

The Marquis de Tromelin¹, Who Sold his Son to the Devil and Went to Hell to Retrieve the Deed

Once upon a time, there was a marquis who was very rich, but who had spent all of his wealth and was now very poor – so poor that it would not have taken much to reduce him to searching for his bread. One day, his wife said to him:

“Go to the woods to search for a piece of dead wood; while you’re doing that, I’m going to search for flour at the mill, and we shall have oatmeal for our supper.”

The marquis went to the woods, and, as he was occupied with gathering the thin, dead branches that the wind had caused to tumble from the trees, he suddenly saw before him a handsome lord, who said to him something to this effect:

“Look at how poor you are today, Marquis de Tromelin, after having been such a rich lord! Well! If you promise to give me fifteen years from now what your wife is carrying at this moment, you shall no longer need to gather dead wood to cook your oatmeal, for I shall make you as rich as you ever were.”

The marquis, stunned, thought about it for some time:

“What is my wife carrying at this moment?” he asked himself. “A bit of oatmeal, which is what she is searching for at the mill, so I shall not risk anything great by saying yes.”

And he replied to the unknown stranger:

“I want that very much; I accept the sale.”

“Then, sign this paper with your blood.”

And he signed, and, in an instant, the unknown lord left, taking the paper with him.

“And the money that you promised me?” the marquis shouted to him.

¹ The storytellers of popular legends have the unfortunate habit of introducing in their stories the names of localities and people whom they know to substitute for other, older names that would be interesting to know. The title of the Marquis de Tromelin is an entirely local substitution and sufficed to designate the place where the story was collected. There is, indeed, a manor by that name in the commune of Plouaret. This observation applies to several other stories that I have collected.

“You shall find it upon arriving at your house.”

The old marquis returned to his house, impatient to see whether the stranger had fulfilled his promise. Alas! He never would have predicted the unhappiness that had just arrived: his wife was pregnant, and he had sold his child to the Devil, for the stranger was the Devil himself!

When the marquis arrived home, he found his wife occupied with gathering gold pieces that fell like hail from the chimney onto the stones of the fireplace. So much fell from the chimney, that in a moment they were as rich as they had once been, and they bought back their old *château* and left their poor cottage to live in it.

The marquise went into labor sometime after, and gave birth to a son, a superb child. They had him baptized in a grand ceremony.

The child was given to a nurse, and he came to delight them.

Between the ages of seven and eight, they sent him to school, and he learned all that he wanted. But, as he grew older, his father became sadder each day, and he often cried when he saw his son. When the child reached his fifteenth year of life, the marquis said that he wanted to send him on a merchant ship to visit far-away lands. But his mother said that, having only one child, she would not let him go on adventures at sea, for fear of losing him. And the marquis had to obey her.

Meanwhile, time went on; the fifteen years was about to end, and the sadness and the worries of the marquis only grew. One day, while he was walking along the highway with his son, he encountered a hog merchant, who was heading to the fair.

“Would you like to take this young boy to learn your profession?” the marquis asked him.

“I couldn’t ask for better; my faith, he looks like he’d do well.”

“Well, then! Take him.”

And he handed his son over to the hog merchant, but, while saying goodbye to him, he slipped a bottle of holy water into his pocket.

The old marquis then went to confess to the rector of his parish. The rector, upon learning that he had sold his son to the Devil for money, did not want to absolve him of his sins. The marquis then addressed himself successively to all of the priests in the country; no one wanted to absolve him, and this made him very unhappy. Finally, he resolved to go to the Pope in Rome. He went on foot with much difficulty, bowed at the feet of the Holy Father, and confessed to him. But the Pope did not want to absolve him either and said to him:

“I have a brother who is a hermit and who lives in a little hut in the woods a hundred miles from here. Go find him, for he has more power than I, and could perhaps grant you absolution. Here is a letter for him.”

The marquis took the letter and began his journey to the habitation of the holy hermit.

“Good day, Father Hermit,” the marquis said to him upon arriving at the hermitage.

“Good day, my son. What can I do for you?”

“Here is a letter from the hand of your brother, our Holy Father the Pope, from Rome, who sent me to you.”

The hermit took the letter, and, after having read it:

“You have committed an enormous crime, my poor man, a frightful crime!”

“Alas! Yes, Father.”

“No matter what, do not despair. Go find the rector of the nearest church; confess to him everything but your greatest sin, and he will absolve you. When you take communion, do not swallow the holy wafer, but remove it from your mouth while no one is watching and bring it to me as quickly as you can in your handkerchief.”

