

# FRANZ VON DINGELSTEDT

JOHN GUTENBERG, FIRST  
MASTER PRINTER

Franz Dingelstedt

**John Gutenberg, First Master Printer**

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# **Franz von Dingelstedt**

## **John Gutenberg, First Master Printer / His Acts and Most Remarkable Discourses and his Death**

### **Chapter I**

#### **As how John Fust, master printer in the city of Maïence, gave his daughter Christine to wife to Peter Schoeffer his partner, and what came of it**

A wedding! how much joy is contained in that word! but even more in the thing itself! You, however, who live in these days, can hardly form an idea of what a wedding was in the good old times, for you possess only the shadow, and even that is of the palest hue. Guests, among whom the husband and the minister appear dressed in black from head to foot, a large room furnished in the modern style, a very prosaic square table, on which, after the marriage contract is signed, the repast is served up, the whole accompanied with the stalest and most common-place compliments, the coldest ceremonies... No, no! a fig for your modern weddings!

Reader, you ought to have found yourself at the appointed hour at the great St. Humbert at Maïence, in the street now called La Rue des Savetiers, and which then bore the name of St. Quentin, for that which I relate to you happened in the year of our Lord fourteen hundred and sixty-one, before Maïence became a federal fortress. That was indeed a wedding in the true sense of the word! A grand, a noble wedding! At the moment when the clock struck twelve, the procession, attired in most superb garments, came out of the church of St. Quentin, and, having turned the corner of the Rue des Savetiers, took the road to the house of the great St. Humbert. All along the route it was accompanied by the joyous acclamations of the crowd; citizens, their wives and daughters, opened their small casements, and put out their heads to gaze, and the little boys in the street maliciously ran behind the wedding guests, trying to jeer and to mock at the bridegroom, as is still the custom in these days – one, indeed, of the only customs left us of olden times.

The sun shed his brightest and warmest rays on the house of the great St. Humbert, for it was on the 14th day of August that Christine Fust, the worthy daughter of the printer John Fust, espoused her father's partner, Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim. On that day, too, the house of the printer was open to all comers; those presses, generally so black and so mysterious, were now crowned with flowers; the screws, the levers, the timber, groaned no longer under the brawny arms of the workman, and the paper and parchment remained neglected in a corner. All the inmates were gone to the church of St. Quentin to be present at the marriage; the workmen, dressed in their finest clothes, stood ranged in a goodly group around their chief, who held firmly aloft the banner of the Corporation, ornamented with the Imperial Eagle. The Burgomaster himself, Jacob Fust, a master goldsmith, brother of the printer, and rich beyond belief, had come in person to do honour to the wedding of his niece. And how can we find fault with the father of the bride, who walked proudly at the head of the band, arm-in-arm with his brother the grandee and the renowned goldsmith, if he cast now and then on the assembled crowd looks in which disdain was somewhat mingled. It is true that he smiled more benignly at the windows from whence certain silvery voices were heard to cry out as he passed, "We wish you much happiness, Master Fust!" Or again, "May peace and a blessing rest on the house of the printer!"

To speak truly, it must be confessed that the couple who had just been united were not in their first youth, and if the bridegroom had nothing in common with Adonis or Apollo, the bride on her side was far from representing that type of beauty which the ancients have bequeathed to us, and

which may still be seen in the gallery of the Medici. Let not this surprise you, reader! Peter Schoeffer in 1449 was already renowned in the Academy of Paris for his skill in caligraphy; he had even then rendered great services to Master Fust, who chose him for his son-in-law; so you perceive that at the time of which we are speaking there was no longer any question of youth or sprightliness for Schoeffer. Christine, on her part, had no doubt chosen her husband for his moral qualities; she had declared herself ready to bestow her hand on the homeless stranger on the day on which he, who was then only her father's workman, should lay at her feet, reposing on a velvet cushion, a copy of the admirable Psalter of the year 1457. Yes, it was not until then that Christine consented to surrender her hand to that of Schoeffer – to that hand which had designed the initials of the Psalter, which had illuminated them in such brilliant colours, and had arranged the beautiful types, the ink of which, it is maliciously said, still clung to his fingers more or less.

The betrothal dated from the year 1457; but, as the father had insisted on proving the character and the talent of his workman, he had made it a condition that the two volumes of the great Latin Bible should be completed before the fulfilment of the marriage. On St. John's day, 1462, the finishing touch was put to the work. Peter Schoeffer wrote upon the last page to the effect that the task was ended; he printed his father-in-law's arms alongside, and on the following 14th of August the book was exposed to the public, at the same time that the marriage was announced; John Fust slyly remarking that he brought on that day two treasures to light, the one conjointly with Schoeffer, the other he generously made over to him.

