

©2009 John Eigenauer
approx. 3750 words
jeigenauer@yahoo.com

The Bones of St. Martin

By

John D. Eigenauer

The year 887 found two poor cripples in the midst of exceptionally good fortune. Because the weather had been good in their region of France, crops had fared well, and prices were fair. No wars beset the local protectorate, no disease had come upon the people in more than a generation and the coming winter, according to all the signs, was destined to be mild. These happy circumstances inspired unusual largesse among the townspeople. This, in turn, had the effect of making life more than tolerable for those who relied upon the yielding consciences of the more fortunate for their sustenance.

To add to their already felicitous existence, a monk named Nestorius sought out the cripples and told them of impending Fortune. He explained that the bones of St. Martin of Tours were being brought back to Touraine after many years absence. The relics, he said, would cure them of their congenital defects: an effect that many other unfortunates had experienced. At once the elder of the two cripples burst into tears and praised God, while the other stood stoically. Pleased at the rejoicing, the monk returned to the abbey to inform his brethren of the impending miracle.

Once the monk left, the younger cripple presented an unexpected scenario to his elder cohort. If they were cured, he reasoned, their business would be lost. They had no training and therefore would not only be destitute, but destitute

without hope of charity. The elder, though not overly intelligent, was quick to see the reasonableness of his companion's logic. The only solution, he reasoned in turn, was to flee the province before the saintly bones could work their undesired cure.

Immediately they gathered their meager possessions and took the road leading south out of the town on the back of a donkey that they borrowed from an unkindly and uncharitable innkeeper. The object of their southerly direction was, of course, the coming of the relics from the north.

They had not been more than an hour in flight when the innkeeper noticed that his donkey was missing. The cry went out and accusations were made. It was determined that an elderly woman of the town, widely known for her malice, had turned the donkey into a black cat for the purposes of sacrificing him in one of her diabolic ceremonies. (Black cats, it seems, were at a premium, while donkeys were in abundance). The woman was sought in her stereotypical hovel, where she was found cooking lentils. To the young people sent to fetch her, the soup appeared to be a potion in which the cat was simmering. The young townsmen returned with the old woman in tow, their hearty imaginations bearing the additional accusation that they caught the woman in the act of boiling the cat and chanting sacrificial hymns to Lucifer in a low voice.

It was a very low voice indeed. And yet, not even the bells of the local church pealed as loudly or as convincingly as the soft, low voices of imagination. And so, with condemnations and accusations ringing in her ears, the old woman was cast into a local prison to await what was then mockingly known as a trial.

This incident alone would normally have been more than enough fodder for the dinner tables of the people of Touraine, but the day held even more. Inspired

by the innkeeper's Christian resignation in the face of so great a loss as his donkey, which he himself said could quite literally "go to the Devil," the townspeople awaited the arrival of the bones of St. Martin. It was hard for anyone to decide whether the bones were a pending testimony of the town's spiritual worthiness or of the collective need for salvation. The deciding argument was posited by a laborer named Jean who had once been to Paris: he reasoned that the town's great prosperity was evidence of the town's worthiness; the bones, therefore, were the crowning testimony of that worth. The logic was better received than it was analyzed and a great shout went up that would have made any commoner such as Jean feel immortal. In the short silence that followed, a godly procession resolutely marched into town.

It is difficult for the modern mind to understand the emotion caused by such an event, since none compares to that occasioned by the anticipation of a miracle. In a town of only three thousand people, virtually every infirmity then known to man was arrayed in hopes of an unmerited deliverance from malady. The blind were led there, the dying were carried, the deaf eagerly came; the mute took hope, those with social diseases sought simultaneous cleansing of body and soul, and the whole came to observe and to praise God. Every emotion was represented, every family held out some hope of the miraculous, and all calmly yet fervidly expressed their most sincere faith that the day would hold events never seen in the history of the world. Every care was laid aside in the eager expectation of a divine spectacle. The more cynical and unbelieving modern mind might say that the circus had come to town and God was the main attraction.

