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The Ingoldsby Legends of Thomas Ingoldsby
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The Lay of St. Odille

ODILLE WAS a maid of a dignified race;¹
Her father, Count Otto, was lord of Alsace;
 Such an air, such a grace,
 Such a form, such a face,
All agreed, 'twere a fruitless endeavour to trace
In the Court, or within fifty miles of the place.
Many ladies in Strasburg were beautiful, still
They were beat all to sticks by the lovely Odille.

beat all to sticks: surpass completely (the OED cites this line)

But Odille was devout, and, before she was nine,
 Had “experienced a call” she considered divine
 To put on the veil at St. Ermengarde’s shrine.—²
 Lords, Dukes and Electors, and Counts Palatine
 Came to seek her in marriage from both sides the Rhine.

 But vain their design,
 They are all left to pine,
 Their oglings and smiles are all useless; in fine,
 Not one of these gentlefolks, try as they will,
 Can draw “Ask my papa” from the cruel Odille.

At length one of her suitors, a certain Count Hermann,
 A highly respectable man as a German,
 Who smoked like a chimney and drank like a Merman,³
 Paid his court to her father, conceiving his firman
 Would soon make her bend,
 And induce her to lend
 An ear to a love-tale in lieu of a sermon.
 He gained the old Count, who said, “Come, Mynherr, fill!
 Here’s luck to yourself and my daughter Odille!”

The Lady Odille was quite nervous with fear
 When a little bird whispered that toast in her ear.
 She murmured, “Oh, dear!
 My Papa has got queer,
 I am sadly afraid, with that nasty strong beer!
 He’s so very austere, and severe, that it’s clear,
 If he gets in his ‘tantrums,’ I can’t remain here.
 But St. Ermengarde’s convent is luckily near;
 It were folly to stay
 Pour prendre congé,
 I shall put on my bonnet, and e’en run away!”
 —She unlocked the back door and descended the hill,
 On whose crest stood the towers of the sire of Odille.

call: a spiritual prompting, taken as a divine summons, to follow a religious vocation
put on the veil: become a nun; **count palatine:** a higher count ruling a large territory
firman: an order issued by a sultan; **mynherr (mein Herr):** sir [quasi-German]
queer: drunk [slang]; **pour prendre congé:** take formal leave of a host [French]

When he found she'd levanted, the Count of Alsace
 At first turned remarkably red in the face;
 He anathematized, with much unction and grace,
 Every soul who came near, and consigned the whole race
 Of runaway girls to a very warm place.

 With a frightful grimace
 He gave orders for chase:
 His vassals set off at a deuce of a pace,
 And of all whom they met, high or low, Jack or Jill,
 Asked, "Pray, have you seen anything of Lady Odille?"—

Now I think I've been told,—for I'm no sporting man,—
 That the "knowing ones" call this by far the best plan,—
 "Take the lead and then keep it!"—that is if you can.
 Odille thought so too; so she set off and ran,
 Put her best leg before,
 Starting at score,
 As I said some lines since, from that little back door,
 And, not being missed until half after four,
 Had what hunters call "law" for a good hour and more;
 Doing her best,
 Without stopping to rest,
 Like young Lochinvar who "came out of the West."
 "'Tis done!—I am gone!—over briar, brook, and rill!
 They'll be sharp lads who catch me!" said young Miss Odille.⁴

But you've all read in Aesop, or Phaedrus, or Gay,⁵
 How a tortoise and hare ran together one day;
 How the hare, making play,
 "Progressed right slick away,"⁶
 As "them tarnation chaps" the Americans say;⁷
 While the tortoise, whose figure is rather *outré*
 For racing, crawled straight on, without let or stay,
 Having no post-horse duty or turnpikes to pay,
 Till, ere noon's ruddy ray

levant (v): take off, abscond, often used in a context of gambling or bad debts

knowing ones: those claiming expert knowledge in horse racing or related sports [slang]

start at score: a sudden dash at full speed; **law:** a fair start, a time or distance advantage given to an animal in a hunt; **outré:** peculiar, unusual [French]

Changed to eve's sober grey,
Though her form and obesity caused some delay,
Perseverance and patience brought up her lee-way,
And she chased her fleet-footed "praycursor" until
She o'ertook her at last;—so it fared with Odille!



