

The Magician and his Valet

*Kement-man holl oa d'ann amzer
Ma ho devoa dent ar ier.*

*All in this story did unsheath
When the chickens still had teeth.¹*

Once upon a time, there was a Breton cultivator by the name of Mélar Dourduff, who would go to a fair on the mountain of Bré, accompanied by his son of about fifteen, whose name was Efflam. The fellow was not rich, and, because there was no money left at his house, he was going to the fair to sell a cow. He scolded his son along the route, and called him lazy and good-for-nothing. The young man talked back to him. As a result, the father, furious, ended the argument by crying, “The devil take you!” Just barely after he spoke these words did an unknown nobleman appear before him on the road, mounted on a black horse.

“Why do you scold your son in such terms?” he asked the father.

“Because, *monseigneur*,” he responded, “he is a good-for-nothing moron; he’s a bum, has the head of an ass, and he does nothing but argue, which often angers me.”

“Entrust him to me as a valet for a year, and I will give you a hundred *écus*.”

“I could not ask for better. Take him away at once.”

And the stranger counted out a hundred *écus* for Mélar Dourduff, made Efflam climb onto the back of the horse, and said to the peasant:

“Return here, sir, after one year and one day has passed, and I will return your son to you. However, if we do not meet at the exact place, you will never see him again.”

And he left with Efflam, on a galloping horse.

The fellow brought his cow back home with him, happy from the sale he had just made. But, let’s leave him for the time being to follow the two others.

¹ In French:

Tout ceci se passait du temps

Où les poules avaient des dents.

– Trans.

All of this happened in the time

When the hens had teeth.

They arrived around dusk at the walls of an old *château* in the woods, and stopped before an enormous iron door. The stranger gave a horn a blow, and soon the door opened and they entered. It was the portal to Hell. In an enormous room inside, there were an infinite number of cauldrons, under which burned the fires of Hell. And coming from these were muffled screams and soul-splitting wails. The devil – for the nobleman was a devil – said to Efflam, “You are to maintain the fire underneath the cauldrons and, although you may hear them, do not let yourself be moved by them and, above all, you must not lift the cover off any of the cauldrons. Otherwise, I shall appear and throw you into that cauldron. You will be in want of nothing here and you will always dine at a table well-served. As for me, I must part to go man-hunting², and you will not see me again for a year and a day. If I am happy with your work upon my return, you will receive compensation, but, if not, then too bad for you!”

And with that, he left.

Each day, Efflam maintained the fires under the cauldrons, deaf to the complaints and pleas that came from them, and, once his work was over, he would walk through the *château* and see in there all matter of things that stunned him. Also, in a cabinet, he discovered books of magic and of sorcery, and as he knew how to read rather well, he learned from them many secrets.

The eve of the day when he would conclude his service in the magician’s house, he returned to his father’s house. He arrived at the door around midnight and knocked three times at the small window next to his bed: Knock! Knock! Knock? “Who’s there?” asked the fellow, getting up.

“It is I, your son Efflam, and I have come to remind you that tomorrow it will be a year and a day since I left you, and that you must be at the exact place of the meeting where you assigned me my master, or you will never see me again.”

Father Dourduff had forgotten about his son and he would have certainly missed the meeting if it were not for this warning.

“My master,” continued Efflam, “will take you with him to his *château*, so you can take your son from there. He will show you three iron doors to the *château* and he will point you to one of the doors and say: ‘Enter through there.’ But do not listen to my master, and enter through one of the two others. Once you are in the *château*’s courtyard, you will see all kinds of fowl -- hens, roosters, ducks, geese, swans, guinea fowls -- and he will say to you while pointing to the animals, ‘Your son is among them; try to find him if you wish to have him.’

“At the moment that you enter the courtyard, a red rooster will flap his wings and cry three times. Take note of that rooster, because that will be me,

² The original Breton expression is curious and untranslatable: *evit mont da duta*. (The story’s collector translates this into French as *aller pour la chasse aux hommes*. – Trans.)

whom my master, a great magician, has changed into that form. And now, good night, for I must return before daybreak, and do not forget!”

