

The Eve of All Souls and a Popular Hymn

By A. Le Braz

On All Saints night, the eve of All Souls day (“*Goël-ann-Anaon*”), the Dead come to visit the living.

The living have made, after Vespers, what is called “the Churchyard Procession.” The priests and singers have sung beside crypt and vault and tomb, the *Plaint* or “*Gwerz*” which follows:—¹

“Come, Christians, amongst the tombs! Behold the bones
Of brother, sister, father, mother,
Neighbours and best-loved friends,
And see their piteous plight!

“Broken and crumbled you behold them,
Often fallen into dust.
Rank and wealth and beauty vanished,
Death has mingled them with earth.

“Rich and poor, the lord and servant,
Differ no more, but equal stand,
And naught remains but dust and rubbish,
We shrink from, but for pity’s sake.

“From this sad state to which they’ve come,
Though dead, they speak a weighty word,
They teach us that which well might help us,
While kept on earth by Christ our Lord.

“List to their lesson, listen well,
Anxious to learn all they can teach,
‘We too, have lived on earth,’ they sigh,
‘You too, like us, will ere long die.’

“We too have loved this earth, and we
Have toiled and bargained, ate and drank.
Behold our shapeless lowly state,
The food of worms beneath the sod.

“ ‘I was a strong and gallant man,—I was a nobleman,’ says one,
‘And I was rich, and wise, and great,
But rank is gone, and so is wealth,

¹ Literal Translation from Verse.

And beauty, knowledge, strength are lost.’

“We have been called, our works, and we,
Before our Judge, our King, our God;
Despise earth’s joys, and hate its sins,
And clothe your souls with merits rare.

“Ask you of us, ‘where are your Souls?’
Alas! they linger far from Heaven!
In purgatorial fire they pay
Their earthly debt to their true God and Lord.

“Amidst these flames unceasingly they cry,
Imploring you for prayers to aid them thence,
From the dark prison where they are enchained,
Haste, haste to succour them, do not delay!

“We cry to you our children, parents, friends!
Forget us not when passing by our graves,
But say, ‘God pardon and give rest
To *L’Anaon* in Purgatory’ our dwelling-place.

“An alms-deed, or a pious, heartfelt prayer,
A fast, still more, Communion or the Holy Mass,
Can mitigate our pains, or shorten them,
Or even lift us out our fiery pain!

“O! kindly priests, fore time our godly guides,
Along Salvation’s path through earthly snares,
Keep pity burning in your hearts for us,
And give us of your goodness truest aid.

“When to the holy altar you ascend,
And when God comes to you, list to our cry,
Out of the fire, we call and call to you
To make our peace with God for Jesus’ sake

“And when our sins are purged we will not fail
To ask our God to answer all your prayers,
Pray for us and we will pray for you. If all helped all
No single soul could surely e’er be lost!

“As floods of water quench the fiercest fire,
So is the purgatorial flame subdued and killed
By the great sacrifice you offer up!
O! pray for our deliverance in Christ’s name!

“When the glad sun beams bright above the clouds
The whole world is suddenly steeped in light,
So shall we rise, shining like to stars,
By virtue of the sacrifice, our pains being passed.

“Farewell, dear parents, brothers, sisters, friends,
Farewell, our children, and our dear ones, all!
We bid you once for all a long farewell.
The Judgment Day will give us back to you!

“Give rest and peace, sweet Jesus, Lord and God,
To *L’Anaom*, the dear and suffering dead,
Call them to Paradise to praise Thee,
With saints and angels, evermore!”²

This solemn “*Gwerz*,” or ballad, ended, all go to their homes, and talk by the fireside of those who are departed.

The mistress of the house spreads a clean white cloth on the kitchen table, and lays thereon tankards of cider, pancakes and clotted cream. These preparations being completed, all retire to rest. The fire is kept burning on the hearth, an enormous log being put upon it called “*kef am-A naon*,” “the Log of the Dead.” About nine o’clock, or half-past nine, the sound of wailing voices breaks the silence. They are those of “The Death Singers,” who go along the roads and from house to house to rouse the sleepers in the name of the Dead, to assist them with their prayers.

And this is their plaint:—

1

“Good people be not you amazed
If to your door we sadly come,
Jesus Himself it is who sends us,
To wake the sleepers in their beds.

2

“Yes, it is Christ our Lord who sends us,
To call you if asleep you be,
Even from your first sleep to rouse you,
To pray to God for us poor souls in pain.

² This hymn was translated from Breton into French by M. Le Braz, and taken from a collection of hymns in Breton, compiled by the Abbé Henry. It is indeed a national ballad song, and it needs to be heard in Breton intoned by rough peasant voices to its weird wailing air. “I shall never forget,” says M. Le Braz, “the effect it produced upon me one All Souls’ Eve in the poor little churchyard of Spézet, a village completely buried in the Black Mountain.” The whole region of Central Cornouailles is a sort of pre-historic cemetery, abounding in mysterious “*Cairns*,” and mounds, or “*tumuli*.” It is truly the Land of the Departed. This mournful melody, this loud lamentation, echoing through the solitary “*landes*,” possesses a wild grandeur which almost makes one tremble.

3

“You in your quiet beds are resting,
Poor souls are we in bitter pain,
You all in peace are softly sleeping,
While we poor souls are in distress.

4

“Shrouded and coffined we lie still,
Our head upon a heap of straw,
Five feet of earth to cover us,
Naught else to-day is ours to hold.

5

“For Mary’s sake, sweet Jean’s Mother,
List to our sorrowful complaint,
List to our sorrowful complaint,
Jesus in Heaven would have us come.

6

“Perchance your father or your mother
Amidst the purging fires may dwell,
Perchance your sister or your brother
May suffer in the cleansing flame!

7

“The fiery ordeal they enduring,
Flames all around them, every side,
Flames all about and all around them,
Wailing, implore you for your prayers.

8

“ ‘Those,’ they cry, ‘we reared and tended,
Desert us now full many a day,
Pray then for us, kind friends and neighbours,
Since our children do not pray.

9

“ ‘Pray for us all, kind friends and neighbours,
Since our children cease to pray,
Pray then for us our friends and brothers,
Ungrateful children do not pray!

10

“ ‘Hasten to leave your beds of ease,
And kneel bare-foot upon the floor,
All ye whom sickness has not stricken,

Or Death be beckoning with cold hand!”

Often (says the narrator), on the eve of All Souls, the dead leaves may be heard to rustle on the paths, as if under the footsteps of invisible beings.

At daybreak the dead accompany the living to the parish church to hear the Mass that is said for them.

One year that my father was going alone to the Mass for the Dead, he suddenly heard someone hail him who appeared to wish to come up with him. A voice cried, “Hey! *Toneun*, wait for me!”

He turned his head, but no one was to be seen. He nevertheless distinctly recognised the voice of my mother, who had died during the previous year.

(Related by Marie Hostion, Quimper, 1887.)