And so, he went to confess to the rector of the nearest town. He received absolution, knelt at the holy table, and brought the wafer to the hermit. The hermit received it with respect and veneration, and said to the marquis:

“Now, I am going to make an incision in your chest, insert the holy wafer between the flesh and the skin, and then I shall stitch your skin together over it.”

And he did what he said, and then he added:

“Now, here is a letter that you will carry to a brother I have who is a brigand, and who lives in a forest eighty miles from here. When you enter the woods, you will see him sitting at a table, busy sharing gold and silver with his comrades, who will be standing around him. Approach him quietly from behind, and be sure to throw the letter onto the table before he has seen you. If you can do that, everything will go well; if, on the contrary, you are not able to, woe unto you! But, in spite of everything, the Devil will come to find you, and you must go to Hell with him!”

The marquis took the letter from the hermit’s hands, and then said goodbye to him and left to seek out the brigand. After much fatigue, he arrived in the forest where he was traveling. In the depths of the forest, he saw a band of thieves standing around a table, under an old oak tree; their leader was in the center, and was sharing gold and silver with them. The marquis approached him quietly, on tiptoe, and succeeded in throwing the letter onto the table before anyone had noticed him.

“Hey!” said the leader, upon seeing the letter. “What does this letter mean?”

And he took it, and, having examined it:

“A letter from my brother, the hermit!” he exclaimed. “Let’s see what my brother, the hermit says. It has been a long time since I’ve had news from him.”

After having read the letter, he turned his head and saw the marquis.

“Was it you,” he asked him, “who brought me this letter?”

“Yes, *monseigneur*², it was I.”

“Good, you had the luck of not being noticed before throwing the letter into the table! You must, based on what I’ve read, go to Hell, and my brother, the hermit sent you to me so that I can show you the road, for here we are on the road to Hell, and we are not far from there. Hey! You only have to follow the path that you see there, and you will soon meet someone who will lead you there. But, since you are in such a hurry to go there, look and see if you can find my seat, for I must be going there, somewhere, a nice one!”

The marquis embarked on the path that the brigand showed him, and soon he met a handsome lord, the same one whom he had seen only fifteen years ago, when he was gathering dried wood in the forest of Tromelin. The lord said to him:

“Is that you, Marquis de Tromelin?”

“Yes, surely, *monseigneur*, it is I.”

“And where is your son?”

“My son did not come.”

“Then, you must come with me in his place. Father or son, it matters little to me, after all.”

“So be it. I shall go with you.”

“Then let’s go! Walk in front, and faster than that!”

“I am tired from the road, and I cannot go any faster.”

“We shall see, anyway. Walk faster, I say!”

“My feet are sore, and I cannot walk any faster.”

“Then climb onto my back.”

“I should like to.”

And he climbed onto the Devil’s back, but he threw him to the ground, saying:

“What does he have on him? He burns me more than the fires of Hell! We shall see; you must walk, needless to say!”

“I have already told you, my feet are completely worn out, and it is impossible to walk. You must carry me, or leave me here.”

And so, the Devil went to search for other devils to aid him. He returned with a troupe of demons. One of them took the marquis onto his back, saying:

“Is that it?”

But, in an instant, he threw him off, crying:

“Ow! Ow!”

² My lord.

The same happened with a third devil, then a fourth. None of them could support him on their backs. It was the holy wafer, sewn under the skin of the marquis' chest, which burned them more than the fire of Hell. And so, they kicked him to the portal to Hell, and cast him in head-first. He immediately heard throughout Hell frightening screams. All of the devils ran from the marquis, crying:

"Make this pest leave! Throw him back onto the earth! May he not remain in here one more minute!"

But no one approached him nor dared to touch him to make him leave. And he did not seem to suffer in any way, though he was in the midst of the flames.

"Give me," he said, "the paper that I signed with my blood, and I will leave immediately after."

"Give him his paper, quick, quick, and he will leave!" the leader of the devils cried.

And they brought him the paper that he had signed with his blood, and through which he sold his son's soul.

"Leave now, leave, quick, quick, and do not return!" they cried to him on all sides.

But, because he was in no hurry to leave, and he was looking around himself, as though he was searching for something:

"What do you need?" they asked him.

"I should like to see the seat prepared for the Pope's brother, the great brigand, for he told me that he must have a nice seat somewhere around here."

"There it is!" they cried.

And he saw a beautiful golden seat, in the middle of a fire so furious that he turned his eyes away from it in horror.

And so, the marquis left, carrying the deed to his son, and he returned to the leader of the brigands.

"Well," he asked him, "have you seen my seat down there?"

"Yes, I have seen it."

"And what is it like?"

"It is a beautiful golden seat, placed over the others in the middle of a furious fire, and the mere sight of it filled me with horror!"