All hearts and minds were thus centered on God; all except one. It seems that our humble Nestorius had been faithfully reading some common hagiography that very afternoon. And as little boys today dream of being baseball players, the good monk dreamt of being a saint. Such thoughts, he told himself more than once, were sin, for they issued from vanity. Yet he convinced himself that he merely desired salvation and that the saintly life would lead him there. And what man could lead a saintly life and not be a saint? "What good the adjective without the noun?" he thought—a turn of a phrase that delighted him because of its exegetical implications for the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

Thus caught up in the rapture of innocently inventing his own scripture, Nestorius ran headlong into the innkeeper, knocking the latter facedown into the mud. It had been many years since the monk had heard epithets like those of the muddied innkeeper. The monk crossed himself many times and humbly prayed forgiveness for his spell of absentmindedness. He excused himself, saying that the thoughts of the impending miracles had carried him away into a divine meditation—a small lie that he would later confess in secret. What had really distracted him was the thought of the cripples, whom he had informed regarding the relics of St. Martin. Perhaps influenced by the afternoon's reading, he reasoned that since he had informed the cripples of the miracle that they were to receive, he would be responsible for that miracle. Augustine himself surely had a first miracle, and probably an equally unpretentious one at that. Yet when the process of canonization began, all such beatific actions had to be considered equally. If his first miracle could be realized by the age of only 37, surely the Pontiff would smile on his less-than-holy youth, much as Augustine's was forgiven.

Not wishing to stray too far from the truth, Nestorius felt obligated to mention the cripples and his hopes for their impending cure. The innkeeper, now willing to forgive the incident in exchange for a few short prayers in his behalf, responded that of all the people he had expected to see seeking the holy relics of St. Martin, the cripples were first; and yet they were nowhere in sight. The monk's spiritual life flashed in front of his eyes. He studied the throng gathering around the gate of the city, awaiting what was left of St. Martin; the cripples were not there. He wondered what he had done to deserve this. His pride, it seemed, had done him in. For his vain desires, he had been denied his first miracle. Ignoring both the innkeeper and the mud, he fell to his knees and promised that such vanity would never again enter his heart.

"My God," he uttered in resolute, broken Latin, "deny me not this one miracle, and I pledge a pilgrimage to Compostela, no matter how difficult." The innkeeper, thinking that the monk was doing penance for the matter of the mud, raised the monk up by the cowl, slapped him heartily on the back and said, "My good man, no time for groveling and begging forgiveness, we're not on a pilgrimage you know. Up with you! The bones of St. Martin approach!"

To a mind such as our monk's, uninitiated into the possibilities of coincidence, the innkeeper's words seemed the words of God. The innkeeper certainly knew no Latin; he had therefore been granted some momentary Pentecostal gift of interpretation. The monk's mind was racing; he hardly knew whether to feel reprov'd or forgiven; he did not even know by whom he should so feel. Yet given the choice between God and an innkeeper speaking to him, the choice was obvious; and given the choice between reprov'd and forgiveness, the

choice was necessary. Much relieved by this conclusion, the monk managed to feel certain that the cripples would present themselves promptly and that his first miracle would be soon under way.

No sooner had the self-gratifying logic presented itself than the bones of the blessed saint arrived, borne by a procession of monks. The crowd gathered more thickly, hoping to see, if not touch, the mere box in which they were housed. With all eyes fixed, with all minds and hearts thus intent on the blessedness of the occasion, from the southern direction came walking, donkey in tow, the two cripples.

The record from which the story is taken most decidedly says, "walking." In fact, the word is underlined: a practice that was virtually unknown in the tenth century. To a reader whose mind is attuned to miracles, as would be the customary reader of such a record, such emphasis hardly seems necessary.

In an innocent moment of irony, the author states that the first thing that was noticed regarding the two cripples was not that they were walking, but that they had the donkey. All donkeys are not the same and this donkey had the very markings that the innkeeper's donkey had. For this reason, a group of men who spent a great deal of time at the inn immediately recognized the donkey as belonging to the keeper of their favorite inn and said so loudly. In a matter of moments, the crowd's attention shifted from the holy bones of St. Martin, never bothering to rest on the two cured cripples, and lighted on the donkey.

"Henri," cried a voice (for that was the innkeeper's name), "They've got your donkey."

"No they haven't," was the calm reply.

"Henri," said the voice, "It's got the same yellowed eye, the white patch behind his ear, the cut tail and the burn on his neck from where your boy..."

