

BELIEVE IN GOD

(A Languedocian ballad)

I was the true Teobaldo de Montagut, Baron of Fortcastell. If you are a noble or a commoner, a Lord or a peasant, or whoever you are who stop for a moment by the side of my grave, believe in God, as I have believed, and pray to Him for me.

I

Noble adventurers, who set out with a lance by your side, with the visor of your helmet lowered while mounted on a powerful steed, who travel the land with no patrimony other than your name and your sword, looking for glory and honor in the profession of arms: if, as you pass through the rugged valley of Montagut, you happen to be caught in a storm at night and decide to take refuge in the ruins of the monastery which still can be seen at the bottom of this valley, hear my tale.

II

Shepherds who follow the unhurried movement of your herds as the sheep graze and spread out over the hills and plains: if, during the heat of the summer when you lead them to the banks of the rippling brook that cascades down through the stones into the valley of Montagut, you decide to take refuge in the shade underneath the ruined arcade of the monastery whose moss-covered pillars are washed the that stream, hear my tale.

III

Daughters from the nearby villages, wildflowers who grow happily while protected by your modesty: on the day of the Patron Saint for this location, as you descend into the valley of Montagut to pick clovers and daisies to embellish his altar, if you can overcome the fear inspired by the darkened pillars of the monastery rising above the rocks and enter the deserted cloister to wander among the tombs that are surrounded by daisies and blue jasmynes, hear my tale.

IV

You, noble warrior, perhaps caught at night in the glare of a lightning flash; you, wandering shepherd baked by the heat of the sun; and you, beautiful daughter, still bathed by drops of dew that seem like tears: in that hallowed place you may have seen a tomb, a humble tomb. It was once covered by a gravestone with a wooden cross; the cross has vanished, and only the stone remains. In that tomb, whose inscription provides the basis

for my story, the last Baron of Fortcastell, Teobaldo de Montagut, rests in peace, and I am now going to tell you the strange story of his life.

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I

When the Countess of Montagut was pregnant with her first child, Teobaldo, she had a mysterious and frightening dream. It was perhaps a warning from God, or maybe just a groundless fantasy that in time became a reality. She dreamed that in her womb was a serpent, a monstrous serpent that hissed as it slithered through the grass and then curled up, as if it were about to strike, before it eventually disappeared from her sight and was hidden by a thicket.

“There it is, there it is,” the Countess shouted to the servants in her nightmare, as she pointed to the thicket where the disgusting reptile was hidden.

When the servants hurried to reach the place to which the lady—motionless and seized by a profound terror—was still pointing with her finger, a white dove rose out of the thicket and flew up into the clouds.

The serpent had disappeared.

II

Teobaldo was born. His mother died while giving birth to him; his father was killed a few years later in a valiant struggle against the enemies of God. After that, the early life of the Baron of Fortcastell could only be compared to a violent hurricane. Wherever he went, his passage was marked by a trail of blood and tears. He hung serfs and peasants, he fought with the other nobles, he tormented young maidens, he persecuted monks, and with his blasphemies and oaths there was no saint, or hardly any sacred thing that he did not curse or disparage.

III

One day when he went out to hunt it began to rain, and he brought his entire retinue of dissolute pages, cruel archers and debased servants, along with their hounds, horses and falcons, to take refuge in the church of a village which was part of his domain; then, a venerable priest who was not afraid of the violent outbursts from the Baron’s impetuous character entreated him, with the Host in his hand and in the name of Heaven, to leave the church and go on foot with a pilgrim’s staff to ask the Pope to give him absolution for his sins.

“Leave me in peace, old man,” Teobaldo declared when he heard what the priest said; “Leave me in peace or, since we have not been able to find a single piece of game to kill today, I will turn loose my hounds and hunt you down like a wild boar in order to amuse myself!”

IV

Teobaldo was known for doing what he promised. In spite of this, the priest insisted on answering him. "Do what you wish; but keep in mind that there is a God who punishes and forgives, and if I die at your hands, it will erase my faults from the book of his anger, and replace them with your name to make you pay for your crime."

"A God who punishes and forgives!..." the sacrilegious Baron replied with a mocking sneer. "I do not believe in God, and to prove it to you, I am going to fulfill my promise. Because, although I am not one who prays, I keep my word. Raimundo! Gerardo! Pedro! Set loose the hounds, give me my crossbow, and sound your horns, because we are going to hunt down this imbecile, even if he climbs up on his altars."