To the two treasures were allotted their separate place of honour. Christine dazzled the eyes of the public, robed in rich crimson velvet, such as was seldom worn in those days by citizens' daughters. Her little white wreath was attached to her hair by a string of Venetian pearls, presented on that very morning by her uncle the Burgomaster, and it must be allowed the pearls became her well. The Bible, on its part, had its silver clasps well rubbed and polished, and, being placed on a table, it shone, to the edification and admiration of all beholders.

If at the end of the table where the Burgomaster presided, dividing the wedding guests on his right and left, there reigned a certain degree of solemnity, it was made up for at the lower end, round the long board prepared for the workmen, where the most noisy and expansive gaiety prevailed. That patriarchal custom which required that the head of the family, after having tasted of a dish, should join in a prayer with all the guests, that custom, at the time of which we speak, had even in the richest families fallen into disuse, only when, as on the present occasion, a dignitary happened to be at table, a special gravity was observed, and a great decorum maintained. "Noblesse oblige," says the proverb, so we must not be surprised if the Burgomaster, instead of taking part in the joyous hilarity of his relatives, and especially of his workmen, looked around him with anxious and pensive eyes. The cares of government clouded his countenance, and occasionally wrinkled his fine lofty brow.

In truth, alarming days were hovering over the good city of Maïence. Two crosiers were clashing rudely for precedence, both being competitors for the Archi-episcopal throne; and, as generally happens in such conflicts, the blows fell less heavily, and in less number, on the backs of the actual combatants than on those of the victims who were the objects of contest. A year previously the Archbishop Dietrich d'Isembourg had been deprived of his see for failing in proper respect towards his spiritual pastor, and Adolfe of Nassau, appointed Archbishop in his room, was preparing seriously, arms in hand, to expel a predecessor who seemed far from disposed to yield his post with a good grace. All the Rhine country, the Palatinate, Bavaria, Würtemberg, and even Brandenburg itself, had taken part in the quarrel, for one side or the other; in the city of Maïence Dietrich d'Isembourg reckoned partisans who were still holding office side by side with those who secretly favoured the new order of things, and rivals and enemies met together full of an animosity which they took but little pains to dissimulate.

To this cause of dissension was added the quarrel between the citizens and the nobles – a quarrel which dated forty years back, and was even now far from being quelled; descendants of the emigrant

families ran about the town exciting the malcontents, they themselves only awaiting an opportunity to regain, in the general confusion, the privileges which they had lost.

These were the grave matters which pre-occupied the mind of the Burgomaster of Maïence, the great Jacob Fust, and left him but little leisure to think of anything but his cares at the wedding of his niece Christine. Did a noisy *vivat* make itself heard at the lower end of the table, was a joyous song resounding, near the entrance door, in honour of the newly-married couple, the Burgomaster would raise himself anxiously on his great carved oaken arm-chair, and, commanding silence, exclaim, throwing his head back, "These are sad times in which we live;" and his brother the printer would echo his words, throwing back his head in like manner. As for the bridegroom he was in the height of good humour, for the pre-occupations of his uncle the Burgomaster affected him but very slightly. "Eh! what then," said he to the assembled guests, "are we not here in our free city of Maïence, under the protection of the pastoral staff of His Grace our Archbishop, whom may God protect? Let my Lord of Nassau intrigue, and cabal as he will, as long as the Rhine flows between him and us, as long as our good walls defend us, we may laugh at his Grace; and moreover our art, our beautiful art, does it not flourish more and more every year? Have we not five good presses in the workshop? Have we not fifty vigorous arms employed in our service? Come, come, my gracious uncle, come, worthy father, put away your fears, and your scruples; fill up your glasses, and second me when I drink to 'the noble art of printing,' with 'three times three.'"

The guests responded to this appeal, and the noise of the *vivat* had scarcely subsided when a great disturbance was heard on the stairs adjoining the banquet-room, and a confusion of voices and footsteps, which seemed to indicate a quarrel. The host was about to rise and go in person to the spot from whence the noise proceeded, to call the disputants to order, when the door was suddenly thrown open. On the threshold appeared two workmen, dragging a third individual by his arms, and who, to judge from his age and appearance, was only an apprentice; "Look, master," said the eldest of the men, "here is a fellow who dares to disturb your festival by coming even into your house to abuse your art, and your noble trade." "Yes, it is true," continued the second workman, "but it shall not be permitted, were I never again to touch a type, or the cheek of a pretty maiden!"

