

The Five Drowned Sailors

By A. Le Braz

Two sailors of Quimper were ordered to convey some casks of cider to Benn-Odet (a hamlet at the mouth of the Odet), in their sloop.

Very probably they lingered at the inn to which they took their cargo. Anyhow, they let the tide time pass. When they reached what is called the bay they found themselves in low water, and ran aground in the sand. Six hours must they wait for the next tide, in the darkness. They did their best under their luckless circumstances. They took down their sails, and wrapped themselves up in them. They were just falling asleep when a loud voice called them both, each by his own name.

“Helo! Yann!”

“Helo! Caourantinn!”

“Helo!” answered both Caourantinn and Yann.

It is thus that sailors hail one another.

“Come and seek us,” continued the voice.

The night was so dark that it was impossible to see two fathoms off and the voice, although strong, seemed to come from afar. Moreover it had a strange sound. Yann and Caourantinn nudged each other.

“I do believe,” said Yann, “that it is *Yannik-an-Odd*.”¹

“I am of the same Opinion,” murmured Caourantinn, “we had best lie hidden.”

And they wrapped themselves up closer in the sail.

But their curiosity, after all, overcame their fear. Yann was the first to peep out of his wrapping.

“Do look!” he said to his companion.

The depths of the bay, to their left hand, seemed suddenly to shine with a light that came up out of the sea. And in this light was outlined a large white boat, and in this boat there stood five men with their arms stretched out. These five men were all alike clothed with white tarpaulin with black dots like tears.

“It is not *Yannik-an-ôd*,” said Yann, “these are souls in pain. Speak to them Caourantinn, for you have made your Easter Communion.”

Caourantinn made a sounding tube with his hands, and shouted, “We cannot come to your assistance, we are aground here. Come you to us, or tell us what you desire. We will do what we can.

The two sailors then saw the five ghosts sit down each in his place. One took the helm, the others began to row. But as they all rowed on one side only, the boat, instead of coming on, only turned round and round.

“What fools they are!” growled Yann; “they are fresh water sailors with a vengeance. I have a good mind to go and show them how to manage the boat. Perhaps it’s that they want. What say you, Caourantinn? Will you stay and look after our boat?”

“No, I will not. If you go, I shall go too!”

¹ “*Yannik-an-Odd*” is a name given collectively by the Bretons to the ghosts of drowned sailors, not friendly to the living.

“After all there would be no danger in leaving The boat where it is. There will be another hour before the tide turns. Come along then, comrade, with the help of God!”

The water hardly came half-way up their legs, so shallow was it.

They made their way along the sand-bank towards the white boat.

The nearer they came the more the ghostly sailors bent upon their oars, and faster and faster did the boat go round.

When the two comrades were close upon it, suddenly it sank, and as it went down the light disappeared, which had showed them the corner of the bay. For one moment the sea and the darkness intermingled. Then in the place where the four rowers had sat, four lighted tapers suddenly appeared. By their fitful light Yann and Caourantinn perceived that the fifth ghost, he, who just now had taken the helm, was under water up to his head and shoulders.

They stopped terror-stricken. In sooth, they would rather have been anywhere but where they were. But having gone so far they did not like to draw back. Moreover, the man’s face was sad, ah, so sad, that it must have been a bad Christian who would not have felt pity for him.

“Are you sent by God, or do you come from the devil?” asked Yann.

As though he had guessed their thoughts and fears, the man said to them,—

“Fear nothing. We are five souls in terrible suffering, and my four companions are suffering even more than I am. The sadness you see in my face is nothing compared with that of theirs. For more than a hundred years have we waited here to find a man willing to help us.”

“If good will alone he needed, we will do what we can for you,” answered Yann and Caourantinn.

“You must go, if you please, to the Rector of Plomehin, and ask him to have five Masses for the dead said for us at the High Altar of the church on five successive days. And will you also take care that there shall be thirty-three persons present at each of these Masses on each day, be they young or old, men or women.

“*Doué da bardono ann Anaon!*” (God give pardon to the Dead!) murmured the two sailors, making the sign of the Cross. “We will do our best to relieve you!”

The following day, Yann and Caourantinn went to see the Rector of Plomehin. They paid beforehand for the twenty-five Masses. They attended them all themselves, and to make sure of the congregation of thirty-three, they brought daily over from Quimper their wives and children, relations and friends. Never had so many people been seen at once at Low Mass at Plomeljn.

On the sixth day Yann said to Caourantinn, “Shall we go out to the bay to-night to ask if we have done all we could?”

“Let us go,” he answered.

So when night came they went down the stream in their sloop. They anchored at the place where they had run aground six days before. And there they waited. Ere long the light they had then seen began to rise out of the sea. Then the white boat stood out in it, and in the boat the five ghosts once again appeared. They were still clad in white tarpaulin, but the black dots were no longer on them. Their arms, instead of being outstretched before them, were crossed upon their breasts. Their faces were bright and shining. And all at once there came a sound of music so touching and so exquisite that Caourantinn and Yann could have wept with joy.

The five ghosts all together bent their heads to the two sailors, who heard them softly utter, "*Trugaré! Trugaré! T'ruGARé!*" ("We thank you! we thank you! we thank you!")
(Related by Marie Mauchec, dressmaker, Quimper, 1891.)