



Joe Machine,
'St Dunstan
and the Devil!'

St Dunstan and the Devil

Steven O'Brien

St Dunstan is fissing in his smithy. Tinkering and tapping, he sits in a shaft of cool sunlight. His hair is pale yellow, like harvest-time wheat.

He squints one of his eyes as he tools a rectangle of red goatskin that will go to make the binding of a copy of the gospel – which is written in good brawny old Wessex English, no less – *Faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum, si thin nama gehalgod*. And so too intones St Dunstan as he goes about his work. He has already made the edgings for the book in gold and garnet. These lie scattered over his bench, glinting amid the chisels, scraps, awls and bodkins.

Tendril and interlacing – St Dunstan has given twining life to the leather. He has copied the gospel onto new vellum, and painted each page with sprightly pictures: long-bearded disciples meshed in the calligraphy, fully fledged angels and dogs whose tongues weave into an inky thicket of coils at the borders of each page. Here is a living, speaking book taking shape, made to shout and chuckle and sing the Word to the people of Sussex. St Dunstan sits up and stretches. He reaches for an apple cake.

There are a handful of these raw-legged monks scattered across the country. Learned, scruffy men, padding the tracks, living among the people, sharing their food, cajoling them, thumbing invisible signs of salvation on their foreheads.

Few places are as remote as Sussex in this, the tenth century after the birth of the Christ. It was the last place in England to accept the Faith. The county is hemmed by marshes on either side. The people are cussed and straight. One of St Dunstan's angels flying across the miles of this landscape would see only the green swathe of thick forest running up towards the northern hills. Just the odd ferule of smoke shows where the little settlements are scattered among the green. Oak and Iron; a monk will be swallowed and marooned among the musky trees.

They wear the new religion lightly here, like a fresh suit of clothes, only to be put on for special occasions. November is *blod monath*, the blood month, where they light fires to hold back the coming darkness and remember the animal sacrifices their grandfathers made. They hang their homes with living green at the midwinter feast and burn a great log. They still keep wassail in the New Year, singing to their apple trees. Days of the week are named for the old gods, Tiw, Woden, Thunor, Freja. When they do build churches they carve the beam bosses with the grinning faces of green men who are set there to guard the sacred space. All is oak in these little churches, which are creaking ships of faith in an ocean of leaves. Wooden pegs hold everything in place. But the thick doors are banded with strong black Wealden iron.

Yet the South Saxons love St Dunstan, who has come from the west at the order of far-off king Aethelstan. They love his silver smithying, and his enamelling. They do not understand his strange alphabet, but they love the menageries and apostles he draws in the margins of his books. When he preaches in the church at Mayfield, they love his magical story of the carpenter Jesus who was nailed to a tree and yet came back again through the mists of death to tell them of his father who lives beyond the sun.

If St Dunstan can be accused of any particular sin it is that he is often too absorbed in his crafty work to take notice of the everyday affairs of the people of Mayfield. Long after the particular events that I am relating, he feels that he should have heeded the hints and rumours far earlier and so taken measures to nip things in the bud, as it were.

For instance there was a young boy called Garland who told him that all the unpicked blackberries had turned mushy on the morning of 10th October. Then another boy called Clapshoe, who brings him a fresh loaf each day, said that someone had told him that a swineherd over in Heathfield was out nutting and had met a tall stranger. He was reaching for the cobs when the man appeared on the other side of the hazel tree. Smiling, the stranger held one of the most loaded branches down for him, so that he could fill his bag. When the swineherd looked up to thank him the stranger was nowhere to be seen.

... Anyway, I am asking you to see St Dunstan now, sitting at his bench, surrounded by all sorts of clutter. His little forge is only just awake; the slinking coals are orange in a dark corner. He is happy that no one has come to look in on him this morning. Often he jumps with a start to find a curious villager standing at his door, silently watching him as he goes about his work. St Dunstan scratches his tonsure and nibbles his cake. The shutters are open and he can see a patch of woods leading down to the stream where he goes to wash. His coarse habit is rucked up to his knees. The stool creaks. Crows carp. Golden leaves pare away on the wind. Wood is being chopped in the distance. St Dunstan drinks the autumn air.