“Why not stay, since you’re already here?” said the old man.

“Because my master knows how to find me, no matter where I hide. And, above all, be at the exact place of the meeting tomorrow, or else everything will be lost.”

“I shall not forget,” replied the fellow.

And Efflam left.

Father Dourduff found everything that he had just heard extraordinary. Still, the next day, he returned to the exact place of the meeting. He soon saw the magician coming, still on the horse, who said to him:

“Climb on the back of my saddle, and I shall lead you to your son.”

They arrived at the *château* walls and dismounted the horse.

“Enter through that door,” said the magician to Mélar Dourduff, pointing him to one of the three iron doors.

But the fellow went to another door by its side. The other grumbled and gave him a suspicious look, but did not say anything.

“First, let us go dine,” said the magician.

And he led him to a vast dining room, where a good, piping-hot meal was being served. They sat down. Mélar Dourduff, on the recommendation of his son, ate and drank little.

“Eat and drink a bit more heartily. Don’t you find the wine good?” the magician said to him.

“The wine is excellent, but I don’t drink or eat much, usually. Please excuse me, and let me see my son now.”

“Come, so I can show you my barnyard first.”

And he led him into a vast courtyard full of hens, of roosters, of ducks, of geese, of guinea fowl, of swans, and other fowls of all kinds. At the moment that they entered the courtyard, a beautiful red rooster had flapped his wings and cried three times, and the fellow took note of him. Next, they visited the stables, where there were beautiful horses as well as some old nags.

“Choose one of my animals, whichever one you want – one of these beautiful horses, for example,” said the magician to Efflam’s father.

“I would rather have,” he replied, “one from your barnyard.”

“What singular taste! But I shall let you choose freely.”

And the old man, referring to the red rooster who had cried upon his entry, said:

“This is the one I want.”

And he took the rooster, who let him take him.

“A thousand curses upon you!” cried the magician, furious. “Someone must have told you to take him! Get out of my view, quickly, you and your rooster, but...I will get you for this!” And Mélar Dourduff left, carrying the rooster in his arms. As soon as he passed through the doorway, the rooster transformed into a man, and the fellow recognized his son Efflam, now grown-up into a very handsome boy. They left to return to their home.

As they passed in front of another *château* not far from the first, and in the same woods:

“Look,” said Efflam to his father, “There’s a place where you could sell me for a high price. At the windows of the *château* we just left, I often amused myself by watching the dances and all sorts of games that continually took place there, because it’s another *château* of Hell, and they have a good time there. I read the books of the magician – who, as I told you before, is himself a devil – and learned in them, amongst other secrets, how to change myself into any animal I want to. I will transform myself into a beautiful hunting dog and will catch plenty of game, which you will offer to the master of the *château*, and he will propose to buy your dog. You will ask for a bushel of money, and you will get it. And don’t worry about anything, for I will know how to do it so that nothing bad happens to you or me, but on the condition that, while handing over the dog, you keep its collar. Are you listening well? You will keep the collar, while giving away the dog, or else all will be lost.”

“I understand,” replied the fellow, “I will sell the dog and keep the collar, easiest thing to remember.”

“That’s it. I will stay a while at the *château*, and you will stay there like me and be well-fed and treated, and will not have anything else to do but care for me. I repeat, if the collar remains with you, everything will go well and we will leave there when we want to, but, if you leave the collar with the dog, they will cook us, me first and then you. So don’t forget to keep the collar, no matter what.”

“I won’t lose it, certainly not,” replied the old man.

The woods that surrounded the *château* abounded in game of all kinds. Efflam changed himself into a beautiful hunting dog and took hares, rabbits, and also as many partridges as they wanted. While hunting, the master of the *château*, attracted by the dog’s bays, came out to see what was happening. He marveled at the beauty, the skill, and the intelligence of the animal and said to the elder Dourduff:

“What a good dog you have! Would you like to sell him to me?”

