

# Breton Notions and Sayings Concerning Death and the Dead

By A. Le Braz

Tokens are like shadows thrown forward in advance of what is about to be.

If we were less absorbed in what we ourselves are doing and in what is being done around us in this life, we should apprehend better what is going on in the other life.

People who deny "*tokens*" receive some such, as well as those who know they receive many. They deny them because they can neither perceive nor understand them, perchance also because they fear them, desiring to see and hear nothing concerning the life after death.

Certain persons possess more than others the gift of seeing.

One who prays for a person lately dead in a votive chapel, or who hears a mass for his intention, may see the defunct person kneeling in the choir of the church. At first he will appear black, then he becomes gray, and at the end of the Mass he will appear entirely white and luminous.

When ships are wrecked in the Bay of Douarnenez, the sea washes the drowned sailors into the Cave of Antel near Morgat. Their souls remain there for one week before going into the other world. Woe to him who shall interrupt their expiation by entering the Cave during that week! He will die a evil death therein.

During stormy nights all round the coast the drowned may be heard calling to one another.

When a fisherman perishes at sea the gulls come crying and beating their wings against the casements of his house.

He who dies a violent death remains between life and death until the time of his natural life has expired.

The immense multitude of suffering souls is called in Breton "*L'Anaon*."

It is not good to sweep the house after sunset. There is danger of expelling the Souls of the Dead who at that hour often obtain permission to return to their former dwelling. Especially should care be taken if the wind drives back the dust, not to sweep it out a second time. Those who fail to regard these directions cannot sleep without being continually awakened by the Souls of the Departed. Moreover, those who sweep in the evening may banish the blessed Virgin who goes round to see into which houses she can permit these privileged Souls to enter.

Children who have died without baptism wander in the air under the form of birds. They make a little plaintive cry. They are sometimes mistaken for birds, but old people know better. Thus, floating in space, they await the end of the world. Then St John the Baptist will administer to them the Sacrament which is essential; after which, they will take their flight to heaven. Sainly persons before entering heaven are allowed to pass through "*Limbo*" that they may see their unbaptised infants, especially such as have prayed much for souls for whom no supplication ascends.

Certain souls are condemned to expiation until an acorn sown on the day of their death shall have grown to be an oak tree large enough to be of some use. Such was the case of

Johan Cainec. But Johan had been a prudent man in his lifetime, and he still remained so after his death. The acorn sown on the day of his death was no sooner above ground, than he cut down the young sapling to make a peg. Owing to this stratagem, he had not long to suffer in the flames of Purgatory.

Other Souls are condemned to make mounds of peat sufficiently large to last three years for burning; others, to cut thornwood during a certain number of years to heat the fires of Purgatory.

Those who had a habit of shortening their prayers, in the morning to get to their work, and in the evening to get to their bed, without taking time to say the final "*Amen*" wander in desolate places murmuring "*Pater Nosters*."

Having reached the last sentence they suddenly stop and can never succeed in getting hold of the word that completes the prayer. Thus, they may be heard despairingly repeating: "*Sed libera nos a malo*," "*sed libera nos a malo*"! They cannot be delivered until the day comes when one of the living shall have the courage and presence of mind to answer, "*Amen*."

If one walking along a road is saying his prayers, and if the word the Soul in pain is seeking is pronounced, the Soul is delivered.

Before reaping a corn field it is well to say:—"If any of the Dead are here, peace to their Souls."

It is good to shroud the Dead with hangings that have been on the walls during the procession of the Blessed Sacrament on the Feast of Corpus Christi.

As many as the blades of grass in a field, or as the drops of rain in a shower, are the Souls who suffer their Purgatory on earth.

During the day the world belongs to the living. When evening comes it belongs to the dead. Honest people should be asleep with closed doors at the ghostly hour.

It is well to leave a few embers of the fire aglow, in case the Dead should desire to seek warmth in their old homes.

There are three solemn festivals in the year when the Dead from different places meet together. The Feast of Christmas, St John's Night, and the Eve of All Souls.

On Christmas night they may be seen passing along the roads in procession, singing the Hymn of the Nativity with clear, sweet voices, sounding like the rustling of the poplar leaves, but at this season no leaves are on the trees. At their head walks the apparition of an old Priest, bent with age, and whose hair is white as snow. In his fleshless hands he carries a Pix. Behind the Priest comes a little boy with a tiny bell. The crowd follows in double rows. Each of the Dead bears a lighted taper whose flame is not stirred by the wind. They wend their way to some deserted chapel where Mass is no longer said except by the Dead.

The Dead who require exorcism are nearly always the rich whose wealth has been ill-gotten; guardians who have appropriated the money of their wards, and, indeed, all who have robbed others and have restitution to make. Their souls are condemned to wander until the wrong they have done is by some means repaired. These are spiteful and unkind. They roam about their former abodes, and avenge their own misery by bringing trouble on the living. They need to be exorcised to reduce them to silence and passivity.

Priests alone have the power of exorcism. Some Priests, however, are not fully able to use it. An understanding and resolute Priest is required, with confidence in his own powers. It is rare that one such is found in a whole neighbourhood.

If the ghost appears and the Priest can succeed in passing his stole round his neck he is instantly subdued.

Monseigneur Lyuer, who died Archbishop of Quimper in 1757 had, during his lifetime, as it would appear, committed several acts of injustice. For many long years he haunted his episcopal castle of Laumirou, driving through the park in his carriage and looking absorbed and sad. A young priest of the diocese had the courage to speak to him; "Listen my lord," cried he, "Put your head out of the carriage window that I may say a word to you." The dead man thus addressed, leaned out of his coach. The priest was enabled to pass his stole round his neck. From that day forward Monseigneur Luyer returned no more.

To protect yourself from an apparition you have only to say: "If thou comest from God, say what it is thou dost desire; if from the devil, go thy way, and let me go mine."

At Bénodet (in Lower Brittany) and in its neighbourhood, when a coffin is being taken out of the church after the Requiem Mass, the bearers have a custom of knocking on the walls. This is done, some say, as a farewell from the Departed, to the Church; and by others, as a summons to St Peter to open the Gates of Paradise for the Soul.

If the flowers laid on the bed where a corpse is lying fade as soon as placed there, it is a sign that the soul is lost; if they fade gradually, that it is in Purgatory; and the longer they live, the shorter is the expiation.

As soon as death takes place, the Soul appears before the Judgment Seat of God to undergo the "Particular Judgment."

As soon as the Judgment is pronounced, it returns to *above* the body (not *into* it), and remains there during the funeral and until after the burial. The officiating Priest is often enabled to see it. M. Dollo constantly saw souls thus, and it was given to him to know where they had subsequently to suffer their expiation. M. Dollo, the Rector of St Michel-en-Grève, was a Priest who knew more than almost anyone about all that related to "*L'Anaon*" (the countless Departed). He knew where the souls of all whom he had buried—except two—were suffering.

Besides such Priests as are enabled to see the separation of the soul from the body, there are other persons also who have received this gift, or to whom, for some particular reason, this mystery has been revealed.