

The Ankou and the Father of his Godson

Once upon a time, there was a poor man who was searching for a godfather for his child, who had just been born. He encountered a stranger who asked him:

“Where are you going, poor man?”

“To search for a godfather for my child, who has just been born.”

“Would you like me as your child’s godfather?”

“I’d like that, and why not?”

The stranger followed the man to his cottage. The godmother, a poor girl who lived nearby, had already been found, so they went to the town at once, and the child was baptized and named Arthur. After the ceremony, the godfather returned to the poor people’s cottage, where he took part, along with the godmother, in a very frugal meal, composed solely of buckwheat crêpes and a bit of smoked lard, with cider to drink. Touched by the poverty and the good hearts of these people, he said to the father while he was leaving:

“You are really poor! If you want, I’ll make you rich.”

“I couldn’t ask for better, but only provided that we are made rich honestly.”

“Understood. Well, then! Take my advice and become a doctor, and you will become rich in very little time.”

“A doctor! My God! An ignorant man like me, who can neither read nor write!”

“That doesn’t matter. All you have to do is do what I say, and everything will go fine.”

“Yes, but completely honestly and honorably,” his wife then said, who heard the conversation from her bed.

“Yes, completely honestly and honorably. Calm down.”

“Then,” said the father, “I want to.”

“Well then! Here is everything you must do. You must advertise throughout the whole country that you have become a doctor and that you have infallible remedies for all illnesses. When you see a patient, always begin by looking for me around the bed, in the form of a skeleton visible by you alone, for I am the Ankou.”

“Jesus!” cried the man while making the sign of the cross.

“Reassure yourself, and don’t fear. If I am at the foot of the bed, the patient should get better; if, on the contrary, I am at its head, the illness is mortal, and the

patient will not escape it – you can always say with complete certainty whether or not the patient will recover – and you will quickly get a great reputation and earn a lot of money.”

“That’s fine, but what *louzou*¹ will I give to the patients, because a doctor must always give some form of remedy?”

“Well! Give what you want, nothing less and nothing more; pure water drawn from the nearest fountain, if you want, and random herbs that you pick from the field and the forest.”

And, with that, the Ankou left.

As early as the next day, the poor man advertised throughout the country that he had become a doctor, and that he had remedies for all illnesses.

A rich nobleman nearby had been sick in his bed for several years. All of the doctors and surgeons, and even witches and warlocks, of the country were called one after the other, and had experimented with their *louzou* and spells. Nothing did anything for him, and, the more that he saw, the more he wasted away. He called the poor man as well.

“You have become a doctor?” the mistress of the *château* asked him.

“Yes, I am a doctor.”

“And you promise to cure my husband?”

“I will surely cure him, if you pay me well.”

“How much do you ask?”

“One hundred *écus*.”

“You may have it, but know that if you do not bring the patient back to health, there will be death for you.”

“I accept. Let me see the patient.”

And the poor man was introduced in the chamber of the nobleman, who was dying. He saw a skeleton at the head of the bed, and understood what that meant.

But, because he was not stupid, he got the idea to play a trick on the godfather of his son.

He checked the patient’s pulse, put the hand on his forehead, examined his urine, asked several questions, and then said to him:

“You have done well to call me, because, in twenty-four hours, it would have been too late! But what asses all of the doctors who called themselves experts were! They did not see one bit of what was making my lord ill, and there was nothing so simple or clear. Begin by turning the bed around, so that the head is where the foot is now, and quickly, because time is running out.”

Valets were called in, who turned the bed around, so that the Ankou, who was at the head of the bed, was now at its foot. The improvised doctor then gave a

¹ Herbs, remedies.

vial of clear water to the lady, and advised her to give her husband a spoonful of it to drink each hour. Then he left, saying that he would return the next morning.

The next day, the patient was better. The day after that, he was even better, and his state improved so rapidly, that, after eight days, he was once again in full health.

The poor man then received the hundred *écus* he was promised, and then a certificate attesting that he had cured the nobleman, when the other doctors had known nothing about his illness.

He gave the hundred *écus* to his wife, and, armed with his certificate, he went to another *château* in the country where another nobleman had been ill for a long time, and, like the first, had lost all hope in doctors. The word of his first cure had already spread across the country, and, upon presenting his certificate, he was quickly introduced to the patient. He asked for two hundred *écus* to cure him, and the lord promised him that without difficulty. The godfather of his son, the Ankou, was once again at the head of the bed, and, in spite of the Ankou's expression of disapproval and anger, the doctor manipulated him like before by moving him to the foot of the bed. After eight days, the second nobleman was once again on his feet, perfectly well, and our man received his two hundred *écus* and another certificate similar to the first.

His reputation had already been made. They spoke of him all around, in the city and in the country, and, in very little time, he became rich.

One day, having heard that the King of France was ill, he took the road to Paris to visit him. As he was passing through a forest, he encountered the godfather of his son, the Ankou.

"Oh! There you are!" the Ankou said to the man upon meeting up with him. "I am very pleased to see you, because I have to reproach you."

"Why, my son's godfather? I can only thank you, and I always count on your advice, because it is excellent and it has made me the number-one doctor in the world."

"Yes, but you deceive me, always moving me to the foot of the bed; that was never agreed upon between us."

"How do I deceive you? Is it evil, my son's godfather, to save the lives of my fellow man, as you have taught me to do?"

