

Notre Dame des Eaux

By Ralph Adams Cram

West of St. Pol de Leon, on the sea-cliffs of Finisterre, stands the ancient church of Notre Dame des Eaux. Five centuries of beating winds and sweeping rains have moulded its angles, and worn its carvings and sculpture down to the very semblance of the ragged cliffs themselves, until even the Breton fisherman, looking lovingly from his boat as he makes for the harbor of Morlaix, hardly can say where the crags end, and where the church begins. The teeth of the winds of the sea have devoured, bit by bit, the fine sculpture of the doorway and the thin cusps of the windows tracery; gray moss creeps caressingly over the worn walls in ineffectual protection; gentle vines, turned crabbed by the harsh beating of the fierce winds, clutch the crumbling buttresses, climb up over the sinking roof, reach in even at the louvres of the belfry, holding the little sanctuary safe in desperate arms against the savage warfare of the sea and sky.

Many a time you may follow the rocky highway from St. Pol even around the last land of France, and so to Brest, yet never see sign of Notre Dame des Eaux; for it clings to a cliff somewhat lower than the road, and between grows a stunted thicket of harsh and ragged trees, their skeleton white branches, tortured and contorted, thrusting sorrowfully out of the hard, dark foliage that still grows below, where the rise of land below the highway gives some protection. You must leave the wood by the two cottages of yellow stone, about twenty miles beyond St. Pol, and go down to the right, around the old stone quarry; then, bearing to the left by the little cliff path, you will, in a moment, see the pointed roof of the tower of Notre Dame, and, later, come down to the side porch among the crosses of the arid little graveyard.

It is worth the walk, for though the church has outwardly little but its sad picturesqueness to repay the artist, within it is a dream and a delight. A Norman nave of round, red stone piers and arches, a delicate choir of the richest flamboyant, a High Altar of the time of Francis I., form only the mellow background and frame for carven tombs and dark old pictures, hanging lamps of iron and brass, and black, heavily carved choir-stalls of the Renaissance.

So has the little church lain unnoticed for many centuries; for the horrors and follies of the Revolution have never come near, and the hardy and faithful people of Finisterre have feared God and loved Our Lady too well to harm her church. For many years it was the church of the Comtes de Jarleuc; and these are their tombs that mellow year by year under the warm light of the painted windows, given long ago by Comte Robert de Jarleuc, when the heir of Poullaouen came safely to shore in the harbor of Morlaix, having escaped from the Isle of Wight, where he had lain captive after the awful defeat of the fleet of Charles of Valois at Sluys. And now the heir of Poullaouen lies in a carven tomb, forgetful of the world where he fought so nobly: the dynasty he fought to establish, only a memory; the family he made glorious, a name; the Château Poullaouen a single crag of riven masonry in the field's of M. du Bois, mayor of Morlaix.

It was Julien, Comte de Bergerac, who rediscovered Notre Dame des Eaux, and by his picture of its dreamy interior in the Salon of '86 brought once more into notice this forgotten corner of the world. The next year a party of painters settled themselves near by, roughing it as best they could, and in the year following, Mme. de Bergerac and her daughter Héloïse came with Julien, and, buying the old farm of Pontivy, on the highway over Notre Dame, turned it into a summer house that almost made amends for their lost château on the Dordogne, stolen from them as virulent Royalists by the triumphant Republic in 1794.

Little by little a summer colony of painters gathered around Pontivy, and it was not until the spring of 1890 that the peace of the colony was broken. It was a sorrowful tragedy. Jean d'Yriex, the youngest and merriest devil of all the jolly crew, became suddenly moody and morose. At first this was attributed to his undisguised admiration for Mlle. Héloïse, and was looked on as one of the vagaries of boyish passion; but one day, while riding with M. de Bergerac, he suddenly seized the bridle of Julien's horse, wrenched it from his hand, and, turning his own horse's head towards the cliffs, lashed the terrified animals into a galop straight towards the brink. He was only thwarted in his mad object by Julien, who with a quick blow sent him headlong in the dry grass, and reined in the terrified animals hardly a yard from the cliffs. When this happened, and no word of explanation was granted, only a sullen silence that lasted for days, it became clear that poor Jean's brain was wrong in some way. Héloïse devoted herself to him with infinite patience,—though she felt no special affection for him, only pity,—and while he was with her he seemed sane and quiet. But at night some strange mania took possession of him. If he had worked on his Prix de Rôme picture in the daytime, while Héloïse sat by him, reading aloud or singing a little, no matter how good the work, it would have vanished in the morning, and he would again begin, only to erase his labor during the night.

