

Richard Dübell – The Book of Darkness

(Translation pages 7–18, 77–80)

Chapter 1

The madman stormed out of the alley and ran yelling at Quirin. "Is it paid off?" he cried, his voice cracking.

"Is it paid off?" His roar echoed in the silence of the night reflected back from the house walls. In his hand he waved a flaming torch, leaving a trail of light behind it.

Quirin backed away until he was stopped by the massive wooden cart behind him. He was so startled by the sudden appearance of the man that his heart was pounding. Although he had no idea what was going on, just one thing was certain: anyone who ran screaming in the middle of the night through the streets of Salzburg, could not be quite right in the head.

"Is it paid off?" cried the madman again.

Behind him Quirin could see two city guards dashing out of the alley. They were panting heavily as they ran but they were too far away. The man would reach Quirin before they caught him.

"Is it paid off?"

Quirin looked at Master Luke and the two workmen with him. The three men were standing by the carthorses staring at the man rushing towards them with their mouths wide open.

"Stop him!" Gaspd one of the city guards. He and his companion were obviously ordinary citizens who reinforced the city guard during night duty. They wore helmets and weapons, but they did not have the red and white jerkins worn by the regular guard troops. And they were anything but well trained.

"Is it repaid?" The lunatic was nearly upon them - a tall, stout man in expensive robes. The torches lit up his reddened cheeks, spotty skin and stubbly chin. His eyes were as wide open as his mouth. Tears ran down his cheeks, saliva dripped from his mouth. His legs were pumping. He was faster than his stocky body suggested.

One of the two city guards stopped, gasped, raised his crossbow and took aim wavering. "Stand still, or I ..."

The crossbow bolt broke free with a bang that made Quirin wince. He felt something whistle past his ear making him spin round. The bolt was a few inches away from his head, stamped into the wooden side of the cart. The madman ran on, unharmed. "... shoot!" Gaspd the shooter. "Oh." He squinted at the crossbow, as if it were to blame for his miserable aim.

"Hey," shouted Master Luke.

The madman changed direction five steps before Quirin, as if he had only just noticed the boy, the cart, the horses and the three men standing there. Quirin clearly heard his wheezing as a mixture of smells - sweat, oil and smoke - reached his nose.

"Stop him, for heaven's sake!" gasped the first of the city guards.

Quirin was stunned. He saw himself step forward as the man ran past and as he did so he stretched out a leg to trip him.

With flailing arms the big man flew through the air. The torch whirled beside him. He bounced on the paving stones and slid on his belly a little further along the alley. The firey torch threw out sparks as it spun and bounced on the ground like a wheel of fire, and then it rolled across the cobblestones until it finally came to a stop.

As the madman had just started to pull himself together with a groan, the first city guard caught up and threw himself upon him. The madman struck out at the guard and then with the strength of a giant picked himself up from the ground. The guard clung onto his back like a rider on a bucking horse. The second city guard ran up, dropped the crossbow and threw himself onto the wild man. The three of them fell back to the ground.

The man squirmed and moaned. "Is it paid off?" he cried. "Tell me whether it is paid off! At the mercy of Christ! Is it paid off? "

The city guards dragged him to his feet. He shook with all his might and they had trouble holding him still. His gaze wandered around maniacally and eventually rested on Quirin, who was standing there uncomfortably, his leg throbbing painfully from the blow inflicted when the huge man tripped over it.

"Is it paid off?" he moaned. His eyes bored into Quirin's heart.

"Yes," Quirin said, unable to stop himself at the insistence of the lunatic.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," sobbed the fat man and his body sagged. "Holy Mary, mother of God." He began to cry.

Master Luke stepped up and pushed Quirin aside. One of his two aides pulled the crossbow bolt out of the side of the cart and tapped his fingers on the sharp iron tip. The second chap whistled through his teeth. Quirin felt a sudden weakness creeping up his legs. The bolt had missed him by a hair! He tensed his knees to keep himself from falling and he tried to quell his trembling.

"What the hell is this?" growled Master Luke. "Why did you shoot at my people?"

The city guard who had fired the crossbow, gestured apologetically. "I shot at the guy here," he gasped.

"Not very successfully," replied the master.

"What did he do?" Quirin heard himself asking. He could not take his eyes off this man who was now huddled on the floor sobbing.

Master Luke gave him a blow to the back of the head. "Shut your mouth when adults talk!"

The Master was a tall, broad-shouldered man with hands like shovels and a square-cut beard that gave him the appearance of a holy prophet. "I am Master Luke Guldenmund, the Printer, and I want to know what this wretch has done."

"He has set fire to the house of the Dutch oil traders," said the one of the city guards.

Quirin blinked in confusion. The fire had been the talk of Salzburg over the past days. With help from the bishop's soldiers the people in the neighbourhood had been able to bring the fire under control quickly, but the fear was not so easy to control: such a fire could spread so fast into other peoples' houses and entire neighbourhoods could be devastated! The fire had apparently broken out in the stairwell of the oil traders' house, not in the kitchen, nor the living room with the fireplace. In addition, they had found iron barrel hoops that had warped in the heat as if a small barrel of petrol had been burned in the stairwell - clearly an indication of arson.