"I know all that," said the innkeeper. "I'm not blind, you know. The donkey appears like mine, but it's not. Mine has been boiled and sacrificed."

"Henri," said the same voice, "this is your donkey, you fool."

"I'm a fool, am I?" said Henri. "We'll see who's a fool. You say that's my donkey. Well, why have we got the old woman in jail for, if it isn't for boiling my donkey after she made him a cat? Do you think that the fine young men who caught her in the very act of communion with the Devil lied? Now be careful who you call a fool, for one of them was your son."

The logic and sagacity of the argument were impeccable. The man stood refuted, as if by Solomon himself, unable to answer. As the crowd was basking in Henri's wisdom, Nestorious, who had focused on a more important matter, shouted "Hosanna!" during the first silence, falling to his knees in front of all, praying in his best and most silently audible Latin. The innkeeper, growing fond of the praise, said, "Nestorious my son, it isn't right to bow like that, no matter what I say." Mustering all the humility he could on such an occasion so temptingly inviting of pride, Nestorious said, "Henri, it is not you I praise, but the Lord Almighty, who has worked a miracle through his humble servant, Nestorious."

Nestorious had always wanted to speak of himself in the third person singular. The gratification was immense and, in his eyes, well deserved. And his pronouncement was well placed. Nestorious had realized some time before that, if he were ever to perform a miracle, humility would only allow him to tell one person: strategically, that person would be the innkeeper.

"You've performed a miracle?" exclaimed the innkeeper.

"Dear sir," implored Nestorius, "please don't let everyone know. It really is a private matter. The left hand and the right hand, you know."

"What have my hands got to do with it, brother? If you've done a miracle, then out with it!"

Opportunities to prove one's humility do not often happen upon monks; this does not mean that Nestorius was quick to recognize the moment. With pleading glances toward the crowd that now focused its attention on him, kneeling humbly in the mud, breathing pitiful sighs and pious exclamations of "PLEASE", Nestorius reluctantly glanced toward the cripples and nodded his most non-committal nod. The crowd was petrified with ignorance. They turned to their new leader for interpretation, which Henri kindly granted them.

"He's healed the cripples," said Henri.

The crowd, seizing the spiritual ramifications of the miracle, rushed upon Nestorius to touch him. He cried out vainly that the relics of the holy saint, not a lowly monk, caused the miracle. His humility was greater proof of his saintliness. The people tore at his garment, grabbed his hair, and prayed for blessings at his hand. One blind man claimed that, for the instant that he grasped Nestorius' hand, he could see as in his youth and had even recognized his wife at his side. Other shouts went up of miracles small and great at the hands of the monk Nestorius. Finally, with Henri's aid, the crowd was beaten back and Nestorius was seen lying on the ground, bloodied, bruised, and nearly naked.

Such an enormous commotion naturally brought the most important men of the town: the Abbot and the feudal lord. Together they demanded to know the

cause and meaning of the riot. Henri, in his new role as spokesman, detailed—with considerable embellishment—the previous two hours’ happenings, going back to the witch. The townspeople nodded in agreement with the story, attributing the added details to the innkeeper’s greater insights. The abbot asked Nestorious if all were true, at which Nestorious piously fainted. The lord called the cripples and asked if they had, indeed, been cured.

The cripples stepped forward and said that they had heard from the saintly Nestorious that the relics of the holy Saint Martin were coming to their town and that the effect, according to the same Nestorious, would be that they would be healed of their respective infirmities. They admitted to having fled in order to escape the miraculous effects of the relics for fear that they would lose the charity that was their only source of income. Once outside the town, they confessed to great remorse for having stolen the innkeeper’s donkey, but pleaded for mercy on the grounds that they planned to return him as soon as the bones were removed and they could safely reenter the town. The remorse, they concurred, was not due to anything they had done wrong (for they had already stated the purity of their intentions), but to the workings of the Spirit within them brought on by the nearness of the bones of St. Martin. The Spirit had the double effect of prodding them to return to the town and try their legs as proof of Nestorious’ words. They did so and found, upon reentering the city, that they did not have as much need of their walking staffs as they had in the past and that they could both walk upright up to ten steps without aid. They praised God, pleaded once again for mercy and bowed to their lord.