At last his growing insanity reached its climax; and one day in Notre Dame, when he had painted better than usual, he suddenly stopped, seized a palette knife, and slashed the great canvas in strips. Héloïse sprang forward to stop him, and in crazy fury he turned on her, striking at her throat with the palette knife. The thin steel snapped, and the white throat showed only a scarlet scratch. Héloïse, without that ordinary terror that would crush most women, grasped the thin wrists of the madman, and, though he could easily have wrenched his hands away, d'Yriex sank on his knees in a passion of tears. He shut himself in his room at Pontivy, refusing to see any one, walking for hours up and down, fighting against growing madness. Soon Dr. Charpentier came from Paris, summoned by Mme. de Bergerac; and after one short, forced interview, left at once for Paris, taking M. d'Yriex with him.

A few days later came a letter for Mme. de Bergerac, in which Dr. Charpentier confessed that Jean had disappeared, that he had allowed him too much liberty, owing to his apparent calmness, and that when the train stopped at Le Mans he had slipped from him and utterly vanished.

During the summer, word came occasionally that no trace had been found of the unhappy man, and at last the Pontivy colony realized that the merry boy was dead. Had he lived he *must* have been found, for the exertions of the police were perfect; yet not the slightest trace was discovered, and his lamentable death was acknowledged, not only by Mme. de Bergerac and Jean's family,—sorrowing for the death of their first-born, away in the warm hills of Lozère,—but by Dr. Charpentier as well.

So the summer passed, and the autumn came, and at last the cold rains of November—the skirmish line of the advancing army of winter—drove the colony back to Paris.

It was the last day at Pontivy, and Mlle. Héloïse had come down to Notre Dame for a last look at the beautiful shrine, a last prayer for the repose of the tortured soul of poor Jean d'Yriex. The rains had ceased for a time, and a warm stillness lay over the cliffs and on the creeping sea, swaying and lapping around the ragged shore. Héloïse knelt very long before the Altar of Our Lady of the Waters; and when she finally rose, could not bring herself to leave as yet that place of sorrowful beauty, all warm and golden with the last light of the declining sun. She watched the old verger, Pierre Polou, stumping softly around the darkening building, and spoke to him once, asking the hour; but he was very deaf, as well as nearly blind, and he did not answer.

So she sat in the corner of the aisle by the Altar of Our Lady of the Waters, watching the checkered light fade in the advancing shadows, dreaming sad day-dreams of the dead summer, until the day-dreams merged in night-dreams, and she fell asleep.

Then the last light of the early sunset died in the gleaming quarries of the west window; Pierre Polou stumbled uncertainly through the dusky shadow, locked the sagging doors of the mouldering south porch, and took his way among the leaning crosses up to the highway and his little cottage, a good mile away,—the nearest house to the lonely Church of Notre Dame des Eaux.

With the setting of the sun great clouds rose swiftly from time sea; the wind freshened, and the gaunt branches of the weather-worn trees in the churchyard lashed themselves beseechingly before the coming storm. The tide turned, and the waters at the foot of the rocks swept uneasily up the narrow beach and caught at the weary cliffs, their sobbing growing and deepening to a threatening, solemn roar. Whirls of dead leaves rose in the churchyard, and threw themselves against the blank windows. The winter and the night came down together.

Héloïse awoke, bewildered and wondering; in a moment she realized the situation, and with out fear or uneasiness. There was nothing to dread in Notre Dame by night; the ghosts, if there were ghosts, would not trouble her, and the doors were securely locked. It was foolish of her to fall asleep, and her mother would be most uneasy at Pontivy if she realized before dawn that Héloïse had not returned. On the other hand, she was in the habit of wandering off to walk after dinner, often not coming home until late, so it was quite possible that she might return before Madame knew of her absence, for Polou came always to unlock the church for the low mass at six o'clock; so she arose from her cramped position in the aisle, and walked slowly up to the choir-rail, entered the chancel, and felt her way to one of the stalls, on the south side, where there were cushions and an easy back.

It was really very beautiful in Notre Dame by night; she had never suspected how strange and solemn the little church could be when the moon shone fitfully through the south windows, now bright and clear, now blotted out by sweeping clouds. The nave was barred with the long shadows of the heavy pillars, and when the moon came out she could see far down almost to the west end. How still it was! Only a soft low murmur without of the restless limbs of the trees, and of the creeping sea.

It was very soothing, almost like a song; and Héloïse felt sleep coming back to her as the clouds shut out the moon, and all the church grew black.

She was drifting off into the last delicious moment of vanishing consciousness, when she suddenly came fully awake, with a shock that made every nerve tingle. In the midst of the far faint sounds of the tempestuous night she had heard a footstep! Yet the church was utterly empty, she was sure. And again! A footstep dragging and uncertain, stealthy and cautious, but an unmistakable step, away in the blackest shadow at the end of the church.

