And the queen readily presented him with the towel.

“Go, Father and Mother,” the Pope then said. “The prediction is accomplished! Do you remember when I said that the day would come that you would be happy, Father, to pour water for me to wash my hands, and you, Mother, to present a towel to me to dry them? – I am your son, and I forgive you from the bottom of my heart!”

And then, they recognized him, and they threw themselves into each others' arms, crying tears of joy and happiness. And they lived together the rest of their days, and died as did the saints.

May we be able to do as they, and go to join them where they are!

Amen (said the audience).

Told by Guillaume Garandel, tailor, in Vieux-Marché, October 1869.
François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne*. Paris:

Maisonneuve, 1881.

Translated by Michelle Collins.