For although, as I said, she ran gaily at first,
And showed no inclination to pause, if she durst,
She at length felt opprest with the heat, and with thirst,
Its usual attendant; nor was that the worst,—
Her shoes went down at heel; at last one of them burst.

Now a gentleman smiles
At a trot of ten miles;
But not so the Fair: then consider the stiles;

And, as then ladies seldom wore things with a frill⁸
 Round the ankle, these stiles sadly bothered Odille.

Still, despite all the obstacles placed in her track,
 She kept steadily on, though the terrible crack
 In her shoe made of course her progression more slack,
 Till she reached the Schwartz Forest (in English the Black).

I cannot divine
 How the boundary line
 Was passed which is somewhere there formed by the Rhine—
 Perhaps she'd the knack
 To float o'er on her back—

Or, perhaps crossed the old bridge of boats at Brisach
 (Which Vauban, some years after, secured from attack
 By a bastion of stone which the Germans call "Wacke").⁹
 All I know is, she took not so much as a snack,
 Till, hungry and worn, feeling wretchedly ill,
 On a mountain's brow sank down the weary Odille.

I said on its "brow," but I should have said "crown,"
 For 'twas quite on the summit, bleak, barren and brown,
 And so high that 'twas frightful indeed to look down
 Upon Friburg, a place of some little renown¹⁰
 That lay at its foot: but imagine the frown
 That contracted her brow, when full many a clown
 She perceived coming up from that horrid post-town.

They had followed her trail,
 And now thought without fail,
 As little boys say, to "lay salt on her tail";¹¹
 While the Count, who knew no other law but his will,
 Swore that Hermann that evening should marry Odille.

Alas, for Odille! poor dear! what could she do?
 Her father's retainers now had her in view,
 As she found from their raising a joyous halloo;
 While the Count, riding on at the head of his crew,

wacke: coarse sandstone [German]; **clown:** peasant

In their snuff-coloured doublets and breeches of blue,
 Was huzzaing and urging them on to pursue.—
 What, indeed, *could* she do?
 She very well knew,
 If they caught her, how much she should have to go through;
 But then—she'd so shocking a hole in her shoe!
 And to go further on was impossible:—true
 She might jump o'er the precipice;—still there are few,
 In her place, who could manage their courage to screw
 Up to bidding the world such a sudden adieu.
 Alack! how she envied the birds as they flew!
 No Nassau balloon, with its wicker canoe,¹²
 Came to bear her from him she loathed worse than a Jew;
 So she fell on her knees in a terrible stew,
 Crying “Holy St. Ermengarde!
 Oh, from these vermin guard
 Her whose last hope rests entirely on you:
 Don't let Papa catch me, dear Saint;—rather kill
 At once, *sur-le-champ*, your devoted Odille!”

It's delightful to see those who strive to oppress
 Get baulked when they think themselves sure of success.
 The Saint came to the rescue!—I fairly confess
 I don't see, as a Saint, how she well could do less
 Than to get such a votary out of her mess.
 Odille had scarce closed her pathetic address
 When the rock, gaping wide as the Thames at Sheerness,¹³
 Closed again, and secured her within its recess,
 In a natural grotto,
 Which puzzled Count Otto,
 Who could not conceive where the deuce she had got to.
 'Twas her voice!—but 'twas *Vox et praeterea Nil!*
 Nor could any one guess what was gone with Odille!¹⁴

snuff-colored: yellowish-brown; **huzza (v):** shouting hurrah
sur-le-champ: on the spot, immediately [French]
vox et praeterea nil: a voice and nothing more [Latin]