"It is the Strasburger who lies!" exclaimed the young boy, making vigorous efforts to free himself from the gripe of his accusers. "I said not a word against you or your art; it is they, on the contrary, who slandered your son-in-law, and even your daughter dame Christine; and you see, master, that was more than I could bear, so my French blood rebelled." "Let peace be in this house," replied Fust, in a commanding tone; "and you Strasburger, who are the eldest, you speak first, and let go your hold of the Parisian!"

"Master, we were down below there, sitting drinking our beer, as your worshipful company, saving your presence, is now seated drinking your wine; we sang, we drank, we laughed, not a soul among us thought of quarrelling; suddenly, I had just delivered myself of a little *bon-mot*, such as is not unusual at our German weddings –"

"Strasburger, what was that *bon-mot*? Come, out with it frankly!"

"I said," replied the workman, hesitating, "I said –"

Here the Parisian, with the vivacity of a Frenchman, interrupted the other, and repeated the *bon-mot* in question – a witticism so strongly seasoned, that, although it might be allowable at a country wedding, it could not be repeated here without a breach of good manners.

This unexpected communication was received with a violent burst of laughter from the male part of the company, including even the worthy Burgomaster Jacob Fust, the bridegroom alone felt his anger rising, and, having some difficulty in restraining himself, he bounded from his seat, while the cheeks of his gentle better-half, Christine, became of a deeper hue than the velvet of the dress she wore.

The Strasburger, emboldened by the success of his *bon-mot*, and by the excellent reception it had met with, cast a look of triumphant satisfaction on the little Parisian, who stood by speechless

and astounded. At this moment a bashful glance directed to him by dame Christine, unseen by all the rest, rewarded him for his chivalrous conduct. The old workman continued his harangue.

“Master, you see, it is on account of this innocent jest that the fellow has made this disturbance; he pretended that the honour of your house was compromised, as well as that of the dame, your daughter, which God defend from injury; he struck the table violently with his fist, and, in fact, behaved like a madman. The Frankforter, who stands there, tried by a paternal remonstrance to bring him to reason, and we were once more seated behind our goblets, when, behold, the young good-for-nothing recommences. We were drinking unanimously to the health of the art of printing, that it might flourish at least a thousand years, when all on a sudden, with his two little spindle legs, he leaps on the table, upsets the goblets, and exclaims that we must not forget him who first invented the trade, who was the author of all our good fortune, him who revealed our beautiful art to the world at large. We both opened our mouths wide – may the Lord forgive us our sin – the wretch told us he was going to speak of the Holy Trinity, when, behold, he calls out, with all the force of his lungs, ‘Long live Gutenberg; long live Master Jean Gutenberg, of Maïence!’ The Frankforter then seized him by one leg, I by the other, we dragged him down from the table and brought him here. Now he stands before you, he who was not ashamed in your own house to give all the honour and praise to Gutenberg.” The Strasburger was silent. At the name of Gutenberg the company became visibly embarrassed; the countenances of some of the guests evinced an ironical pleasure. Peter Schoeffer, looking down, busied himself awkwardly in readjusting the frill of his shirt, while Master Fust, not caring particularly to meet the fiery eye of the little Parisian, turned alternately from one workman to the other.

“Children,” replied he, after a moment’s painful pause, “children, you are but simpletons after all; what is the use of troubling your heads, on a day like this, with such nonsense? Leave Gutenberg to himself, and let us enjoy in peace the good which God has given us!”

“Master,” exclaimed the little Frenchman, in a lofty tone, and interrupting Fust, without hesitation, “that is what we have done; but allow me to say one word, one only, with an honesty worthy of the great art which we promote; if all this company thinks to-day of you, and of Master Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim, of his letter-founding, of his skill in engraving, in illuminating, in printing, ought we, on that account, to forget the man to whom we owe all that we now have? That is why, I say it again, and may all those who feel as they ought to do, say it after me, ‘Long live Gutenberg of Maïence, the first printer of the world, long may he live!’”