The corn is in and the people are salting their bacon flitches. He has the sudden feeling that everything is being held in the balance, just as it should be. Then, being a man of honest piety, he regrets his momentary pleasure that no one has come visiting, and he whispers a silent prayer of repentance.

... 'Goistering' is a Sussex word for loud feminine laughter. Scarcely has the prayer died on his lips when the monk is astonished to hear his name being called just outside the workshop in a voice like a whole set of silver cutlery being dropped down a well. 'St Dustin! St Dustin! St Dustiiiiin!' He turns to the doorway. For a second the morning light is eclipsed. 'Hellooo, St Dustin?'

Quickly he pulls his brown habit down over his pale legs. There are crumbs all over his stubby chin.

'St Dustin? Ah, there you are.' Hand on one hip, laughing and sashaying, in comes a woman, the like of which he has never seen before. The rustle of fallen leaves accompanies her as she sways. St Dunstan is dumbfounded and swallows hard. Because the sun is at her back she appears at first as a series of disjointed fragments, dazzling and flickering. What he does notice immediately is an abundance of golden flesh.

St Dunstan opens his mouth. 'Err?' he says.

'Oh listen to your voice. Such a lovely sound. Everywhere I go they say St Dustin is so sophisticated, so cultured, so learned.' The woman brushes black hair way from her face; it tumbles across her shoulders. Her eyes are silvery grey like the dawn glimmer across the Rother.

'Err?' replies the monk. His tongue is dry and his heart hammers.

'Hear him speak!' She laughs and her red mouth opens wide. 'Oh you beautiful man.'

St Dunstan is many things but he has never been called beautiful. He has a kind of scratchy, end-of-the-garden look about himself. He looks best in a shed. He knows he smells like freshly peeled mushrooms. At last he is surprised to hear some words tumble from his lips. 'Madam,' he says, 'I don't believe we have . . . er, that is, I don't think I . . . er.'

The woman silences him by holding up one finger: 'No,' she says. 'You were going to ask my name. But that is not important and so I shan't tell you. So just sit still and let me look at you, and then I'll tell you why I came.'

He feels a strange flush come over him and his lips are locked. He sits. The 'looking' seems to be more for St Dunstan's benefit than hers, for she taps across the workshop and stands before him. She is wearing a dress the colour of crimson dogwood leaves. It stretches over her body like a rumpled sheet. She smiles and is quiet. Her black hair is glossed like simmering pitch. You couldn't be a man, and an artist to boot, and not gaze at this woman in wonder.

Therefore, monk as he is, it is as an artist and a man that he takes in the beam of his visitor. Her skin is like pearwood that has been stained to a dull gloss with beeswax. He notices how she is never still and when she moves it puts him in mind of a jar full of honey pouring slowly to the floor. And like golden honey the light seems to shine through her skin.

'Oh, St Dustin you are everything that I hoped you to be,' she says. He can't place her breathy accent at all. It is like mead infused with faraway spices. She backs away and suddenly springs up to sit on a table. Her dress is slashed to the thigh. The monk looks down the long yard of her legs and sees how tiny her feet are, with shiny black shoes tapering to sharp points. Here is a woman for whom you would kick down a door. As if reading his thoughts she rolls her eyes and her laughter clashes across the room. 'Good. Let us talk.'

St Dunstan feels his tongue suddenly loosened. 'Since you will not introduce yourself, tell me, what can I do for you?'

'See here' says the woman. She motions to her neck and there he sees a pendant. She reaches for the clasp and undoes the necklace. St Dunstan feels a throbbing at his temples.

He must not look there, yet his eyes are fixed on the darkening amber shadows that lead down the low-cut front of her dress. His eyes widen as if his lids will tear at the corners when she bends forward and hands him the pendant. He feels it hot and heavy, but he cannot take his gaze away from the semi-furled secret bosom. 'It is broken,' she says.

Relieved to be able to look anywhere but 'there', he stares at his palm and finds a small silver spider sitting with its legs splayed out to make a claw. The eyes are six tiny rubies. It is an exquisite but cruel object. The woman folds her hands over his and when she touches him a sapling tremor runs through his arm. 'See my little spider. He is broken. One of his legs has gone. I have come a long, long way to find you, so you can fix him.'