Then burst from the mountain a splendour that quite
 Eclipsed, in its brilliance, the finest Bude light,
 And there stood St. Ermengarde, drest all in white,
 A palm-branch in her left hand, her beads in her right;
 While, with faces fresh gilt, and with wings burnished bright,
 A great many little boys' heads took their flight
 Above and around to a very great height,
 And seemed pretty lively considering their plight;
 Since every one saw,
 With amazement and awe,
 They could never sit down, for they hadn't *de quoi*.¹⁵
 All at the sight,
 From the knave to the knight,
 Felt a very unpleasant sensation, called fright;
 While the Saint, looking down,
 With a terrible frown,
 Said, "My Lords, you are done most remarkably brown!—
 I am really ashamed of you both;—my nerves thrill
 At your scandalous conduct to poor, dear Odille!

"Come, make yourselves scarce!—it is useless to stay,
 You will gain nothing here by a longer delay;
 'Quick! Presto! Begone!' as the conjurors say,
 For, as to the Lady, I've stowed her away
 In this hill, in a stratum of London blue clay;¹⁶
 And I shan't, I assure you, restore her to-day
 Till you faithfully promise no more to say 'Nay,'
 But declare, 'If she will be a nun, why she may.'
 For this you've my word, and I never yet broke it,
 So put that in your pipe, my Lord Otto, and smoke it!—
 One hint to your vassals;—a month at the 'Mill'¹⁷
 Shall be nuts to what they'll get who worry Odille!"

The Saint disappeared as she ended; and so
 Did the little boys' heads, which, above and below,

bude-light: a recently invented and very bright oil lamp; **de quoi:** the wherewithal, the necessary something [French]; **done brown:** beaten, made a fool of [slang; implication of "cooked overdone"]; **nuts for/to:** a source of pleasure or delight for someone [slang]



As I told you a very few stanzas ago,
Had been flying about her, and jumping Jem Crow;
Though, without any body or leg, foot or toe,
How they managed such antics I really don't know:
Be that as it may, they all "melted like snow
Off a dyke," as the Scotch say in sweet Edinbro'.

And there stood the Count,
With his men, on the mount,

jumping Jem Crow: the "Jim Crow" dance, a popular black-face minstrel performance

Just like “twenty-four jackasses all on a row.”¹⁸
 What was best to be done?—’twas a sad bitter pill—
 But gulp it he must, or else lose his Odille.

The lord of Alsace therefore altered his plan,
 And said to himself, like a sensible man,
 “I can’t do as I would,—I must do as I can;
 It will not do to lie under any Saint’s ban,
 For your hide, when you do, they all manage to tan;
 So Count Hermann must pick up some Betsy or Nan,
 Instead of my girl,—some Sue, Polly, or Fan;—
 If he can’t get the corn he must do with the bran,
 And make shift with the pot if he can’t have the pan.”

With such proverbs as these

He went down on his knees

And said, “Blessed St. Ermengarde, just as you please—
 They shall build a new convent,—I’ll pay the whole bill
 (Taking discount)—its Abbess shall be my Odille!”

There are some of my readers, I’ll venture to say,
 Who have never seen Friburg, though some of them may,
 And others, ’tis likely, may go there some day.
 Now, if ever you happen to travel that way,
 I do beg and pray,—’twill your pains well repay,—
 That you’ll take what the Cockney folks call a “po-shay”
 (Though in Germany these things are more like a dray),—
 You may reach this same hill with a single relay,—

And do look how the rock,

Through the whole of its block,

Is split open, as though by some violent shock
 From an earthquake, or lightning, or horrid hard knock
 From the club-bearing fist of some jolly old cock
 Of a Germanised giant, Thor, Woden, or Lok;¹⁹

And see how it rears

Its two monstrous great ears,—

For when once you’re between them such each side appears;

ban: a formal ecclesiastical denunciation; **“po-shay”:** a post-chaise, a type of four-wheeled carriage; **dray:** a cart for hauling heavy loads; **relay:** fresh horses

And list to the sound of the water one hears
 Drip, drip, from the fissures, like rain-drops or tears,
 —Odille’s, I believe,—which have flowed all these years;
 —I think they account for them so;—but the rill
 I’m sure is connected some way with Odille.

