

# The Poisoning Angel

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## Plouhinec



‘Oh, no, don’t pick that, H  l  ne, it’s a thunderflower. Goodness, that’s what I should call you from now on: “Thunderflower”. And don’t pull on that stem either; it belongs to a viper flower. Don’t you know that a woman picked a bunch of those and her tongue split in two? You’re seven years old – when will you ever learn?’

‘Don’t go near that field with your bare legs, poppy petals suck your blood; and don’t step in that, you’ll get your sabots dirty, little dung flower. Oh, don’t put those shiny little black balls near your mouth: belladonna berries are a deadly poison. Who would have a daughter like you? Who’s that in the distance, coming over the moor? We’ve not seen him before. And behind him,

there, beside the small man, with its wheels in the air, I only hope that's not the Ankou's cart. Quick, Thunderflower, run and get me two needles!

The mother spoke in a Celtic dialect and when she had finished, Thunderflower, little H  l  ne, so pretty with her blond hair spreading out like a dandelion, and scrawny feet beneath her violet skirt, galloped off, sabots and all, through a pool with rotting gorse and straw, towards a miserable farm with a roof of thatch, and dry-stone walls.

Stones! There was no shortage of those in this landscape. Everywhere the granite poked up through the holly and thistles. There were so many stones, with scant grass and such poor soil that the farming women spread wrack snatched from the sea on their land as fertiliser.

Two rows of menhirs, standing stones made of schist, sawed at the overcast sky. As the intruder drew closer, the moor seemed to bare its teeth showing gums of heather. Some river women came up from the wash place and joined the women working on the land to go up to Thunderflower's mother and ask, 'Who can that man be, coming towards us, Anne J  gado?'

'*War ma f  , heman zo eun Anko drouk.*' ('I would warrant that's an evil Ankou.') The gentleman was still approaching. He had a cane in his hand, a pipe in his mouth, new boots and a goatskin waistcoat. A gust of wind ruffled the few hairs on his forehead, which was creased in a frown.

'Hello there, ladies,' he called in French.

Visitors never came this way and the women and children watched him in astonishment, as he drew near, observing, 'The road that goes past your place is the worst imaginable. It crosses

more than a hundred ponds and it's not wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other.' Smiling, he came closer still. As they waited for him, several of the women took out the pins that were holding the folds of their bodices together between their breasts.

'He won't be able to bring misfortune on any of us who can shed a drop of his blood.'

Close at hand now, the man introduced himself. 'My colleague over there and I are Norman wigmakers. We've come to buy hair in your region because even the men wear it long here.'

Facing him, the old women in their black dresses and the younger ones in reddish-brown skirts listened to him, stupefied, as if he were a traveller from exotic lands.

'Can you understand me?' the Norman said, worried by their disconcerted faces. 'Do you speak French, Mesdames?'

At that point, many of the women reached up to take out the needles securing the wings of their headdresses shaped like a horizontal figure of eight, which stuck out on either side of the head. The ends of the wide strips of white fabric tumbled on to their shoulders, and delightful Thunderflower, returning with little mud stockings, held out a needle to her mother, who had a plain flat headdress in everyday cloth. Meanwhile the wigmaker explained his presence.

'We landed on your shores this morning, and before we'd even gone three leagues our covered cart, which you can see behind me, slipped into a rut. Might there be some men in this village who could help us to get it—'

'*Ann diaoulou!*' yelled a female voice, whereupon all the washerwomen and farm women hurled themselves upon the Norman, brandishing their metal points. It was like a wasps' nest

emptying on to his almost bald head. Suddenly surrounded, he was stuck with darts all over. The needles and pins went far into his thighs, back, legs, face and stomach.

‘The Caqueux bleed from their navels!’ ‘The moon will swallow you up!’ The savage Celtic cries surrounded the wigmaker, who shielded himself with his arms as his legs flailed wildly. People came swarming up from the banks and moors.

Lamenting his fate, the harvester of hair, understanding that he was suspected of bringing misfortune, uncovered his face to comment, ‘You’ve hardly been touched by civilisation. Only here could one witness such superstitions.’ A needle was thrust into one of his eyeballs. The wigmaker let out a yell. With his face in his hands he fled the circle of heathens, as a stout peasant woman chided, ‘Oh, not in the eye! Who’s put his eye out?’

The Norman ran off through pink heather and flowering buckwheat, that late summer’s snow. ‘Sdeath,’ he shouted, and it was as if the women had thrown out Jesus Christ Himself. Once safely back with his horrified sidekick – a puny dark-haired man who moaned, ‘Oh, that such a thing should be seen in the Empire of Napoleon’ – the injured man turned round. With his good eye he could make out in the distance men at work breaking the moor, using picks to turn over the soil, which was so difficult and stony it would snap a ploughshare. These peasants would strive doggedly to get a few farthings out of the stones. But now, in their short waistcoats, wide breeches and round hats over long, flowing hair, their calloused hands on tools that looked straight out of the Middle Ages, they were doubled over with laughter.

At all the natives, both men and women, the maimed victim shouted, ‘Fossils! Cretins! Degenerates!’

This took place in the hamlet of Kerhordevin in Plouhinec (Morbihan). The wigmakers unhitched the horse from their overturned cart with its yellow canvas. Anyone tilting their head sideways would have been able to make out the words ‘À la bouclette normande: Normandy’s finest tresses’. Bareback on their mount, they crossed a pond (where the steed went for a swim) still bawling, ‘Idiots!’ after the people they were leaving behind on the moor.

‘*Piou zo azé?*’ (‘Who’s there?’)

The front door of a miserable cottage opened wide. Seated at her spinning wheel, Anne Jégado saw only the bright night and then the outline of her daughter appearing on the threshold.

‘Oh, it’s you, you naughty *groac’h* (sprite)! What a fright you gave me! Why did you knock three times before you came in?’

‘I only banged my sabots to get the mud off them, Maman.’

‘So you don’t know, Thunderflower, that a chance noise repeated three times means misfortune? Don’t you know that’s what the Ankou does? Before he puts the body of a victim into his cart, he calls them three times in an eerie voice. For instance, for me he would call “Anne! Anne! Anne!” Look, your father was frightened as well. He immediately unsheathed his sword, messenger of misfortune. Where have you been at this hour, at *Penn ar Bed* (World’s End)?’

‘Leaning against a menhir on the moor.’

‘Again? What can you be dreaming of, always leaning against those standing stones?’