

I. How Dieudonat came into the world and the strange circumstances that accompanied his birth

The story of Prince Dieudonat is a very fine story. Unfortunately, it is probably nothing but a tissue of lies; many considerations, in fact, encourage the belief that the gentleman never existed, and that reason would suffice to explain why no one can say in which country or century he lived. The most ingenuous contradictions, not to mention anachronisms, abound in regard to the personage. Undoubtedly, some erudite individual will succeed one day in bringing into rigorous accord the events that might never have happened; in the meantime we shall content ourselves modestly with following as best we can the thread of the more or less authentic adventures that several traditions and a few documents propose with enough good faith for the complaisance of our credulity.

There was once a couple of great feudatories, issued from royal stock, who governed an immense fief in the Empire; just like a King and Queen, they had their capital, their army and their subjects. The Duke was named Hardouin, the Duchess Mahaut. They were God-fearing, and people feared them almost as much.

They were loved too because of the charity that the wife showed to the poor and the husband strove to render to all. It was said in whispers that he was not often in a judicious state of mind and that he sentenced at random. Equally, the servants at the castle claimed that he was much inclined to anger. They were not lying, but the Duke made it a principle not to make any decision in anger, which is a bad counselor, and the people understood the range of that good intention so well that, in order to express their gratitude for it they granted the lord a magnificent nickname; they called him Hardouin the Just. For custom dictated in those days that leaders were venerated in spite of their faults, just as it determines today they are hated for their qualities.

Everything, therefore, was for the best, save for one detail: the sovereign couple had no heir. That detail was important in the eyes of the people. They became anxious: what would happen when the present masters died? What exotic despot would come to take their place? Might the Emperor not profit from the circumstance to adopt the duchy, as a wolf adopts a lamb? Might he offer it to his son, Galeas? King Gaifer to the west and King Aimery to the east did not dissimulate their sympathy for those future orphans either, nor their intention to take them in guardianship. Now, the province was jealous of its autonomy; would it consent to be subject to a foreign yoke? Certainly not.

Blood would flow, then!

“Who will liberate us?”

There did exist, in the Court, one of the lord’s bastards, who was already growing up and whose name was Ludovic. His father had sired him with an infidel woman under the walls of Jaffa, or some other Asiatic city, had baptized him, and then brought him back with his luggage out of the goodness of his heart; but to tell the truth, the child was Christian in name only, and no one doubted that he was possessed by the Devil by virtue of maternal heredity. Everyone knows that the Saracens are the issue of Hell, as indicated by the burned color of their skin, and that the blood of the fallen angels runs in their veins, propagating all the vices there.

The little bastard did his best to demonstrate these known verities. He lived in a perpetual fury, beating his servants, breaking his toys, torturing animals and ripping up his clothes. He rolled eyes as black as coals, and the Duchess never encountered him without trembling. As for the Duke, he testified an alarming tenderness for that child of his sin: Ludovic was handsome; Ludovic was intelligent; everything that Ludovic did provoked tearful laughter or wide-eyed admiration in his father.

The Duke often took the boy with the gilded skin between his knees and gazed into his eyes for a long time without saying anything; it was supposed then that the master was reflecting, although that was not in his habits; in reality, the former crusader was remembering similar eyes, and nights in Idumea, the memory of which rejuvenated him. The sessions of that contemplation never failed to end with a deep sigh, which was attributed to the apprehension of future days, but simply translated a regret for past nights.

Although there was cause for it, the effects of this predilection were feared; if the lord took it into his head to leave his fiefs and his crown to the dark-skinned boy, what a shame it would be for Christians to obey a Moor! Between that threat and the threat of foreign domination, where was salvation?

All salvation is in God. People had the good idea of addressing themselves to Him; on Sunday, and even during the week, thousands of prayers rose toward Heaven, to request therefrom a legitimate heir, an authentic scion of the sovereign and his veritable lady.

The supplications were heard on high.

One morning, the news spread that, in seven or eight months, the Duchess would bring into the world a male child. A daughter would have been no use, at least for what interested the people, and the latter did not hesitate in deciding that Heaven, since it was finally intervening, had the firm intention of being useful to the country.

The bells rang delightedly in the belfries of all the churches and convents; public prayers were organized to encourage God to continue His good work and prescribe that the future child really was a boy. They also wished that the prince would possess all the qualities of an excellent sovereign, and that desire was quite natural.

In order to be a good king, however, more virtues are required than to be a good man. That is why the saints in paradise were individually requested to furnish the embryo in question with the merits by which each of them was distinguished on earth; it was agreed between the faithful that every saint ought to bring his or her personal contribution, and to that end, would be individually solicited by all the Christians to which he or she had already testified a particular benevolence.

There is nothing like being in accord, and union makes strength; that precise organization had the result that was hoped. The saints of both sexes allowed themselves to be persuaded by the touching unanimity of an entire people; they judged that such a rare entente ought to be compensated, if only to set an example for peoples to come, and they interceded.

God listened to them. The child was made into a boy; then, day by day, during the months of the gestation, all the saints, at their annual festivals, brought their own particular virtues to him. Qualities of the mind as well as those of the heart arrived in the little fellow, numbered and classified, even before he was born. He also received the physical advantages: health, strength and beauty. For all these reasons it seemed appropriate to call him Dieudonat.

At the same time, in anticipation of immediate needs, the maidservants of the Duchess dressed a cradle and sewed swaddling clothes.

But the Devil, who never fails to get mixed up in our plans, watched these moral and material preparations; as is only just, he was anxious for his Ludovic, whose affairs were about to be compromised by that birth. For want of being able to make anything, he resolved to spoil everything, and add to the gifts of Heaven a present from Hell.

He drew up his plan: the Duchess would take charge of alerting him herself when the first pains extracted a cry from her, for our cries of pain are the Devil's daily bread, and he does not miss a single one. As soon as she screamed, he came running. Taking advantage of the disorder that reigned in the castle, he presented himself in the disguise of an old beggar woman.

In that era, sovereign ladies gave birth in public, to avoid substitutions of children, and access to the natal chamber was permitted to all. The Evil One penetrated without difficulty into the hall of honor where the chatelaine was lying on her splendid bed. Slipping between the chambermaids he came all the way to the cradle, and there he put his hands together hypocritically, with an expression of admiration, shed two tears on to the wrinkled skin of his cheeks and said:

"I too would like to make you a present, dear child, and this is mine: all your wishes will be granted irrevocably."

Who was very astonished, on hearing those words? The Duke, the Duchess and all the servants. It was thought that the old woman was a fay, and perhaps even the Madonna. Think of it! His wishes granted—all of them! What a gift! Emperors did not have as much, nor the Pope in Rome.

The Duke approached the old woman.

"Did I hear correctly, my Lady? The wishes of our child will be granted—all of them?"

“Yes indeed,” said the Devil, “irrevocably.”

The word “irrevocably” might have been able to disquiet reflective people, for, if one thinks about it, Death is the only irrevocable thing down here, and adding a second to it is, to say the least, imprudent. But people do not reflect, to begin with; they prefer, as a commencement, to jump for joy or sink into sadness, and to go back on their first impression later.

At any rate, events did not take long to prove that the Prince really did have all the virtues, and the Devil’s present into the bargain.