V

After hearing this order, the pages hesitated for only a moment and then began to untie the greyhounds who filled the church with the ugly sound of their barking. Laughing with Satanic glee, the Baron had loaded his crossbow, and the venerable priest, murmuring a prayer and raising his eyes to heaven, was calmly waiting for death when, somewhere outside of the holy sanctuary, a clamor and the sound of horns was heard with shouts of: "It's the wild boar! There he goes, through the scrubs! Into the woods!" When he heard the news of the beast he had been hoping to hunt, Teobaldo immediately ran to the doors of the sanctuary filled with joy. All his servants followed him and, after them, the horses and the greyhounds.

VI

"Where did he go?" the Baron asked, as he leaped onto his horse without touching the stirrup, or unloading his crossbow.

"Through the ravine that runs along the foot of those hills," they answered him.

Without waiting to hear any more, the impetuous hunter sank his golden spur into the flank of his horse and galloped off at full speed. All his men followed him.

The inhabitants of the village, who were the first to announce the sight of the terrible beast, had already taken refuge inside their huts and, as they anxiously peered out of the windows to look, they crossed themselves in silence when they saw the diabolical retinue disappear among the trees.

VII

Teobaldo led the charge. His horse, either faster or ridden harder by its rider than the others, got so close behind the boar that several times, dropping the reins over the neck of his horse, he stood up in his stirrups and raised the crossbow, prepared to shoot. But each time the boar was visible only for an instant while it raced through the trees, and when it appeared again, it was always out of range.

The chase continued like that for some time, passing through ravines and valleys, as well as the stony bed of a river, until the boar entered the forest where it was visible from time to time between the trees. Teobaldo did his best to keep the beast in sight, always struggling to reach it, but thwarted by its marvelous agility and quickness.

VIII

At last the moment came when he had an opportunity to shoot; he raised his arms and the bolt flew and landed, trembling, in the back of the terrible beast which jumped and let off a frightful roar.

“It’s dead,” the hunter shouted with joy, digging his spurs for the hundredth time into the flanks of his horse. “It’s dead. It will never get away now. The trail of blood it sheds is marking its path.” Saying this, he blew his horn to give the signal of victory, so those who were following could hear.

Just then his horse stopped running; its legs buckled, its muscles contracted, and it fell to the ground with blood flowing from its nostrils, its mouth covered with foam.

It had died of fatigue; it had died just when the wounded wild boar was slowing down, when only a little more effort would have been needed to catch it.

IX

It would be impossible to describe the anger that was painted on Teobaldo’s face, and it would be impious and offensive to repeat the curses and blasphemies that flowed from his lips. He shouted for his servants to come and help him, but the only response was an echo, and he tore his hair and pulled his beard in desperation.

“I’ll have to follow him on foot, even if it kills me,” he finally said, as he reloaded his crossbow and was about to take off and follow the boar. But just then, he heard a noise behind him; as he looked back he saw the branches part, and a page appeared, leading a horse that was black as night.

“Heaven has sent it to me,” the hunter said leaping onto its back, as agile as a deer.

The page who was thin, very thin, and as yellow as death, smiled at him with a strange expression and handed him the reins.

X

The horse neighed so fiercely it made the branches of the forest tremble; then it made an incredible leap, a leap that was so high it lifted the rider more than ten rods off the ground. The air began to make a whirring noise in the rider’s ears like the sound of a stone thrown by a sling. They took off at full speed, running so rapidly and moving so violently, that Teobaldo feared he might lose control and be thrown off the horse’s back; he became so dizzy that he had to close his eyes and hold on to the mane with both hands.

Without pulling on the reins or using his spurs and without urging him with his voice, the horse ran on and on without stopping. How long did Teobaldo continue riding on the

horse's back, without knowing where it went and feeling the branches hit him in the face, the brambles snagging his clothes, and the wind whistling in his ears? That would be impossible to say.

XI

When Teobaldo recovered his senses and opened his eyes, he anxiously looked around and saw that he was far from Montagut in a place that was strange and unfamiliar. The horse was still running; rocks, trees, castles, and villages passed by at his side in a flash. One after another, new horizons opened before his eyes, new sights that then disappeared and were replaced by one that was even more strange and unknown. Narrow valleys bristling with blocks of granite that had fallen from a mountain during a storm; cheerful countrysides covered with a tapestry of green that was sprinkled with white villages; endless deserts where the sand was baked by a fiery sun; vast empty places and immense plains; regions of eternal snow where giant icebergs floated under a grey sky, with arms that stretched out like they were about to grab him by the hair as he passed by; and thousands of other sights and sounds it would be impossible to describe, until finally he was covered by a dense fog and ceased to hear the sound made by the hooves of his horse as they struck the ground.

