

The Diabolical Fiddler

I'm going to tell you a story that I took from my grandfather. It happened when he was young – many years have passed since then – but he had never wanted to swear that it was true, not having been there when it happened.

It was before the great Revolution. One evening when there was a large gathering on a farm on the outskirts of the village of Vaurenou, in the parish of Servon, they had, as one says in the country, a *veillouas* (that is to say, a *veillée*¹) and, at that time, they visited their neighbors more willingly than now, because there were fewer inns. Also, almost all of the people of the village and the neighboring tenant farms came to the farm of Father Joulaud, a happy fellow who had several agreeable and youthful daughters, and who moreover, it having been a good year for apples, had said that cider would not be spared.

The women and girls brought their distaffs well furnished with fibers along with their children, and the men, sitting here and there, braided straw hats or made baskets with strands of hay circled by chopped brambles. The old warmed themselves by the banks that garnished the two sides of the vast fire and were placed on a sort of platform formed of large, flat stones irregularly assembled and elevated a foot off the dirt floor. On the fireplace burned two resin candles in tall wooden candlesticks made with a willow branch in a small plank that served as its foot, but, in spite of this luxury of lights, and in spite of another resin candle that burned on the table in an iron candlestick, the brightness of a fire of dead gorse bush lit up the room where these *veillouas* were held better than those rustic candles. It was the main room of the farmhouse with its armoires and its closed beds² along the walls, the long and narrow table with wooden benches, and the girders that supported the attic floor blackened by the smoke.

It was All Hallow's Eve, and, all while working, the boys and girls conversed happily, the storytellers told stories of revenants or sometimes stories of fairies, and, from time to time, Father Joulaud passed around bowls of excellent cider, and often went to the wine cellar by himself for casks to replenish his jug of *terre brune*. The guests were so involved in the festivities that none of them thought

¹ *Veillée*: "In French-speaking rural areas, a traditional evening social gathering of a family or community, often with singing, dancing, etc." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "veillée," accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/243266>. – Trans.

² A traditional Breton bed, elevated and inside a cabinet resembling an armoire. For more information and images, see "Box Beds in Brittany," *Old & Interesting*, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/breton-box-beds.aspx>. – Trans.

sadly about the next day; rather, they seemed to have believed this time of the year merrier than Christmas or Easter, which were then occasions for great rejoicing. When the clock sounded nine, everyone appeared to be more concerned with amusement than with work, and, when one of the young people proposed a dance, almost everyone joined him. Only the old men and the good wives shook their heads as a sign of disapproval.

“What do you think?” said an old woman. “Dance on All Hallow’s Eve, the eve of the day when we go in procession to the cemetery to kneel before the graves of the dead? Is it not at this time of the year that, sometimes, they visit the places where they once lived?”

“My faith,” said someone adjacent to her, “leave the dead be; their day isn’t until tomorrow. When they were on earth, they had fun, so they can’t find it wrong for us to do as they did.”

“That’s right!” cried the young people. “Let’s dance!”

“But,” objected an old man, “you don’t have any music, and a dance with neither a *vielle*³ nor a violin is as sad as a festival without a bell.”

“If there is nothing else that will keep us dancing,” said the first boy who had spoken, “I’ll charge myself with searching for a fiddler. The town of Servon is not far away, and only yesterday Matelin Bertru there got us jumping. I think that he will agree willingly to coming here as well, especially if I tell him that he will find happy company and good cider here and will earn some money. If Bertru refuses, I will go to find his crony Jean Tual, one of the best *vielle* players from here to Vitré. Wait a while for me, and I will bring you a musician, even if he is the Devil himself.”

The young lad left the farm, and he proceeded towards the town, not along the route that, because of the last rain, was muddy and broken up by puddles, but by the pathway traced along the *forières*⁴ between the embankments planted with trees and the cultivated land. He walked briskly, whistling a song, and he was going to jump over the stile of the third field, when his ears were struck by the sound of a violin which played a *ronde*⁵ of the most dancing sort.

“It doesn’t seem,” he thought, “that I need to go any farther, because here is a fiddler who comes from around here and who doesn’t seem gloomy.”