'Where are you from?' asked St Dunstan.

Again that laughter. 'Ha ha, from the back of the moon,' she replies. 'Why does it matter where I am from, silly man? I have walked all of the twittens and wappleways to search for the great St Dustin.'

'It's very delicate work. I er. That is I don't think I want to ...' He is trying to refuse this commission, for he notices that the woman has broken up once more into a series of parts. He doesn't know if it is his imagination, or the sunlight shuttering across the dark of his workshop, but he feels suddenly feverish.

Here are her legs mixed up with her wide smile. Here is her tossed-back chin, her black hair and always shadow between her breasts. St Dunstan feels that a man could place his hand on the ebb and flow of this woman and the glide would never end.

She has drawn close to him. 'You can't refuse. I can pay you.' Her breath smells of cinnamon and it is like nettle rash on his neck.

'What will you pay?' he croaks. She has squeezed his fist so tightly the silver spider's remaining legs have broken the skin of his palm, so he is relieved when she draws away from him. Standing, she tip, tip, tips on her little black shoes and puts one hand back on her hip. He sees her whole again.

Her silver eyes do not blink. 'Here is a little knot that keeps my dress safely tied. I have only to loosen this and it will fall to my ankles. Imagine that, St Dustin. Yes, think of that.'

The monk is off his stool. His brown habit folds in woolly clumps around his ferrety frame. In her heels the woman is a head taller than he is. There is a fire in his cheeks. He feels his shiny tonsure redden and he trembles.

'You are earth and I am fire,' she croons. 'You are an artist. What could you do with this?' She traces the glissade of her curves with her painted fingers.

St Dunstan walks towards the woman. Men have gone to the gallows with less sense of purpose. He imagines the taste of her skin and the arching of her naked back. Her eyes are nearly closed as he draws near. 'Ah, perhaps you would like to loosen this knot yourself.' Her whisper is like a midnight promise that darkens the noon light. She thrusts her hips like a dancer against his bony pelvis. Her little shiny shoes make a slow tympani on the tiles. He looks down at them.

Hesitantly, St Dunstan, Aethelstan's holy monk, the tinkering craftsman, loved by the Sussex people, puts his arm around the cinched waist of the crimson-dressed woman and she leans towards him with her red lips parted . . .

. . . Imagine you are standing outside the monk's little workshop. You hear a scalding shriek as if a fox has slammed its paw in the hen house door. It is a sound that fetches the bile up to eat at your teeth. This is the jagged scream that breaks from the lips of the woman. For St Dunstan has reached behind her to his forge, where his favourite heavy tongs have been lying in the live coals all morning. And with these he has nipped her nose firmly between the two tongs of red-hot iron.

'How dare you come here with all your hussying tricks,' he shouts, as the woman squirms and tries to wrestle with the hissing tongs.

'Aiyee St Dunstin! What are you doing? Ay, my lovely nose!'

'Stop that,' he cries. 'Your shoes have given you away.' For of course what St Dunstan has noticed is how those little pointy black heels have wavered for a second in his sight and showed themselves to be two neat, lacquered, tapping, cloven hoofs.

With a tug he pulls the screaming woman this way and that. 'Now, now now, enough of all your clitter, clatter,' says St Dunstan, grunting with the effort. 'You must come forth and show yourself, for as you know,' (tug, tug, tug) 'for as you know, I have you fast pinned by this Sussex iron and you must COME FORTH!' At this he gives the woman's nose such a wrench he half-expects it to come clean off.

'Oh the pain, the cruelty. Yo me estoy muriendo!' Tears like gledes of lead run down her cheeks and blister St Dunstan's hands. Yet now she spasms and convulses and then she is swallowed by a cloud of choking sulphur. St Dunstan feels a great counter pull, but he hangs on for dear life and squeezes the pincers even tighter. The sulphur blinds him for a second but when he opens them there, cringing rudely and red at the end of his tongs, is the Devil himself, squawking and retching and whining.