Adoral

Now then for a moral, which always arrives
 At the end, as the honey bees take to their hives,
 And the more one observes it the better one thrives:—
 We have all heard it said in the course of our lives,
 “Needs must when a certain old gentleman drives.”
 ’Tis the same with a lady:—if once she contrives
 To get hold of the ribands, how vainly one strives
 To escape from her lash or to shake off her gyves!
 Then let’s act like Count Otto, and, while one survives,
 Succumb to *our* She-Saints—*videlicet* wives!
 (*Aside*) That is, if one has not a “good bunch of fives.”—
 (I can’t think how that last line escaped from my quill,
 For I am sure it has nothing to do with Odille.)

Now young ladies, to you!—
 Don’t put on the shrew;
 And don’t be surprised if your father looks blue
 When you’re pert, and won’t act as he wants you to do!
 Be sure that you never elope;—there are few,—
 Believe me, you’ll find what I say to be true,—
 Who run restive, but find “as they bake they must brew,”
 And come off at the last with “a hole in their shoe”;
 Since not even Clapham, that sanctified ville,
 Can produce enough Saints to save *every* Odille.

ribands: reins; **gyves:** shackles; **videlicet:** namely [Latin]; **bunch of fives:** a fist [slang]
Clapham Saints: a loose association of Anglican social reformers and philanthropists
 based in Clapham, London

NOTES

¹**Editor's Headnote:** First published in: *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. VII (February, 1840), pp. 172–176. The stanza is one of Barham's nonce creations, handled with characteristic freedom. The length varies from eight to twenty-two lines, but each concludes with a hexameter couplet rhymed on *Odille* as the last word of the stanza. Within each stanza Barham piles on consecutive rhymes. In the stanza beginning "Alas, for Odille! poor dear! what could she do!" nineteen lines share an end-rhyme. Shorter stanzas begin with a run of four to eight consecutive terminal rhymes, with a scattering of internal rhymes thrown in for good measure. The effect is like listening to a singer holding a single note for an improbably long period. Barham's madcap rhyming keeps the reader moving at a similarly breathless pace in the chase over briar, brook and rill after the runaway Odille.

In his edition of the legends, Dalton Barham provides a note identifying his father's source: "The legend of St. Odille, and the origin of her grotto (near Freiburg, in the Black Forest), are given in Tennant's *Tour through Switzerland*, etc." The reference is to: *A Tour through Parts of the Netherlands, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Savoy, and France, in the Year 1821–2* by Charles Tennant, published 1824, vol. 1, pp. 433–436. A few paragraphs from this source material are worth quoting for comparison to Barham's lively comic inventions:

Odille had already ascended half way up one of the high mountains of the forest, looking down upon the Rhine, when worn out with fatigues to which she had been little used, she seated herself upon a rock, and lifting up her eyes to heaven, joined her hands in prayer. But presently, startled by a distant sound of horses' feet, she looked around, and beheld an approaching troop of horsemen drest in her father's colours.

She hastily arose to save herself by rapid flight. Fear at first acted like wings upon her nimble feet, but soon her weak and gentle nature yielded, and she fell exhausted upon a rock.

The horsemen advancing with a rapid pace were now near upon the spot, when Odille, trembling, lifted up her hands to implore deliverance from heaven. Suddenly the rock opened! Odille entered, and instantly the rock closed!

Presently she heard the sound of horses' feet above her, and her father's voice calling her by name.

"My father," answered Odille, and Attich [her father] gazed around in mute surprise. "Odille" cried he again, and he was seized with terror on hearing a second time the voice of his daughter issuing as if from the rock beneath him. "You persecute him who protects me," replied Odille, and she then related what had passed. Attich now recognized the will of a superior power, and swore to respect his daughter's vow, and to build for her a convent. Upon this the rock opened, and Odille came forth, arrayed in a garment of celestial light. She fell into her father's arms, and besought his blessing and forgiveness.