³ *Vielle*: A musical instrument with four strings played by means of a small wheel; a hurdy-gurdy.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “vielle,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223288>. – Trans.

⁴ I am not sure what this means. – Trans.

⁵ *Ronde*: “A round dance; a dance in which the participants move in a circle or ring.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “ronde,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/167204>. – Trans.

All while thinking, he continued walking, and, as the fiddler was walking towards him to meet him, they did not lag in finding themselves facing one another. The night, rather dark, did not permit him to see the face of the player. “Is that you, Matelin Bertru?” said the lad.

“No, it’s a traveling fiddler who travels across the country to play for bread.”

“You appear to be someone jovial and very devoted to your music.”

“Yes,” said the fiddler. “It’s not in my character to be prone to sorrow.”

“So, you will not refuse to play tonight at the farm of Father Joulaud, which is only a *huchée*⁶ from here, and whose chimney you will see smoking if it were day. There are many people gathered there, good cider, and people who are asking only to dance if a good fiddler like you will agree to play them some tunes.”

“I am always at the service of the revelers who call me, and I dare flatter myself that I shall make the lads and the lasses dance as well as the best of the country.”

At the arrival of the fiddler who had continued playing while walking, the people at the *veillouas* screamed with joy. They hurriedly pushed the furniture from the middle of the room that would have gotten in the way of dancing, and, a few minutes later, the young lads and lasses were jumping “like *pillotous*⁷ hot from drinking.” So entrancing and jumpy were the tunes that the musician played. Only the old men and the good wives remained by the fire to warm themselves.

The fiddler stood next to them, and his back was turned to them. He played with vigor, to better mark the rhythm or to indicate a change of position, he raised his voice, shouting joyous words that, more than the sound of the violin itself, seemed to excite the dancers.

The children who, because of their age, were not permitted to join in on the grown ups’ amusements, remained next to the old on the platform-of-sorts formed by the stones of the fireplace, and they watched the fiddler and the dancers with curiosity.

“*Maman*,” said a little girl to her mother who held her on her knees, “look! The fiddler has feet like those of our colt.”

The mother saw that her child was right. She told her to remain quiet under this circumstance, and she left the house without making a noise, as if to check the weather. She hurried to the priest’s house in Servon, where she told the Rector that the enemy of the human race, disguised as a fiddler, was making the young dance at the farm of Father Joulaud.

⁶ Voice’s reach: from *hucher*, or to call out.

⁷ Traveling rag-and-bone men [who engage in “the collecting and selling of old clothes and other discarded items.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “rag-and-bone,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/242256>. – Trans.].

The priest donned his stole and his surplice, took a vase of holy water and an aspergillum, and he did not arrive too late to the room of the house.

The dance was by then in a sea of flames, and neither the lads, nor the lasses proved to be tired. The musician fluttered his bow on the strings without once pausing. He left the fireplace and stood up next to the door, which was open and whose *contre-hu* – that is, a low door that is hardly more than three feet high – alone was closed.

Traveling across the room, the Rector walked so softly that no one perceived his arrival, and it was easy for him to pass his stole around the neck of the fiddler who suddenly stopped playing, and began to scream like a scalded cat. He took at the same time the form of a devil with his goat horns, his long tail, his cloven hooves, his bat wings, and his hands with pointed claws.

“You have done me a great wrong, priest,” he cried. “If you had been late only a half-hour, everyone here would belong to me, for the clock would have sounded midnight.”

“I am very happy, Satan, to have been able to foil you and stop you from taking away my parishioners. Get out of here at once or I will spray you with holy water.”

“Remove the stole that you passed around my neck and that is burning me, and I will leave through the chimney.”

As soon as the priest had freed the Devil’s neck, the Devil ran towards the chimney, and he disappeared, making a noise similar to that of a storm. He made several stones fall from the gables to the earth, and they assure me that they were never able to put them back in place.

Told by Jean Bouchery from Dourdain in 1878.

Paul Sébillot. *Contes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*. Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880.

Translated by Michelle Collins.