"That was a week ago!" Master Luke said.

"True, Master Guldenmund," panted the city guardian. "Only - this evening he tried it again."

"What? Again, in the house of the Dutchman? "

The city guard shook his head. He tried to lift the sobbing man, but he immediately fell heavily back onto the ground. Master Luke made a brief gesture. His two companions came forward to give him a hand.

Again Quirin took a blow to the head from his Master. "Stop gawping!"

The four men were finally able to heave the culprit to his feet. His eyes fell on Quirin.

"Is it really paid off?" he whispered. Quirin swallowed. He turned away.

»Which house did he set fire to today?" asked Master Luke.

"The Bishop's Palace."

The Master stared at the guard in disbelief. Quirin hardly believed his ears. Archbishop Johann III was the ruler of the city of Salzburg. He was not exactly popular with the independent Salzburger patricians and merchants who had in fact themselves chosen him to be their mayor, but the simple people respected him. No one would have dared to touch a hair on his head. Not even if he were walking alone at night through the streets. And now someone had tried to burn down his palace!

"This chap is insane," Master Luke said. With some satisfaction, he added, "But he will hang!"

"And you, Master Guldenmund?" said the city guard, evidently trying to regain some of his authority, "Where are you headed with such a great load?"

"To the Admont monastery," answered the Master jerking his thumb at the cart, "with my printing press!"

The city guards seemed impressed. Everyone in Salzburg knew of the mysterious printing machine of Master Guldenmund, which was so different from the presses of his competitors in that it could be disassembled, transported anywhere by cart and reassembled.

"The abbot wishes to reprint his manuscript collection," Master Luke said, not without pride. "We have a long way to go. Therefore we are up early. "

The city guard nodded and without even a blink of appreciation towards Quirin, he said: "Thank you for your help, Master."

"You're welcome," said Master Luke, also without looking at Quirin.

The city guards led the madman away.

"Enough of this lunacy," exclaimed Master Luke glaring at Quirin and his two companions. "We must get on."

Quirin stared after the city guards and the madman. He had expected to see fear or hatred in the features of the man. But he was mistaken.

Is it paid off?

What in the world did that mean?

Master Luke gave him a third blow to the back of the head. »Do you need a special invitation, slacker?"

Quirin hastily climbed up to the wagon seat and squeezed himself in between the other two men. As the cart rolled away he looked back at the guards and their prisoner until they were swallowed up in the mouth of the next alley.

"Wouldn't I like to know what the devil has written in that madman's book of life," chuckled one of the workmen. "Falling flat on his face – daft idiot - brought down by the puny peg of a snot nosed little brat ..." An elbow hit Quirin in the side, but he already knew that it was himself who was meant by the mention of "brat".

"What do you mean?" Said the second fellow.

"Never heard of the book of life? Everyone has one. The devil writes down every crap you have ever made in your life. Then, at the Last Judgement these are placed against you in the pan of the weighing scales. "

"Just imagine what he has just written up in Quirin's book of life: Almost had his turnip shot away, because a fat constable was too stupid to aim! Hey, Quirin? Or don't you care what the devil writes about you in your book? "

"He probably does it on the lime tree leaves, the same ones that he wipes his arse with!"

The two fellows roared with laughter until the Master ordered them to be quiet.

And so the cart with Master Luke's mysterious book printing machine from Salzburg rolled on, into Dachstein mountain range and the valley of the Enns, towards the rich and famous Admont monastery. In the higher elevations of the mountains snow still gleamed in the starlight. It was early spring. It was the year of the Lord 1486. It was the largest order ever for which Quirin accompanied his master.

But Quirin Klingseis, thirteen years old, thought only of the arsonist. The man had been caught in the act. He had tried to set fire to the bishop's palace. He would be sentenced to death. He would hang.

So why then, in his face, had there been just pure relief to be seen?

Chapter 2

Quirin had never in his whole life been further from his hometown Salzburg than the episcopal forests owned by the bishop – a distance that could be done on foot, back and forth, in a day. His father had taken him a few times when he had needed to negotiate with the forest supervisor purchases of birch or pine. He needed the wood for his work. Already, in the late morning, Quirin was farther from his home than he had ever been before. He felt no homesickness. Instead, he felt a kind of sadness that nothing now was like it was before.

Quirin's father was a woodturner and turned out whatever he got orders for: spinning wheels, tool handles, chair legs, plates, cups, wooden nails for roof trusses, spigots for choir stalls, buttons ... nothing with which one might become rich or famous. His workshop was small. He was in the guild, the union of all Salzburg woodturners, but he was by no means important. Quirin's older brother, the firstborn in the family, had a desire to learn the new craft of printing and had little interest in his father's workshop. His father had no objections at all to this. The workshop, though, was good enough for Quirin, the second son.