The lord thanked them for the honesty of their confession. He remained concerned, however, over the matter of the donkey. Theft was normally punishable by death, yet in this small province he had never sentenced a commoner to death, much less the recipient of a miracle. He called the innkeeper forward and asked if he would accept the found donkey as payment for the crime if the cripples should accept the penance imposed upon them by the Church.

The innkeeper replied that he would be happy to accept the donkey were it his, a remark that greatly confused the lord, but not the crowd. Henri mercifully rescued his lord from ignorance, filling in details regarding the cat, the donkey, and the devil that he had left out before. The lord accepted the explanation, yet remained uncertain as to what to do regarding the conflicting testimonies.

"I doubt not your words, good innkeeper," said the lord, "yet I cannot but wonder what to do with the old woman. If the cripples lie not, then she did not steal your donkey. If she did not sacrifice your donkey, then the cripples lie about your donkey; and I wonder why they would accuse themselves of a crime that they did not commit."

The argument was far too complex for anyone present except the abbot, who immediately recognized the subtle theological implications of the logic. "All men, by virtue of their capacity to reason," he said, "can lie. Augustine tells us, however, that devils, when they take possession of a man, cannot lie, as we see demonstrated in the eighth chapter of Luke in which the devils confess Christ Jesus. Herein we learn that the possessed, though capable of wreaking evil with their bodies, cannot but confess God and truth out of the great sorrow they feel for their

eternal damnation. Therefore, I say, bring forth a demoniac and we shall hear the truth!"

A great cry went up as many minds raced in an attempt to decide whether or not they were possessed. Each person weighed fame against potential condemnation until one epileptic young man stepped forward and declared that he had been possessed since his youth as punishment for his deceased mother's adultery. The crowd eagerly and loudly confirmed the confession. Thus prepared for an impending solution, the abbot stared into the demoniac's eyes and said, "In the name of the holy St. Martin, tell us to whom this donkey belongs and from whence it came."

However absurd it may seem that a learned theologian interrogate the devil in the name of God over the circumstances of an ass, the absurdity occurred to no one present. Quiet hung over the town as the epileptic sought silent inspiration from his devil; and he was not disappointed. The boy felt a growing inner tension working its way to his mouth. He heard his own voice change from a squeaky insecurity to a resonant resoluteness. For the first time in his life he felt powerful. How far could his newly found power take him? Could he declaim the abbot himself? The lord? He considered the entire kingdom and decided upon a witch.

The devil in this young man, though honest, was less than brave. It is no wonder he did not have an important dominion as did Beelzebub or Belial, but was consigned to the body of a peasant. The devil wondered, therefore, if the boy would ever lead him to greatness as the boy wondered the same about the devil. And so, with honesty as their only weapon, they pronounced the witch guilty of theft and alliance with the Devil. The townspeople quickly forgot who had issued the

judgment, for they lifted the young epileptic onto their shoulders and shouted praise to his wisdom. Several people cried out that the town would soon be free of yet another Devil worshipper, thus securing greater domestic tranquility for all. The old woman, who heard all of this from her cell, knelt and thanked the Lord for the few hours of warmth she had enjoyed in the cell, asked to be forgiven of her sins, and prepared herself for the temporal flames that awaited her, always holding out hope for rest in the life hereafter.

With the crowd's attention diverted, Nestorius marched, wounded and cold, back to the monastery. Half way up the hill, he turned and watched a panorama of human life spread itself out before his eyes. The young demoniac was enjoying his moment of fame, some people were gathering firewood, the lord was congratulating the abbot on averting a great crisis, while others were seeking the curative powers of the bones of St. Martin. In the background, a shabby donkey wandered unattended down the road he had most recently traveled. The vista had an entirely unexpected effect upon the saintly Nestorius. As his thoughts turned to the old woman, it occurred to him that the only theft was that committed by the exonerated, and that his own spiritual father effected the only communication with the Devil. Since neither irony nor doubt were impressions to which the humble monk was attuned, neither impressed him as much as did the need for silence. He turned again to the monastery, bowed his head in the face of a cold wind, and prayed that his own righteousness would cover this multitude of sins.