The rock has remained opened from that day, and in the grotto which had hidden Odille rises a medicinal spring, possessing many virtues.

²Who is Saint Ermengarde and where is her shrine? She could be the eleventh-century German Saint Irmgardis (Irmgard) of Süchteln, but her remains in Cologne Cathedral would be at quite some distance for Odille to visit, even in good shoes. Another possibility is the still more remote Irmgard of Chiemsee, a ninth-century Benedictine

abbess. Barham most likely invented this saint, giving her a plausible name that is both medieval and Teutonic.

³ Barham's variation on the familiar "drink like a fish."

⁴ A parody of "Lochinvar" from Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) canto v, stanza xii:
"She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush, and scour;
They'll have fleet steeds that follow," quoth young Lochinvar.

⁵ Phaedrus (c. 15 BC–c. 50 AD) retold Aesop's fables in Latin verse. John Gay's *Fables* (1727) includes an unrelated story called "The Hare and Friends."

⁶ *Slick* (adverb/intensifier: smoothly, quickly, completely) was a medieval word (from *sleek*) that survived as dialect in Barham's Kent and elsewhere. It became current in early nineteenth-century America, then passed back to England as a popular colloquialism; *right away* for "at once" was an Americanism commented on by Dickens in his *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842).

⁷ "Tarnation" for "damnation" is US slang, very current in the early nineteenth century; "chap" at this time was still a relatively fresh British colloquialism for "fellow."

⁸ The "things with a frill / Round the ankle" were pantalettes: frilly drawers or knickerbockers worn under a skirt by nineteenth-century women during physical activity.

⁹ Neuf-Brisach, a fortified town in Alsace, designed by Sébastien Leprestre de Vauban, a military engineer; construction began in 1698. Breisach is on the opposite bank, in Germany; the Rhine was crossed here by a bridge of boats.

¹⁰ Odille has climbed the Schlossberg overlooking Freiburg im Breisgau in Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

¹¹ Small children were told that they could catch a bird by laying salt on its tail, and the phrase became proverbial. Barham works a display of proverbs into his rhymes in this legend—at least ten in all, and probably more.

¹² The Nassau balloon was one of the attractions at Vauxhall Gardens (see "The 'Monstre' Balloon," pp. 287–293).

¹³ The port of Sheerness (Isle of Sheppey, Kent) on the Thames estuary, where the river's width is about five miles.

¹⁴ Samuel Pegge, *Anecdotes of the English language* (pub. 1814, p. 247): "The London expression of enquiry after any body is—'What is *gone with* such-a-one?'"

¹⁵ The frisky little angels who can never sit down are putti heads or bodiless cherubim, consisting of baby heads with wings, familiar from the decorative arts (and from old-fashioned Valentine's Day cards). Thackeray had a similar take on them:

I have often thought that those little cherubs who are carved on tombstones and are represented as possessing a head and wings only, are designed to console little children—usher and beadle-belaboured—and say "there is no flogging where we are." From their conformation, it is impossible. (*Punch* 1845, vol. VIII, p. 45)

- ¹⁶London blue clay: a stiff, thick clay substrate, through which the Thames Tunnel was constructed at great cost and difficulty (begun 1825, completed 1843).
- ¹⁷The “Mill” alludes to the treadmill developed by Sir William Cubitt in 1817 and widely adopted by English prisons as a means of teaching “habits of industry” to offenders. Working “the everlasting stairs,” roughly equivalent to climbing over eight thousand feet a day, was severely exhausting.
- ¹⁸The comic song “Four and Twenty Fiddlers All in a Row” from Thomas Durfey’s *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1720) lent itself to topical parodies.
- ¹⁹Thor: Nordic god of thunder who warred against the giants; Woden (Odin): the god of both war and wisdom; Lok (Loki): a shape-shifting trickster god.