'Unhand me!' The Devil is attempting to give a show of haughty outrage, but this is difficult with burning iron claspings your nostrils. 'I am a Prince, for goodness' sake. There are certain protocols, dues and privileges. Oh I beg of you, do let go old boy.'

'We have no use for princes such as you in Sussex,' roars St Dunstan (and who would have thought such a grizzly monk could labour so with the tongs). 'I'll ask you now, why did you come here? When as you well know all the land from South Harting to Rye, and from Newhaven to Rusper is barred to you forever . . . with the exception of Crawley.'

'Ah, Crawley,' said the Devil. Despite the pain a look almost of happy reminiscence passes over his crimson face.

'Why?' insists St Dunstan, twisting the tongs again. There is a tremendous racket now in the workshop as the Devil is dragged around, for his tail whisks everything off shelves and benches.

'Ouch, ouch, ouch,' responds the Devil. 'You know why I came. For your laundered, starched, crisp and neatly folded soul.'

'You shan't have it,' yells St Dunstan, panting with the effort. 'What were you thinking of, appearing as a woman like that? What if I had given in? Imagine the gossip!' The Devil's knees suddenly buckle and now the breathless monk is standing over him.

There he is lying on the floor with his red jacket torn and the buttons of his waistcoat popping off as little glinting cinders. His crimson bowtie is all puckered and loose. He tries to smile, although, as you know, the Devil hates his clothes to be rumpled and mired. St Dunstan glimpses the sharp teeth and forked tongue.

'Look here,' says the Devil. He is trying to wrestle his head away. 'I realise there has been a mistake. A good man like you was never going to fall for my old *hidalgo* act. I see that now. Really I do. So if you'll just let me go, perhaps we could have a pint of Harveys like proper gentlemen ... possibly over a game of cards?'

'None of that!'

'Then maybe a pinch of my puffball fungus snuff? You'll find it in my waistcoat.'

'No,' replies St Dunstan, Aethelstan's man. 'For all your yammering, I mean to wring submission and promise out of you.'

It is now that St Dunstan really begins to go to work. Never has the Devil been subjected to such twisting, hauling agony. He is stricken and buckled and wracked. He begins to cough up goutts of flame. All the while he moans like a wrestler caught in a headlock who is refusing to give in. 'No. No. No.'

'You must yield to me and swear that you will never darken us with your wicked ways again.' By one way or another St Dunstan has dragged the Devil to the door of his workshop. How he cringes and yowls. 'Or I swear by this iron that your princely nose will never be the same again.'

'Very well. Very well. Pax!' gasps Devil, with his voice hoarse and broken.

'Good. Now swear upon all the grim glories of your under-kingdom that you will leave us unmolested forever.'

'Yes, yes, yes. I swear,' hisses the Devil.

St Dunstan unclappers his tongs and stands back. The Devil – dishevelled, despoiled and well-nigh dis-nosed – arises from the dust of the yard. He straightens his collar and smooths his centre-parting. Gingerly and limping slightly on his shiny hooves, the Prince of Darkness steps away and unfurls his wings. He looks long and moodily at the monk. However, St Dunstan knows that even the Lord of Hell is bound by his own promises.

'No class,' spits the Devil. Then he flies off towards Tunbridge Wells to cool his sore nostrils in the waters there (which incidentally is the reason why that drink they peddle just over the Kent border tastes so sulphurous and ghastly).

St Dunstan casts aside his tongs and leans against the door jamb. His scratchy brown habit is soaked with sweat. His arms are quivering like rushes. His workshop is a chaos of

tools and broken wood and torn vellum. Yet he is happy that he has foiled the old Trickster with good iron and blessed fire from Wealden charcoal.

As he gathers himself there comes a skittering click from under an overturned chair. He looks down to see a quick flash of silver. It is the broken spider pendant making for the door. Across the floor it darts into the open air. Clapshoe, the boy who brings St Dunstan bread, is surprised to find the exhausted monk stamping and hopping around the yard, and beating the ground with a stick.

St Dunstan never did catch the Devil's pendant, for it escaped into the grass at the edge of the woods. So despite his promise never to trouble the people of Sussex again, the Devil left a tiny part of himself here and for that we have always to be on our toes.

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