“If you give me enough money,” replied the fellow.

“How much are you asking?”

“A full bushel of money.”

“That’s a lot, but you shall have it.”

“In addition, I want to keep the collar.”

“No, the collar is always given with the dog, like the bridle with the horse.”

“That depends on the conditions. In my case, I’m hanging onto my dog’s collar, and I will not give it for anything in the world.”

“I’m paying this well, it seems to me, to have the collar with the dog.”

“I will keep the collar, I say to you, or it is not a deal.”

“Well then! Stubborn old man, keep your collar, give me the dog, and come in to receive your money.”

“There is another condition.”

“What is it?”

“I want to stay for some time at your *château* to care for the dog, until he is accustomed to living with you, and I will be treated as his master.”

“Agreed. Follow me, with your dog.”

After eight days, the elder Dourduff said that he was tired of that way of life and returned to his house. The next day, Efflam also left the *château* in the form of the dog, and went towards his father’s house. But the master of the *château* quickly noticed his disappearance and pursued him with a pack of dogs. When Efflam heard their bays behind him, perceiving a peasant occupied with cutting gorse bushes in a moor, he ran to him and said to him, “Quickly, give me your clothes for a moment, and I will compensate you well.”

The man, astonished to hear a dog speak, threw his sickle to the ground and stripped off his clothes out of fear.

The dog transformed into a man, who donned his clothes, took the sickle, and calmly started to cut gorse after having said to the peasant, “Go to the edge of the road and pretend to be a beggar dying of hunger. Soon, you will see a lord arrive on a horse, preceded by a pack of dogs, and he will ask you if you have seen a dog pass by, running alone. You will respond that he has passed less than a half-hour ago, and that he followed the road straight ahead.”

A moment later, the lord arrived, indeed, his horse galloping very fast, accompanied by an enormous pack that made an infernal racket.

“Have you seen a dog pass here by himself?” he asked the false beggar.

“Indeed, *monseigneur*,” he responded. “He passed by less than a half-hour ago, and he continued down the road straight ahead.”

And the lord and his pack continued their pursuit. So Efflam returned the sickle and the clothes to the peasant, to whom he gave a piece of gold. Then he transformed into a dog once again and left through the field to return to his father’s house. He arrived there happily, tricking the devil and his infernal pack, and returned to his natural form.

Sometime later, bored at the house, Efflam said to his father:

“The big fair on the mountain of Bré is tomorrow, Father. I shall transform myself into a beautiful horse and you will ride me to the fair. A man who will say he is a Norman horse merchant will come to haggle for me, and he will be none other than the master of the first *château*, the one who is searching to recapture me, as he had told us he would. If you follow my instructions step by step, we shall trick him again. You will ask that he deliver a barrel filled with silver to your house in exchange for the horse. He will grant it to you, because money means nothing to him. But, when you give away the horse, retain the bridle like you retained the dog’s collar. Otherwise, you will never see me again.”

“I will not lose it,” responded the fellow.

Therefore, early the next morning, Mélar Dourduff took the road to Bré on a magnificent horse. Everyone admired it along the way, and, while he was being sold at the fair, a crowd gathered around him. Merchants from Léon, Cornouaille, Vannes, Tréguier, and Goëlo did not fail to arrive, but the price was so high that no one could afford to pay. Finally, around dusk, arrived a foreign merchant speaking Norman, whom no one knew save for that fellow Dourduff, though they all knew at once whom the merchant had business with. He fell rather easily into an agreement on the price, a barrel of silver. But, when he was giving away the beast, as Dourduff prepared to remove the bridle:

“What are you doing there?” asked the stranger.

“I sold the horse, yes,” replied the fellow, “but not the bridle. I am keeping my bridle.”

“But, old imbecile, the bridle always follows the horse.”

“I will keep my bridle, I say to you, or there won’t be a deal.”

