

THE DEVIL'S BRIDGE

PONT-SAINT-MARTIN

Over the centuries, the infernal architect built such a large number of bridges that it would be too long to draw up a list: in the Aosta Valley alone, several specimens attest to his tireless activity. But the devil's bridge par excellence is the one that binds the memory of its origin to Saint Martin and gives its name, in turn, to the centre of Pont-Saint-Martin.

Passing through Aosta, one day the Bishop of Tours found himself precluded from leaving the valley because of the collapse of the bridge over the Lys river, which the devil prevented from being rebuilt. Moved by pity for the people of the village and eager to continue his journey because the Pope was waiting for him in Rome, the Man of God came to terms with the devil and ended up accepting his proposal: he would grant him a soul if he could build a bridge capable of defying the centuries, by that same night. Whoever first set foot on it would be Hell's prey. The devil set to work, and the bridge was finished at the break of dawn, solid and wide, suspended over the abyss with its bold archway: so clearly the work of Satan that no trace of a cross appeared on it, either in the interlocking of the stones or in the solid iron keys, firmly embedded with hooks.

At the head of the new construction, the evil one waited impatiently. The saint approached it to ascertain the validity of the work, but he was careful not to set foot on it. Instead, with a swift gesture he threw a fine piece of meat before him, at the same time letting the little dog he hid under his cloak loose. The little animal rushed at the food, under the incredulous gaze of the deceived demon: that was his reward, the first to step on the bridge he had built. He grabbed the animal indignantly and hastened to hide his rage from hell, opening a gap in the parapet that the villagers tried repeatedly to wall up in vain. The fault could only be repaired when it was decided to insert a tabernacle into the parapet, to close the breach and invoke God's protection on the wayfarers. But some people still maintain that whoever crosses the bridge in mortal sin is caught by the devil, who takes him or her away.

Taken from: T. GATTO CHANU, *Fiabe e leggende della Valle d'Aosta*, Rome, Newton & Compton Editions, 2004