

The Devil's Son

Once upon a time, there was a dressmaker named Fantic: young, pretty, elegant, and who loved nothing more than to dance. On pilgrimages, at *aires neuves*¹, at weddings, nowhere did anyone ever see a dancer as light and as indefatigable as Fantic. One day, on a pilgrimage to Lanvellec, she danced the whole afternoon with a lord whom no one in the land knew, but who appeared to be very rich, for he was well-dressed, wore golden rings on his fingers, and six-*livre* pieces jingled in his pockets.

After dusk, her dancer, gallant and well-mannered, accompanied her back to her house and spoke to her about marriage.

"Come visit my father and my mother," replied Fantic to him while lowering her eyes, "and address your request to them."

The unknown lord accompanied her to her father and mother's house, greeted them politely, and asked them for the hand of their daughter.

They lived in a cabin with a rather poor appearance and lived with difficulty on a small farm of four or five acres of land. They were very much stunned to see a lord so well-dressed, and who appeared to be so rich, accompany their daughter back home and ask to marry her. They, too, were quick to consent, seeing themselves as very honored. Their betrothal took place the next day, their wedding within eight days, and there was a great feast.

The day after, the new husband said to his wife something to this effect:

"I am going to leave on a long voyage, and I shall not return to see you until you have brought your first child into the world: that is to say, in nine months."

"Why are you leaving me so early?" asked Fantic, in a pleading tone.

"I must. But I have to warn you before I go: you will have a son nine months from now, but do not allow yourself to have him baptized, or woe unto you!"

"Why won't my son be baptized like the children of other Christians?"

"Do you not know who your husband is? I am the devil Beelzebub!"

The young woman, upon hearing this, let out a scream and fainted. The other left.

Nine months later, to jump ahead, Fantic gave birth to a son, as predicted by her husband, whom she had not seen since.

"You must have the child baptized at once," for he is very weak," said the grandfather and the grandmother.

¹ The *aires neuves* were festivals where a newly-built threshing floor for wheat was flattened by dancing over it. See Emile Souvestre, *Les derniers Bretons*, vol 2 (Michel Lévy, 1875), 229-30. – Trans.

“Wait for his father to arrive,” replied the mother. “He promised to return the day my son was born.”

“But, my poor girl, how unfortunate it would be for him to die without having been made Christian! He is so weak! There isn’t a moment to lose; you must bring him to the church at once.”

Fantic did not dare to insist any more that they wait. They promptly searched for a godfather and a godmother, and they headed down the road to the church with her child. While on the road, they encountered three horsemen, whose horses were at full gallop. One of them descended from his horse, placed the child in the arms of the nurse, then the three strangers continued their route and reached the mother, who was bedridden. When she saw her husband angry with eyes resembling two hot coals, she hid her head under the sheets.

“I had warned you, you unfortunate woman,” he said to her, “not to have my son baptized, and you wanted to disobey me. But, fortunately, I arrived in time, and the evil has not yet been done. Listen well, and be careful not to act against what I’m going to say to you, or you will regret it: you will keep my son with you without baptizing him, until he is ten years old. When he reaches his sixth year of life, you will send him to school at the monastery of the abbey nearby, and the day that his tenth year ends, I will come myself to search for him and take him with me, or I will send one of my own. Will you obey me this time?”

“Yes,” replied the poor woman, seized by fear.

And the three horsemen, who were three devils, were gone.

The child came into the world well and looked well. The day that he entered into his sixth year of life, his mother sent him to school at the abbey as his father had advised. He learned all that he wanted to, and the monks were stunned by his intelligence. But, from that moment on, he grew thinner each day before their eyes, and he became so sad that it was a pity to look at him. The monks and their parents as well attributed this change to excessive studiousness, but the true cause was different entirely. Every morning, when he was heading to school, he encountered a black water spaniel who took the little finger of his left hand into its mouth and would not let go of it until he reached the abbey door. The child had spoken to his mother, but the poor woman did nothing but cry, doubting that the black spaniel was anything but her son’s very father. As the child approached his tenth year, his sadness increased each day, and she could not look at him without tears coming from her eyes. But she did not tell him the cause of her chagrin and her suffering, despite all his insistence and his prayers. Still, one day, when the fatal day was near, she confessed everything to him. The child, in turn, revealed the mystery to an old monk who was very scholarly and who was very affectionate to him. The old man consulted his books, then he went to see the mother of his student and said something of this effect to her:

“Your son has a very sad destiny, and you too, my poor woman! But let me handle it; have faith in me and, with the help of God and an old hermit friend that I have, I hope to succeed in saving both of you. As the fatal day is approaching, I shall go to see my hermit friend with your son tomorrow.”