Not only did he not mind it, Quirin loved being in the workshop. He loved taking a piece of rough natural wood, turning it, crafting it and working it until it metamorphosed into something beautiful, something that was not just beautiful in its form but also beautiful to use. The handle of a workshop handtool nestling in the palm of his hand possessed a beauty. It was handsome. A spinning wheel running almost silently looked and sounded beautiful. A button that attracted the fingers to run repeatedly over it because it was so smooth was as beautiful as a rare gem.

There was change to come, however. For a while his life was not to be his own. It was a life which had to balance profit so that his brother could go into studying. Quirin's life was no more than that of a lump of lead which had to be the same weight to counterbalance the gold in the other pan.

Quirin's brother had begun studying with Master Luke Guldenmund – as a printer's apprentice. It quickly became clear that Quirin's father was unable to pay the expensive training costs, even when he began making the spare parts for the Master Printer's presses. Eventually, Master Luke had suggested that he should take both sons into his care, the elder as an apprentice, the younger as a laborer earning the monies needed for the dues for the elder. Master Luke had seen them coming, he had it all

worked out. When all was considered, Quirin's father would have to pay dearly, and that included spare parts, and given the youth and inexperience, and thus the initial worthlessness of Quirin's work, the contract would have to run for twenty years.

Quirin's father and Master Luke shook hands on the deal.

Twenty years is, when you're twelve, a long time. It is like a lifetime. Only one year had passed. To Quirin it seemed like a hundred.

He received a sharp jab in the side. "Hey, are you dreaming?"

Chapter 13 (pages 77–80 – middle to end)

"A Book of Darkness! Don't you know what that is? You - a book printer – of all people you should know!"

"A book with black letters on black pages?" suggested Quirin not even knowing where that comment came from.

Anna snorted contemptuously. "Haha, very funny! You wouldn't be making jokes if you knew anything about The Book of Darkness or what the hell might be written in yours."

Suddenly Quirin was reminded by Anna's words. Mertel and Endres had been saying something about a book during their departure from Salzburg. "In the Book of Life," he said breathlessly, "all your actions in your life are listed, and at the judgment ..."

"Yes, yes," Anna cut in loudly, "but that is not what I am talking about. Do you really have no idea? You can read about the Book of Life in the Bible. I am talking about the Book of Darkness. There is nothing about the Book of Darkness in the Bible. And do you know why? Because God's Bible had already been written before the Devil invented the Book of Darkness."

Anna breathed out. Now, as she spoke, she was quieter and less patronizing. Quirin had the suspicion that she had been shouting purely to cover up the fear in her voice and body. "Your whole life is constantly being weighed," she said quietly. "The salt that the miners dig out of the mountain is measured against the tithe we deliver to the monastery. The sins we commit are measured against the penance imposed upon us for confession ..."

"The training of one brother against the dirty work of another," Quirin gasped.

Anna did not seem to have heard. "For everything there is a counterweight. The Book of Life records our deeds, so that the Lord Jesus can decide on the Last Day if we may enter paradise. The names of those who are admitted are written into the Book of Eternal Bliss. And of course there needs to be something set on the other side of the scales to counterbalance that book."

"And that is ... the Book of Darkness?"

Anna nodded. Her eyes, large now, glittered in the morning light that was streaming in through the entrance of the barn. Her white-blond hair shimmered.

"Those names written by the Devil are the names of the people who belong to him. Their fate is to burn forever in hell. And sometimes the Devil searches out servants to work in damnation for him."

Quirin's throat tightened. In his mind's eye he was remembering how Master Luke had jumped to his death. Just before he had run away from his pursuers he had shown them the samples book. But why? Because it looked from a distance like the stolen chest? But the Viscount, sitting on his horse, had not been ten paces from Master Luke. He must certainly have recognized that it was a book. And foaming with anger just like the river Enns that carried the book away the Viscount took off on his horse and chased after it.

Quirin's eyes searched for the box. What was hidden in it? His heart began to pound with fear once more.

"Abbot Anthony is a servant of the Devil," whispered Anna. "Satan has given him the power to write names in the Book of Darkness. When he writes in your name, you are eternally damned! "

Quirin could not tear his eyes away from the box. When he had shaken it, it had felt as though there was something heavy, like a book, within. The Book. The Book which the Viscount had thought he was chasing when he charged after Master Luke and his samples book in the turbulent waters of the river Enns.

The Book ...

... of Darkness?

"What have you been up to?" asked Anna in the resulting silence as Quirin cringed in terror.

"What?" He gasped.

"What have you done? Why is the Viscount looking for you? Half the night he and his men have been tearing people from their beds, searching all the hiding places and interviewing each and every individual. Do you have something that has been stolen from the monastery?" She pointed to the wooden casket. "Like that thing that you have been staring at all the time?"

Before, Quirin would have defiantly replied: *What's it to you?* Instead he felt the enormous weight of events pressing down directly on his soul. He was completely on his own - and suddenly here, next to him was a person who was interested in him. He did not know if he could trust Anna Hutmann or not, but at that moment he did not care. He had to unburden his heart, provided that the fear did not stifle him.

"Master Luke is dead," he whispered, and then the whole story broke out of his mouth, bit by bit, up to the point of his terrible suspicion. "I think in the chest - is the Book of Darkness"!