"Certainly it's evil, because since I told you my secret, almost no one in your country has reached me: the rich especially have been eluding me, and you have done me a considerable wrong. So stop tricking me. Is this the thanks that I receive for the service I've given you?"

"My faith, my son's godfather, you have taught me your secret, which is excellent, and I thank you so much, but, as a doctor, I cannot let my patients die, because they depend on only me to save them. I just don't have the courage..."

“Well! If that’s why, woe unto you, for your turn will come as well, and maybe earlier than you believe.”

“Oh! My faith, my son’s godfather, too bad for you. You have taught me your secret, and it’s good. Don’t expect me not to use it for myself, when the moment comes.”

“Oh! So that’s how it is! Well then! I won’t forget!”

And, upon that, the Ankou left in anger. The doctor continued his journey to Paris, rather unfazed by his threats and counting the whole time on turning his bed around, to put the godfather of his son at the foot when he saw him at the head.

Upon arriving at Paris, he went straight to the king’s palace and asked the gatekeeper:

‘ “Is this the palace of the King of France?”

“Yes.”

“Is he still ill?”

“Yes. On whose part are you asking for information on him?”

“On the part of no one but myself. Let him know, I beg of you, because I desire to see him and speak to him.”

“You?...Do you believe that the presence of the king is first-come-first-served?”

“Know, man at the door, that I am not the first to come, and the king will only congratulate himself on my visit.”

“Who are you, to speak in this way?”

“I am a famous doctor of Lower Brittany, and I am going to bring the king back to health.”

“Yes, we can tell that you are from Lower Brittany, by the way you speak. The most knowledgeable doctors of the kingdom know nothing about the king’s illness, and a mean Lower-Breton bonesetter claims to show him!...Go! Leave...and go far away!”

“Man at the door, you are insolent, and I’m going to cut off your ears.”

“Go, get out quickly, I’m telling you, or I will set my dogs on you.”

The king’s son had just passed by at that moment, hearing all the noise and seeing the furious gatekeeper, he asked who it was.

“This man wants to enter in spite of me, and is insulting me.”

“Why does he want to enter, and who is he?”

“He says that he comes from Lower Brittany and he has a remedy to cure the king.”

The king’s son, without asking him any more about it, went up to our man and said the following to him:

“You say that you are a doctor and that you have a remedy to cure the king, my father?”

“Yes, prince, I am a doctor, and I will cure the king, your father, if you permit me to give him my medicine.”

“Do you know that the most knowledgeable doctors in the kingdom have already failed him?”

“I know that, but let me look at him and give him my medicine, and I will assure you of the potential risks of my treatment.”

“You shall have a barrel of money, if you bring my father back to health. But also, if you cannot do it, you will be burnt alive.”

“I accept. Lead me to the king.”

“Follow me.”

And the prince, to the great astonishment of the enraged gatekeeper, led him to the royal patient.

The old king, worn out by the various remedies that he had absorbed and still more by his illness, was at his worst. He could hardly still breathe.

As soon as the doctor entered his chamber, he saw the Ankou at the head of his bed.

“Let’s begin by switching the ends of the bed, which are badly placed!” he exclaimed immediately.

That was done at once, in spite of the discontent of the godfather of his son, the Ankou. Then he checked the pulse of the old king, examined his urine, gave him a vial of water from which he was to drink a spoonful per hour, and then left, saying that he would return the following morning.

The next day, the king was getting much better, and seemed to be reviving and regaining his strength more each hour. The day after that, he was even better, and, after eight days, he had completely regained his health.

Our man then returned to his country, overwhelmed with presents and accompanied by four mules loaded down with money. He bought farms and forests, had a magnificent *château* built, and, being wealthy enough to, he stopped practicing medicine.

The godfather of his son, the Ankou, was always keeping an eye on him, and, more than one time, he saw him at the head of his bed. But immediately he jumped out of it, turned the bed around, and no longer had anything to fear. Because of this, he lived a very long time, a certain number of years, so many that he became known as Old Man Trompe-la-Mort².

One day when he was walking in his fields, he saw a chariot stuck in the mud on the highway, and a man who was crying and hitting his horses with great strikes of his whip. He approached him to help him lift his chariot out, and recognized with astonishment that the charioteer stuck in the mud was none other

² Literally, “tricks Death.” – Trans.

than his son's godfather, the Ankou. The chariot was full of old, ragged, and threadbare clothing.

"When are you going to come see me at my house?" the Ankou asked him.

"I have plenty of time. Wait a bit longer, my son's godfather. But what is the meaning of this load? Have you become a *pillaouer*³?"

"This is the clothing that I've worn out chasing after you."

"Well! When you have worn out as much again, maybe then I'll think of coming to your house."

One of the Ankou's thin horses had diarrhea and was soiling all of the roads that he traveled.

"Eh! Then stop letting your horse make a mess on my roads, my son's godfather," the ex-doctor said with irony.

"And how can I do that? Do it yourself, if you can."

"Wait! Wait! You'll see."

And our man took a rock from the road, stuck it like a plughole into the horse's *derrière*, and began to hit it with another rock to force it in. But the horse struggled violently and bucked the stone, which hit our man on the forehead, and with such force that he fell dead right then and there.

"Oh! Oh!" the Ankou exclaimed, laughing. "I knew that I would finish you off, in one way or another."

And so, Trompe-la-Mort finally died.

Told by Barbe Tassel, Plouaret, November 1869.

François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne* t.1. Paris:

Maisonneuve, 1881.

Translated by Michelle Collins.

³ Rag-and-bone man.