

The Story of a Grave-Digger

By A. Le Braz

The grave-digger of Penvénon at that time was old Poézevara. He was generally called Poaz-Coz. Old as he was, and although he had “dug six times round the churchyard,” which is the same as saying that he had dug in the same place six graves, he was a man who knew, almost to a day, how long each corpse had been buried, and how much it had become decomposed. In short, it would have been difficult to find a grave-digger who knew so much about his business. He seemed to see clearly into the graves he had dug and filled in. The blest earth of the churchyard was to his eyes as transparent as water. One morning the Rector called him.

“Poaz-Coz, Mab-Ar-Guenn has just died. I think you might dig his grave where that tall Roperz was buried five years ago; don’t you agree with me?”

“No, Reverend Sir, no Corpses are preserved for a long time in that corner. I know Roperz. It is doubtful if by this time the worms have attacked him.”

“Well, you must do your best. Mab-Ar-Guenn’s family greatly desire that he should be buried in that spot. Roperz has been there these five years. It is time he should make room for another. It is but just!”

Poaz-Coz went away with his head in the air. He was not the master, he had to obey, but he was not satisfied.

He put his pick-axe into the ground. Very soon a third of it was opened.

“One more blow,” said Poaz to himself, “and I shall have reached the coffin.”

And he struck the blow with such force that not only did he reach the coffin, but he went through it. Infected effluvia rose up into his face. He reproached himself for having given too heavy blows.

“God is nevertheless my witness,” he murmured, “that I had no intention of touching that poor Roperz! On the contrary I want to arrange so that he shall not be distressed by the vicinity of Mab-Ar-Guenn.”

The good grave-digger spent two hours in making sufficient space at the bottom of the grave that two coffins should be placed therein, that of Roperz having a corner to itself.

This done, he felt more at ease in his mind, although he was even then not quite comfortable. The idea of having treated one of his dead with disrespect. He had no appetite for his supper that evening, and went early to bed.

He had just fallen into a doze when the noise of the door turning on its hinges awaked him.

“Who is there?” asked he, sitting up.

“You were not expecting me then?” answered a voice that he recognised at once, notwithstanding its sepulchral tone.

“To say the truth, François Roperz, I did think it possible you might come!”

“Yes, I have come to show you what you have inflicted upon me!”

The moon was at its height, and its clear light illumined the grave-digger’s house.

“See!” continued the ghost, “a living man should not be treated thus, still less a dead man

He unbuttoned his long shroud. Poaz-Coz shut his eyes. The spectacle was enough to make one die of horror. The chest of Roperz was one great hideous wound.

"In truth I ask your forgiveness, François Roperz," said poor Poaz, in a tone of entreaty. "Do, pray, forgive me! I am not as bad as you think. I did not desire to touch your grave. I knew that your time had not expired. But I am only a servant. I must obey the Rector's orders, or I should lose my livelihood, for I am too old to learn a new trade. And indeed it is the first time that such a thing has happened, all who lie in the churchyard can declare it!"

"And therefore, Poaz-Coz, I bear you no ill-will, and the less because you have done your best to repair the harm you involuntarily did to me."

The grave-digger uncovered his eyes. The ghost had buttoned his shroud.

"I see," exclaimed Poaz, "that you remain as good-natured in the other world as you were in this!"

"Alas!" cried Roperz, "that doesn't count much where I am!"

"You are not quite happy, then?"

"No, I still have need that a Mass be said. I thought that perhaps after what has occurred, you would not refuse to have one said, and to pay for it yourself!"

"No, I certainly will not refuse, you shall have the Mass you need, François Roperz!"

"Hear me to the end. This Mass must be said by the Rector of Penvénon, by him, himself. Do you hear?"

"I hear."

"I thank you, Poaz-Coz," the ghost said. And those were his last words. The grave-digger beheld him go out of his house, cross the village green, and clear the churchyard fence.

The following day, which happened to be Sunday, amongst the notices before the sermon at High Mass, the Rector announced that on the following Tuesday Mass would be said at the request of Poaz, the grave-digger, for the repose of the soul of François Roperz, of Kervinion.

Tuesday came, and the Mass was said by the Rector himself. Poaz-Coz knelt in the front row, I, who tell you the story, was there also; my chair was next to his.

When, after the Mass was over, the Rector was on his way to the Sacristy, Poaz touched my elbow.

"Look," said he, in a trembling tone.

"At what?"

"Do you not see someone following the Rector into the Sacristy?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you not recognise him?"

And before I could reply, Poaz-Coz whispered into my ear, "It is François Roperz, don't you see, it is François Roperz!"

It was true. I recognised him directly Poaz spoke. The step, the manner, the dress, were all those of François Roperz. I felt quite bewildered.

"You will see," said Poaz-Coz, "that something will come of this!"

And so it was.

As the Rector, after having taken off his sacerdotal vestments, was crossing the churchyard as a short cut to the Presbytery, he was suddenly seen to sway, and he fell down

dead not far from the newly filled grave where, beside the coffin of François Roperz, that of Mab-Ar-Guenn had been laid.¹

(Related by Baptiste Ueffroy, Penvénon, 1886.)

¹ Poëzevara (called Poaz-Coz) the grave-digger, died in 1889. Another version of the story relates that the Rector had a fit on the day he said the Mass, but did not die on the actual day.