With three bounds, and before he could be prevented, the audacious boy reached the table, seized one of the filled wine-cups, and emptied it at a draught. He had just laid it down again, with a crash, when Master Fust, red with anger, pushed him roughly aside, “Fellow,” he exclaimed, in a voice husky with vexation, “what have you done?” “What you should have done instead of me,” replied the little Frenchman, without being disconcerted, and becoming more calm in proportion that his master grew more excited. “How! you have the audacity to come here and jeer us in the presence of our guests, and, above all, in the presence of my brother, the most worthy Burgomaster? To the door, to the door, with the little brawler! Go, go, to your Gutenberg, see if his great presses are at work; go, run through the streets and highways with your hero. To the door with him, I say!” The printer threw a few pieces of small money to the Parisian, and with an angry gesture pointed to the door. “Master Fust,” replied the other, while collecting the coins which were scattered over the floor, “if I pick up this money, it is to take what you owe me; but I cannot go to Master Gutenberg, and that you know as well as I do. Since the day he was obliged to give up his establishment to you, for a debt of a hundred, or a couple of hundred dollars, which you lent him at a high interest, he has not been in a position to set up any press worth speaking of. So it always is in this world. To the one, head and intelligence, to the other money!”

These last words were scarcely uttered, when a blow from a fist fell on the cheek of the little Frenchman. Master John Fust, incapable of further self-control, had struck the blow; and, if Schoeffer



and the two other workmen had not interfered, a serious scene might have ensued, to the cost of the audacious boy, and in presence of the guests. In an instant the whole assembly was in an uproar; Christine took refuge, trembling, in the arms of her husband; the guests swore, threatened, jeered, murmured; the workmen in the meanwhile had all the trouble in the world to restrain the little Frenchman, whose clear silvery voice called out through the crowd, “Master Fust, you have no right to strike me! you had not the right even when I was in your service, you have it still less now. I insist on your giving me satisfaction!”

“Turn out the brawler, turn him out,” said the Burgomaster, in a solemn tone; but the workmen tried in vain to execute the order.

“I shall go of my own accord, and alone,” said the little Parisian, grumbling, “as soon as these German fists have loosened their hold of me, not before. Yes, I shall go straight to Master Gutenberg, and if he has no work to give me at his presses, well, I would rather untie for him the strings of his shoes, than remain any longer in a house where one is forbidden to speak out one’s thoughts in liberty. You, Fust, you, Schoeffer, what would you be without that Gutenberg, whom you have robbed of his goods! O, cursed be the false, the inhospitable threshold! And you who live under this roof, take care lest the hymeneal torch lighted this day change not into a burning flambeau, which shall swallow up, under its wings of flame, the ruins of your ill-gotten wealth!”

During this allocution, uttered with all the earnestness of passion, the two workmen had dragged the boy towards the door, resisting all the way. One kick, and he rolled down the staircase, carrying with him the Frankforter and the Strasburger. Schoeffer shut the door on the disputants, reconducted Christine, with much care and solicitude, to her arm-chair, tried to calm his father-in-law, and succeeded in restoring, at least, an appearance of calm to the festival, and to the guests, who had been first surprised, and then alarmed, at this scene.

## Chapter II

### **What John Gutenberg, Master printer, said, and what he did, while Peter Schoeffer was taking to wife the demoiselle Christine; all which should interest the reader**

If you have not been spoiled, reader, by the sight of the fine rooms of Messrs. Brockhaus and Hadnel, those *coryphées* of the present day of the art of typography, who draw off their books on Stanhope presses, in frames of highly polished wood, fastened with bright iron screws, perhaps you will not feel any repugnance to follow me into the low dark abode to which I am about to introduce you. We enter. The night is mild and beautiful, the moon's silvery beams rest gently on the undulations of the eternally flowing Rhine, a light breeze trembles through the vine leaves, the deep shadows of the houses conceal here and there the streets of old Maïence. But why should we occupy ourselves with such matters? Did the old man with silver hair, with his head bending over the table, and given up body and soul to his work, occupy himself with them? Where were his workmen? They were out of doors enjoying the beauty of the night, being rocked gently in small boats on the river, or drinking in taverns, or standing at church doors saying soft gallantries to their mistresses, and he the solitary, the indefatigable workman, why did he take no rest? His inflamed eye-lids, his forehead furrowed with wrinkles, his rounded back, showed how much he stood in need of it.

A smoky lamp hung from the beam which divided the ceiling of the room into two equal parts, and shed its feeble light on the table where John Gutenberg was working. But beware, reader, of representing this table to yourself as furnished with any of those perfect instruments which are the improvements of modern days; with a case for the letters, a *visorium*, a composing-stick, a galley, or a catch; it was nothing more than a great oaken board, on which his letters were placed in little woollen bags, ranged in alphabetical order; the form in which they were to be disposed was in front of the artist, and at his side, on a desk, roughly put together, reposed the heavy in-folio which he used as a manuscript. Let the compositor of the present day, who complains, often justly, of the illegible copy of the poet or the philosopher, compare humbly his task with that of his great predecessor! He was obliged first to select from his bags, to place the letters with great delicacy, to turn back to the manuscript in order to read it, and to recommence his labour incessantly until one whole line, laboriously put together, had been ranged along a string; if at this point his negligence, as a compositor, had permitted one fault, he must needs unfasten the string, and recommence his work from the beginning!