The woman thanked the old monk and reminded him to do all that he swore.

The next morning, the old man and the child began to go seek out the solitary hermit. After having walked for several days, they finally arrived in a large, infertile plain completely burned by the sun. There, they noticed a poor hut constructed with tree branches mixed with mud from the earth and covered with gladioli and bulrushes. This was the hermit’s dwelling.

The monk pushed the door of the house, and they perceived the old man in the center of it, sitting on a stone heated by the fire. Smoke came out from under him and smelled strongly of roasted flesh. And yet he prayed aloud, as though he had not suffered at all.

“Jesus! Father Hermit, you’re burning!” cried the child, seeing the smoke and smelling the scent of roast.

“It is nothing, my child; don’t pay any attention to it. I am trying to accustom myself to the fire of Hell, where I shall surely go now, because of my many and horrible crimes, for I was a feared and heartless brigand in my youth.”

“You, my father, go to hell, after such terrible penitence?” replied the child. “No! That isn’t possible, for God is good and merciful, and he will certainly forgive you, because of your repentance and your penitence, but me? Alas! I was, from my birth, destined for the fires of Hell, and I am currently headed there.”

“You speak to me of Hell, my child? Young as you are, you cannot yet deserve to go there.”

Then the monk explained everything to the hermit.

“Alas!” cried the solitary hermit. “Your fate is frightening, my son, and that of your mother is no less so. But do not allow yourself to sink into despair, for the bounty and the mercy of God are infinite, as you yourself said, there is not a moment to lose. Here is what you must do. Tomorrow is the fatal day, you say? You will pass the night with me in my hermitage to pray and listen to my instructions, and, tomorrow morning, you will go to the edge of the moor, having in your pockets several cruets full of holy water that I shall give you. Soon you will see the devil Beelzebub, your father, arrive, or one of his own whom he has sent to search for you. He will invite you to climb onto his back, in order to travel more quickly. You will obey him, but, as soon as you are on his back, he will sink into the earth up to the waist, and throw you down, saying, ‘You are so heavy! Might

you have holy relics or a piece of the Holy Cross on you?’ You will assure him that you do not have anything like that on you. He will retire with difficulty from the earth and tell you to climb again onto his back. You will do so, and he will sink again into the earth up to his armpits. Finally, on the third try, he will disappear up to his eyes. He will let out terrifying screams, to call for help. Immediately, you will see an entire troupe of hideous devils running up to you, and, in pushing and throwing you from hand to hand, in the end, they will dump you in Hell. Your father, the great devil Beelzebub, will come to receive you. Throw one of the cruets of holy water at his face, and he will immediately back away, letting out terrifying screams. Then throw holy water all around him: his left, his right, before him, behind him, and no devil will dare to approach you. Throw some also into the open cauldrons, the ones with boiling oil, and the others of cast lead, that you see nearby, from where lamentable complaints and screams come, for inside those cauldrons are souls in pain, and, likewise, you would calm their torture for a moment and they will thank you for it. They will cry to you from all sides more quickly, and they will promise not to harm you if you consent, but do not listen to any of them and continue throwing the holy water around you, and say that you will not stop doing so and do not leave before the great devil Beelzebub, your father, hands over the marriage contract with your mother, which he took. He will give it to you, ordering you to leave at once. But you will demand again that he renounce any claim on you, on your family, and on your descendants, until the ninth generation, and that he sign a pact stating this with his blood. He will grant you that as well, so as to hasten the sight of your departure. When you take the papers, you will return them, but, before that, empty all the cruets into the cauldrons where the poor souls in pain suffer from unspeakable pain. If you succeed in your perilous adventure, as I wish from the bottom of my heart, do not forget to see me upon your return.”