She sat up, frozen with the fear that comes at night and that is overwhelming, her hands clutching the coarse carving of the arms of the stall, staring down into the dark.

Again the footstep, and again,—slow, measured, one after another at intervals of perhaps half a minute, growing a little louder each time, a little nearer.

Would the darkness never be broken? Would the cloud never pass? Minute after minute went like weary hours, and still the moon was hid, still the dead branches rattled clatteringly on the high windows. Unconsciously she moved, as under a magician's spell, down to the choir-rail, straining her eyes to pierce the thick night. And the step, it was very near! Ah, the moon at last! A white ray fell through the westernmost window, painting a bar of light on the floor of sagging

stone. Then a second bar, then a third, and a fourth, and for a moment Héloïse could have cried out with relief, for nothing broke the lines of light,—no figure, no shadow. In another moment came a step, and from the shadow of the last column appeared in the pallid moonlight the figure of a man. The girl stared breathless, the moonlight falling on her as she stood rigid against the low parapet. Another step and another, and she saw before her—was it ghost or living man?—a white mad face staring from matted hair and beard, a tall thin figure half clothed in rags, limping as it stepped towards her with wounded feet. From the dead face stared mad eyes that gleamed like the eyes of a cat, fixed on hers with insane persistence, holding her, fascinating her as a cat fascinates a bird.

One more step,—it was close before her now! Those awful, luminous eyes dilating and contracting in awful palpitations. And the moon was going out; the shadows swept one by one over the windows; she stared at the moonlit face for a last fascinated glance—Mother of God! it was—The shadow swept over them, and now only remained the blazing eyes and the dim outline of a form that crouched waveringly before her as a cat crouches, drawing its vibrating body together for the spring that blots out the life of the victim.

In another instant the mad thing would leap; but just as the quiver swept over the crouching body, Héloïse gathered all her strength into one action of desperate terror.

“Jean, stop!”

The thing crouched before her paused, chattering softly to itself; then it articulated dryly, and with all the trouble of a learning child, the one word, “*Chantes!*”

Without a thought, Héloïse sang; it was the first thing that she remembered, an old Provençal song that d’Yriex had always loved. While she sang, the poor mad creature lay huddled at her feet, separated from her only by the choir parapet, its dilating, contracting eyes never moving for an instant. As the song died away, came again that awful tremor, indicative of the coming death-spring, and again she sang,—this time the old *Pange lingua*, its sonorous Latin sounding in the deserted church like the voice of dead centuries.

And so she sang, on and on, hour after hour,—hymns and *chansons*, folk-songs and bits from comic operas, songs of the boulevards alternating with the *Tantum ergo* and the *O Fillii et Filiae*. It mattered little what she sang. At last it seemed to her that it mattered little whether she sang or no; for her brain whirled round and round like a dizzy maelstrom, her icy hands, gripping the hard rail, alone supported her dying body. She could hear no sound of her song; her body was numb, her mouth parched, her lips cracked and bleeding; she felt the drops of blood fall from her chin. And still she sang, within the yellow palpitating eyes holding her as in a vice. If only she could continue until dawn! It must be dawn so soon! The windows were growing gray, the rain lashed outside, she could distinguish the features of the horror before her; but the night of death was growing with the coming day, blackness swept down upon her; she could sing no more, her tortured lips made one last effort to form the words, “Mother of God, save me!” and night and death came down like a crushing wave.

But her prayer was heard; the dawn had come, and Polou unlocked the porch-door for Father Augustin just in time to hear the last agonized cry. The maniac turned in the very act of leaping on his victim, and sprang for the two men, who stopped in dumb amazement. Poor old Pierre Polou went down at a blow; but Father Augustin was young and fearless, and he grappled the mad animal with all his strength and will. It would have gone ill even with him,—for no one can stand against the bestial fury of a man in whom reason is dead,—had not some sudden impulse seized the maniac, who pitched the priest aside with a single movement, and, leaping through the door, vanished forever.

Did he hurl himself from the cliffs in the cold wet morning, or was he doomed to wander, a wild beast, until, captured, he beat himself in vain against the walls of some asylum, an unknown pauper lunatic? None ever knew.

The colony at Pontivy was blotted out by the dreary tragedy, and Notre Dame des Eaux sank once more into silence and solitude. Once a year Father Augustin said mass for the repose of the soul of Jean d'Yriex; but no other memory remained of the horror that blighted the lives of an innocent girl and of a gray-haired mother mourning for her dead boy in far Lozère.