I

Noble gentlemen, humble shepherds, beautiful daughters, who are listening to my tale: if you wonder at the events I have described, don't think this is a fable I have invented to challenge your credulity. This story has passed from mouth to mouth until it reached me, and the inscription on the grave, which still survives in the monastery of Montagut, is an unimpeachable proof of the truthfulness of my words.

So believe what I have said, and believe what I am going to say, which is every bit as true as the things I have already related, although even more amazing. I might perhaps decorate it with a few poetic images, but I will never knowingly depart from the truth.

II

When Theobaldo ceased to hear the sound of his horse, he had the feeling he had been cast into an abyss and could not repress an involuntary shiver of fear. Until then, he had believed the sights he had seen were the product of his imagination created by stress, that he was mounted on a runaway horse, and that he had never passed the bounds of his territory. But there was no longer any doubt, he was under the influence of a supernatural power that was taking him to an unknown destination through a dense cloak of unreal forms which, at times, was illuminated by flashes of lightning that pierced the darkness.

The horse was running, or better swimming, through an ocean of caliginous mists, and the incredible sights continued to spread out before the dazzled eyes of the rider.

III

Traveling over the clouds dressed in long tunics with a border of fire, their flaming hair waving in the wind while carrying swords that shed livid sparks of light before his eyes, were angels, ministers of the anger of the Lord who were marching in a formidable army above the wings of the storm.

Then, climbing even higher, in the distance he seemed to see twisted clouds like a sea of lava, and underneath his feet he heard the roar of thunder, like the Ocean roars when it lashes the rocks as the weary traveler watches in amazement.

IV

And he saw an archangel as white as snow seated on an enormous crystal sphere that traveled through space in the serenity of night, like a beautiful silver ship on the surface of a lake of blue.

And he saw the burning sun traveling around its golden axis in an atmosphere of colors and flames and, in its heart, glowing spirits who live unhurt in this burning environment, while they sing hymns of joy to the Creator.

He saw the barely visible threads connecting men to the stars, and he saw the rainbow spreading out like a colossal bridge over the abyss which separates the first heaven from the second.

V

He saw souls coming down to Earth on a mysterious ladder; he saw many who came down and few who went back up. Each one of these innocent souls was accompanied by a pure archangel who sheltered it with the shadow of its wings. Those who returned by themselves came back in silence, and with tears in their eyes; those who did not, rose up singing, like larks on a morning in April.

Then the pink and blue clouds floating through space like transparent curtains of gauze broke apart, like the veil on the altar of a church when it is removed on Holy Saturday, and the magnificent Paradise of the Just appeared before his eyes.

VI

There were the holy prophets you have seen carved in the entrance of our cathedrals; there were the luminous virgins that the artist has tried in vain to copy from his dreams onto the stained glass windows; there were the cherubim with their long, floating robes and their golden halo like those on the table of an altar; there, finally, crowned with stars and clothed with light, surrounded by all the heavenly hierarchies and beautiful beyond all imaginings, was Our Lady of Montserrat, the Mother of God, the Queen of archangels, the refuge of sinners and solace for the afflicted.

VII

On seeing the Paradise of the Just and the throne where the Virgin Mary was seated, the heart of Teobaldo was overcome by dread, and a profound sense of fear took control of his soul. In the regions leading to the sacred sanctuary of the Lord there was nothing but eternal solitude and silence. From time to time his forehead was struck by a gust of air as cold as the blade of a knife, a wind like those the prophets felt with the approach of the divine spirit; all this made his hair stand on end and pierced him to the marrow of his bones. Finally, Teobaldo came to a place where he seemed to hear a dull murmur, like the buzzing of a swarm of bees on an afternoon in autumn while they circle around the late-growing flowers.

VIII

He was passing through a fantastic region where all the sounds of Earth finally come to rest: the sounds we believe have died out, the words we think have vanished in the air, the sad laments we imagine that no one hears.