The next morning, the two travelers said farewell to the hermit and, while the old monk was returning to his monastery, his young companion proceeded alone to the edge of the great moor. Soon, a devil came to see him and said to him while tackling him:

“You are right to come here yourself, for I would have very well found you in any place you were hiding. Climb onto my back, so that we can travel more quickly, for your father is impatient to see you again.”

And the child, without hesitating, leapt onto the back of the devil. But he immediately sunk into the earth up to his waist, and he threw off his load, saying:

“What do you have on you? Some relic of a saint or a piece of the Holy Cross, without a doubt?”

“I have on me no relic of a saint, nor a piece of the Holy Cross.”

“Well then! Try climbing up again.”

He jumped a second time onto the devil's back, and he sunk once again into the earth, up to his armpits this time. On a third try, he disappeared up to his eyes. Seeing the uselessness of his efforts, he began to emit awful cries to call comrades to his aid. An entire army of hideous devils immediately ran to him. To make a long story short, he finished by finding himself in the depths of Hell, and there, he performed the plan exactly as the hermit advised him without missing a beat and without losing courage nor failing even once, and he returned carrying his mother's and the Devil's marriage contract of which I spoke earlier.

When he arrived at the hut of the old hermit, the hermit was already sitting on his burning *stone*, praying aloud, and invoking divine mercy. But he was now so thin, so scrawny, that he resembled a skeleton or the Ankou himself. When the old man noticed the child, he felt great joy and said something to him of this effect:

"Well! My child, did you succeed in your voyage?"

"Yes, Father Hermit, because of you."

"No, my child, do not thank me, but thank God. At present, you are saved because of Him, and your mother is also, like you, but as for me, unfortunately, I do not know yet what will become of me."

"Your repentance, Father, is so sincere and your penitence so harsh, that God can only forgive you."

"I sense that the time has come for me, my child, to appear before my supreme judge. I do not have more than a breath left of life, my flesh and my bones are burnt to ashes, and I shall not see the sun of tomorrow. Spend the night here with me, and pray for my soul, which needs a great many prayers. When I have taken my final breath, you are to set fire to the hut of branches and dried leaves, and you shall leave what is left of my poor body in there. When everything is consumed, you will find within the ashes a fragment of burnt bone. Pick up that fragment of bone, wrap it in white linen, and go dispose of it on the wall of the nearest cemetery, then hide behind the cross to see what will happen there."

The hermit died during the night as he had predicted, and the child burned his body, setting fire to the hut, then he found within the ashes a fragment of burnt bone, wrapped it in white linen, went to dispose of it on the wall of the nearest cemetery, hid behind the stone cross, and waited.

A moment later, he saw coming from opposite sides of the horizon a black crow and a white dove. The crow, the first, passing just over the wall, flapped its

wings at the linen that contained the bone and almost made it fall onto the path that went along the cemetery. The white dove came at his turn, and, with a vigorous flap of its wings, restored the linen and the bone to its first position. The crow and the dove also fought for around a half-hour, with one sometimes winning and then the other, the first wanting to make the bone fall into the cemetery, the second striving to cast it into the cemetery. Finally, the dove carried it away: it made the bone fall into the cemetery. Good carried it over evil, and the soul of the old hermit, the former brigand, was saved.

The child, who was now a young man, for his voyage had lasted several years, felt a relief in his heart, and he returned home and returned the marriage contract to his mother, which he had searched for in Hell. Then he became a monk in the monastery where he had gone to school. Also, his mother became a nun in a nearby convent. They both lived out the rest of their days as lived the saints, and, when Death came to find them, it did not scare them, and they went not to Hell, but straight to Heaven.

May we all be able to see them one day!

*Amen!*²

Told by Pierre Le Roux, oven owner in the town of Plouaret.
François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne t.1*. Paris:
Maisonnette, 1881.
Translated by Michelle Collins.

² The other storytellers respond as a chorus with “Amen!” when a story ends with such a wish, which happens frequently.