"Really! And do you think that that is where I'll be?"

"Oh! I beg of you, renounce the life that you lead. Turn to God, and make penance!"

"Yes, it has been a long time, hasn't it?"

And the great brigand became sad and anxious. He had the marquis remain there to eat, pass the night to talk with him, and, the next morning, he had all of his followers gather around and said the following to them:

“Comrades, for a rather long time, I think, we have led detestable lives that will lead us straight into Hell. For me, I wish to end my life of crime and perform penance before death. Any of you who wish to imitate me can remain with me; as for the others, I invite them to leave the area, for I will never see them again.”

The brigands, stunned at such a sudden conversion, all left, joking about and insulting their leader; the Marquis de Tromelin alone remained with him. Then the brigand said to him:

“Go search for some heavy, rocky sand in that ditch nearby, and dump it around this table.”

The marquis brought some heavy sand and dumped it around the table. Then the brigand walked around the table a hundred times, without stopping, on his bare knees. Blood streamed all around the table, and his kneecaps were skinned to the bone!

Then he said again to the marquis:

“Now, take some pincers, and tear out one of my toenails and one of my fingernails at each half-hour; if I am about to faint, present me with a glass of wine to give me strength.”

The marquis obeyed. When he had pulled out all of the brigand’s nails, one after the other, the brigand said to him again:

“Now, you will tear off one of my limbs each hour!”

And, when all of his limbs were torn off, one after the other:

“That’s it for me, for now,” he said. “Finish me off, then construct a funeral pyre, and burn my body and my limbs in there. You will gather up the ashes and you will place them in a coffin that you will place on the wall of the cemetery of the nearest town. You will then see a black crow and a white dove arrive from two points on opposite sides of the horizon. The white dove will try, by flapping its wings, to make the coffin fall into the cemetery, and the black crow will labor to make them fall to the opposite side. If the black crow wins, my poor soul, alas, will go to Hell, but, if victory remains for the white dove, then my saved soul will have taken flight to God’s Heaven!”

The combat between the black crow and the white dove lasted for a long time on the cemetery wall. More than once, the coffin threatened to fall to the opposite side, but the white dove was full of courage, and it finished by winning over the enemy. The brigand’s soul was saved!

The Marquis de Tromelin, his heart full of joy, returned to the old hermit.

“Well! My son, have you succeeded?” he asked him, as soon as he saw him.

“Yes, Father, thanks to God!”

And he told him everything that had happened.

“May my benediction and that of the Lord be with you, for you have saved my brother, the brigand! Now, go announce the good news to my brother, the Pope!”

And he said goodbye to the holy hermit and continued his journey to Rome.

Great was the joy of the Holy Father upon hearing that the marquis had succeeded in his voyage, and that he had even saved the soul of his brother, the brigand. He then opened the chest of the marquis removing the holy wafer to give to him to eat, and blessed him.

The marquis then went back on the road to his country. It had been ten years since he had left, and no one was waiting anymore for him to return there. During his absence, his son, who did not remain for long with the hog merchant, had returned to school and studied to become a priest. The same day that his father arrived in the country, he had to say his first Mass, and, on that occasion, there was a great meal at the Tromelin manor. The old marquis, having learned of this, disguised himself as a beggar and went to the kitchen to demand alms. No one recognized him. His wife, who was there, said:

“Yes, my friend, pauper of God, you may eat to your heart’s content. Since I lost my husband, I have never refused a pauper.”

“May God bless you, my good lady! It seems to me that today, you are celebrating a great festival?”

“Yes, my son is to say his first mass today, and we are all happy for him. Oh! I wish to God that his father were still alive, to take part in this joy and this happiness!”

“Trust in the bounty of God, my good lady; maybe he is still alive.”

“Oh! If only that could be! But, alas!”

The lady gave him clothing to dress him properly (they were his own clothes), and had him sit at the banquet table with family and friends.

The young priest looked at the beggar, and he did not know why his heart warmed, and he was drawn towards him.

The meal over, the beggar begged the priest to let him confess at the church. They went to the church, which was nearby. The father introduced himself to his son. Immediately, his son ran to bring the good news to his mother:

“My father! My father! The beggar is my father!” he exclaimed to her.

“Is it possible, my God!”

And they threw themselves into each other’s arms, and their joy and fortune was so great to be reunited, that they all died at that place.

“May God bless their souls!”³ said the other storytellers.

³ *Bennoz Doue war ho ineou!*

Told by Barba Tassel, Plouaret, January 1869.
François-Marie Luzel. *Légendes chrétiennes de la Basse-Bretagne t.1*. Paris:
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