Here, in a harmonic circle, are the prayers of children, the supplications of virgins, the psalms of pious hermits, the petitions of the humble, the chaste words of the pure at heart, the resigned complaints of those who suffer, and the hymns of those who hope. Among them, Teobaldo heard the voices that can still be heard in the luminous ether, including the voice of his mother who was praying to God for him. But he did not hear his own.

IX

But outside the circle, a discordant noise wounded his ears: thousands and thousands of crude blasphemies, shouts of vengeance, songs of orgies with their lewd words, desperate curses, threats of deprivation, and sacrilegious oaths of impiety.

Teobaldo traveled through this second circle with the rapidity of a meteor that crosses the sky on a summer night so he would not have to listen to his own voice which was still speaking so loudly that it overpowered all the other voices in that infernal concert.

“I don’t believe in God! I don’t believe in God!” his voice was saying, still echoing in the ocean of blasphemies. And Teobaldo was beginning to believe.

X

He passed through other vast areas full of terrible sights he could not comprehend and I could not describe; he finally reached the last circle of that heavenly spiral where angels worship the Lord, as they prostrate themselves at His feet. He tried to look.

A breath of fire burned his face, a sea of light blinded his eyes, and a giant thunderclap pierced his ears. He was torn from his horse and began to fall like a burning stone that is hurled from a volcano, falling and falling without ever stopping; blinded and burning, he fell like the rebellious angel after God demolished the pedestal of his pride with a breath from his lips.

.....

I

The night had ended and the wind was moaning in the trees and shaking the leaves; the moon was shining through the branches when Teobaldo raised himself on his elbow and, rubbing his eyes as though waking from a profound slumber, he looked around and found himself in the same forest where he had wounded the wild boar, the same spot where his horse had collapsed and he was given the fantastic steed that had carried him through strange and mysterious places.

A vast silence reigned all around him, a silence interrupted only by the distant cawing of crows, the quiet rustling of leaves, and the distant ringing of a bell which was carried by the wind.

“Was it all a dream?” Teobaldo wondered, as he got up and began to walk through the forest until he finally left it and entered an area of open land.

II

Rising above the rocks in the distance he saw the outline of the castle of Montagut that stood out against a background of transparent, bluish clouds in the night sky.

“My castle is far away from here, and I am exhausted,” he murmured. “I will wait for morning in a nearby town,” and he entered the town where he knocked on a door.

“Who are you?” they asked him.

“The Baron of Fortcastell,” he responded, and they laughed in his face. He went to another door and knocked again.

“Who are you and what do you want?” they asked him.

“I am your Lord, Teobaldo de Montagut,” he insisted, puzzled by the fact that they did not know who he was.

“Teobaldo de Montagut!” repeated his irritated questioner, “Teobaldo de Montagut, the one from the legend?... Bah!... Be on your way, and don’t come and disturb the sleep of honorable folks by telling them foolish stories.”

III

Full of surprise and disbelief, Teobaldo left the village and started to walk toward his castle which he reached just as day was breaking. The moat was clogged with stones that had fallen from the crumbling ramparts; the drawbridge, which was now useless and was falling apart, was still hanging from stout iron cables that were covered with rust by the passage of time. In one of the towers a bell was ringing slowly, and in front of the gate of the fortress a cross was standing on a granite pedestal. Not a single soldier could be seen on the walls and from somewhere inside them the notes of a beautiful and solemn religious hymn could just be heard.

“This is my castle, there is no doubt of that,” Teobaldo said, looking anxiously from side to side, unable to comprehend what he saw. “There is my coat of arms still engraved on the keystone of the arch. This is the valley of Montagut, and these are the lands that belong to me, the domain of Fortcastell.

At that moment the heavy doors creaked on their hinges, and a monk appeared on the threshold.

IV

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Teobaldo asked the monk.

“I am a humble servant of God,” the monk answered him, “a priest in the Monastery of Montagut.”

“But...” the Baron interrupted, “isn’t this the castle of Montagut?”

“It was...” the monk continued, “but that was many years ago... According to what is said, the Lord was carried off by the devil and, since he had no children or relatives who could inherit them, these lands were given to the monks of our order, who have been here for more than one hundred and twenty years. And who are you?”

“I...” stammered the Baron of Fortcastell, after a lengthy moment of silence, “I am..., a poor sinner, who repents for his sins and comes to confess them to your abbot, and asks that he be accepted into the bosom of your religion.”