“Well, then! It’s no deal,” said the merchant.

And he turned his back, ill-humoredly, and prepared to leave the fair. But the people, excited by the stranger, who paid generously to drink, started to jeer at the fellow, treating him like an imbecile, an old idiot, so that he absent-mindedly left the bridle with the horse.

In an instant, the magician mounted the beast and with it rose in the air, to the amazement of everyone. Mélar Dourduff, seeing this, understood the full extent of his fault and began to cry.

“Why do you cry, old imbecile?” the others asked him. “You have a full barrel of silver for your horse. What does it matter to you now?”

“I sold my son!” he cried. “The horse! That was he, my son. The devil took him!”

And he wailed and tore at his hair. But no one else understood any of what he said, and one would believe that he was drunk and talking nonsense.

Behold Efflam, returned to Hell in the form of a horse. A domestic servant was in charge of monitoring him and bringing water to the stable, with orders that he never let him go to the river to drink. For all his food, they threw him a bundle of thorns in his manger. The poor beast, under this regime, grew visibly thinner. He drank a lot, enough that the man in charge of providing him with unlimited water, who had grown tired of taking water from the fountain which was quite far from there, found it more efficient to ride the horse to the nearest river. The animal immediately threw himself into the water, threw off his bridle as well as his rider, and changed into an eel. From there, the valet returned to his master and said, crying:

“The horse is gone!”

“Where was he, you imbecile?”

“He went into the river and changed into an eel!”

“Curses!” cried the magician. “I had told you not to allow him near the river.”

And he ran to the river, to the place where the horse entered. He threw himself into the water, immediately turned into a pike and began to search for the eel. The eel, very close by, left the water, became a hare, and ran! Likewise, the pike became a hunting dog, and pursued the hare. They ran through a small town. There was at that moment a wedding at the local church and the wedding guests cried, “Look! Look! A dog chasing a hare!” The hare hopped into the cemetery and entered the church. The dog stopped at the cemetery steps, for the devil cannot place his feet upon holy ground.

The bride and the groom were kneeling on the choir rails and the priest was preparing to place wedding rings on their fingers, poor silver rings that a choir boy carried on a silver platter. Suddenly, one of the rings changed into a beautiful golden ring, with a precious stone. The priest passed it onto the finger of the bride. It was the hare, or rather Efflam Dourduff, who had changed into a wedding ring. The wedding guests left the church. The bride, upon arriving home, removed her ring from her finger and locked it in her armoire.

Everyone was at the table, making noise, joking, and laughing, when an unknown fiddler entered the room and began to play the violin. He played so well, with much liveliness and gaiety, that everyone left the table and began to dance. At the end of the day, they asked the fiddler what he wanted in exchange for playing.

“I ask for nothing,” he said, “but what I have lost that is here.”

“And what would that be?” asked the groom, intrigued.

“A beautiful golden ring with a precious stone.”

“Might that be my wife’s ring, which came from I don’t know where?”

And the bride went to search for the ring in her room, and the fiddler accompanied her. But, at the moment that she took the ring, it slipped between her fingers, fell to the ground, rolled away, and became lost in a pile of wheat that was nearby.

“Aah!” she cried. “The ring has fallen to the ground and rolled into the wheat.”

And she began to search for it, and as she did not retrieve it, the fiddler changed into a red rooster and began to inhale the wheat, and he inhaled it, he inhaled it!...Only three or four grains remained when one of them changed into a fox, which threw itself at the rooster and bit him with his sharp teeth!

The conflict ended thus, and Efflam outsmarted him once again. Efflam then returned to his father’s house in his natural form, and as he was at present quite rich, he remained peacefully at his home and married the richest heiress in the land.

Told by Fiacre Briand, mason in the commune of Cavan (Côtes-du-Nord), 1872. François-Marie Luzel. “Le magicien & son valet (Métamorphoses).” *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère* t.12 (1885): 346-57.

Translated by Michelle Collins.