Miserable place as it was, there worked the first printer of the world! A humble cradle which contained a giant! Poor, wretched house, what a difference between it and those palaces which the disciples of the great inventor have since built for themselves! The shutters of Gutenberg's room were hermetically closed, not one of the moon's silver rays could penetrate them; the smell of the printer's ink, of the oil, and the black smoke, made the close air of this poor apartment still more oppressive; a painful stillness prevailed, disturbed only by the metallic noise of the letters as they touched each other. But I will not dwell any longer on this melancholy picture, in which you might have seen the old man, whose stray white locks shaded his broad forehead, whose feeble fingers could only slowly and with trembling fulfil their task, whose knees tottered, and who whenever he turned over the leaves of his manuscript was forced to wait a few seconds to regain breath and strength. No, no, reader, think of Gutenberg rather as you would doubtless like to see him, standing on his pedestal of stone, in the centre of the square, in front of the Cathedral of Maïence, one of the last achievements, but by no means one of the happiest efforts, of the great Thorwaldsen.

John Gutenberg, in his humble workshop, turned round on hearing the door behind him creak on its hinges. "You see, I knew it," said one of the new comers on entering, "there he is, still at work." He to whom these words were addressed shrugged his shoulders slightly, both came forward, and the foremost, with his head respectfully uncovered, approached Gutenberg, who gave his visitors a friendly greeting. Addressing the second, "Will it please you, my dear Doctor," he said, "to look on for a few moments while I am at work? If so, take this stool, and sit at your ease, as far at least as that is possible in my humble abode. Beildech," said he to the other, "did you take care to fasten the latch as you came in?" "Yes, Master," replied Beildech; "but it must be close upon midnight, it is time for you to leave off work; here you are still at your table; will you never learn to think of yourself, and of those who love you?" At these words the old man, with a gesture full of tenderness, took the hand of the speaker and pressed it on his heart. Beildech was the only one who, through good fortune and evil fortune, had invariably stood by Gutenberg, from the day when the latter left the gates of his native town on horseback, to direct his steps towards Strasburg; days of youth and of beauty.

The second person whom we introduced was named Dr. Humery. He was Syndic of the free city of Maïence, and a wise man, if ever there was one, and well versed in the knowledge of all that was right and just. The chronicles say that even in a state of blindness he could have distinguished black from white, and white from black – a science which has completely escaped the numerous successors of the Syndic Humery! He called himself the patron of Gutenberg in the year 1455, when a sentence of the tribunal of Maïence, having forced the poor printer to give up his workshop to John Fust his creditor, Gutenberg, his heart overflowing with resentment against his native town, fled to Strasburg; but finding that he succeeded no better there than elsewhere, he soon returned to his own country. While Master John was seeking some resting-place where he might pursue his art, it was the Syndic Humery who advanced the seventy crowns which Gutenberg required to set up his new presses, and who provided him with the quarters which we have described. "On account of which," said the convention, "the above named Master John is held to continue his labours at the risk and the peril of Humery."

"Consider," said the disinterested Syndic, "that you are no longer young; I wish to save you from all further risk of getting into trouble. Continue your work on my account, so that what you do, shall be mine by an equitable payment, but, on the other hand, let it be understood that I am likewise responsible for your losses; and above all, Master Gutenberg, beware of your old tricks!"

Gutenberg said gratefully Yes and Amen to all that was proposed to him, but his heart was broken. He neither asked nor wished for anything but to be allowed to cultivate his art, that well-beloved art, to which he had consecrated the earliest, the best days of his life. In the absence of children, which had been denied to his old age, he desired at least to play with his metallic characters, black to the outward eye, but full of the attractive force of affection to the printer. So it happened that Gutenberg took up his abode at the back of the Syndic's house, working with his press as far removed as possible from the little windows, before which, as soon as it was dusk, he hastened to fasten the shutters. Reader, if you ask me a reason for this peculiarity, here is one which may account for it. From the windows of the house of the Syndic Humery you might see a little old smoky building, which, by a caprice of fortune, happened to be exactly the birthplace and cradle of the ancient race of the Gutenberg (*zum guten Berg*

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