Selections from the Introduction

By L. Mariller

In Brittany no wall of separation exists between the world of marvel and the world of reality. The beliefs which have given birth to these narratives; in which the Souls of the Departed are the chief actors, are still active and actual beliefs, and the Bretons have no need to transport a supernatural event to a distant region and a far-off age, to accord it easy credence. They are still in the mental condition in which the explanation of a natural occurrence—sickness, death, or tempest,—which most easily arises, is one on the supernatural plane.

Distinction, indeed, between the natural and the supernatural does not exist amongst the Bretons, not at least in the same sense that it exists amongst us. For them the living and the dead are equally the inhabitants of this world, and they live in perpetual intercourse with one another. *"L'Anaon"* (as they name the vast crowd and concourse of the Dead) is feared, as the storm and the tempest are feared, but no more surprise is felt that the thorn bushes and the rushes that border the roadsides should be shaken by the passing of disembodied spirits, than that the birds should warble blithely in those bushes.

All the Breton country from mountain to sea is filled with wandering souls who weep and make their moan, and though they may not be seen by all, yet may all on certain solemn festivals,—on All Saints' day, or in the Christmas night,—distinguish their faint footsteps along the silent paths.

For the Breton, the world of wonder is interwoven with the world visible, as the honeysuckle is intertwined about the hedge. He has a tender respect for the dead. For *"L'Anaon,"* his feelings are deep and strong, half terror, half tender compassion, and he speaks with trembling of the souls of those who are no longer in this mortal state.

II

The narratives to be found in this book contain no special moral. They are not pious or edifying legends, they were not related[1] to inspire horror of sin or fear of God. There is therefore nothing artificial or stilted about them. These supernatural events were recounted with the same simplicity and good faith that would have characterized tales of adventures of sailors in distant seas.

Fear of the departed, combined with a sense of their perpetual presence, is the keynote of all these anecdotes. They are not testimonies to a dead past, but the expression of living beliefs, to which the Bretons, both of the coast and of the country villages, hold firmly at this moment. The actors in these stories behave just as would do the peasant, the fisherman, or the woman at the spinning wheel by whom they were related. The narrators are not surprised if a dead person comes to reclaim the piece of linen in which he should have been buried and which has been stolen, and were such a thing to happen they would no more hesitate than did the housewife in the legend, to follow the advice of the rector and carry back to the churchyard the shroud of which the corpse had been deprived.

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[1] All these stories were related to the author by Bretons, chiefly peasants—Translator.

As things are represented in these legends, so do they exist in reality in Brittany. The tales told round their hearths by Bretons are not only believed by them but are often their own actual experiences.

Breton life is still replete with usages which to us may appear strange, because, though once general, they have elsewhere died out. Almost all the circumstances of life are marked here by some symbolic ceremony invested now with a Christian garb, but undoubtedly stamped with modes of thought and feeling anterior to Christianity. It is perhaps hardly accurate to speak of them as symbols. Many persons still attribute an actual efficacy to these symbols. They are, in fact, of the nature of magic. They consist,—not of prayers and acts designed—so to speak,—to attract the Divine attention, and to induce Almighty God favourably to regard this world, but very frequently of processes with intent to constrain His Will, or the will of the devil, or the will of the souls of the departed. And from this aspect the Breton rural population can hardly be declared more than half Christianized.

Certain actions are deprecated not because they may draw down God's wrath, but because they are supposed to be in themselves directly dangerous. For example, it is whispered that no one should stand on Christmas night near crypt or vault to listen to the rustling of the bones, or near the stable to hear the converse of the cattle. To hearken would be certain death. Often, too, it is not thought to be through the protection of God that some unseen peril is escaped, but by some magical agency. There is nothing to fear from the dead, one will be assured, when going along lonely roads at night, for a person who carries upon him one of the tools wherewith be makes his living, be it needle, spade or shovel.

All such superstitions are rooted still in the hearts of the greater part of the peasants and sailors, and there are many, who would without much remorse spend the hours of Divine service in a tavern, and who would blaspheme the name of God without fearing to be struck down, who would nevertheless be wild with terror were they to discover that, on Sunday at Mass, someone had slipped, unperceived, a two-farthing piece, with a hole through it, into their pocket.

The true character of some of their ceremonies is totally unrealized by those who practise them. Partly on account of the seasons of the year when they are carried out, and partly because of their vague resemblance to the ceremonies of Catholic ritual, Bretons have come hardly to see any difference between these practices of very different origin from those, the observance of which, is enjoined by the Church.

Thus, for instance, twice a year they offer an actual *"Cultus"* to the dead, a real worship, of a kind which dates back not oniy beyond the Christian centuries, and to the Hellenized paganism of Imperial days, but probably points to Druidic sources.

The Bretons nevertheless are in entire good faith in believing that the ceremonies accomplished by them twice a year—on the Feast of St John, on light nights round the crackling thorn, and on that of All Saints, within their storm-beaten hovels,—ate truly Christian. They would think they bad been remiss in their duties as good Catholics if they bad failed, on St John's night, to recite Litanies round the blazing "*Tantad,"* or if, on the night of All Souls, they had omitted to leave hot pancakes and cider on the kitchen table.

It does not appear, moreover, that the clergy are openly opposed to these traditional observances. They are even occasionally present at them, the priest blessing the bonfire

and setting light to it. The same thing happens also in some other parts of France, especially in Languedoc.

It would seem probable that this arises not only from the desire of the parochial clergy not to hurt the feelings of the faithful who have been attached for untold generations to these old customs instinct with the spirit of the Celtic race and its past history, and not solely from the practical wisdom which has led to the placing of a cross on the *"Menhir"* (the Druidic stone), or to the building of a church dedicated to a saint, close beside the venerable tree or the sacred spring formerly the objects of worship; but also that the priests themselves appear in some degree to share the feelings of their flocks, and to be willing to some extent to admit these curious cults into the Catholic ritual, side by side with the orthodox *"cultus"* of the Blessed Virgin and of the Saints. It is indeed just because this strange medley of customs and ceremonies has been, as it were, assimilated by Christianity that it has survived, almost entire, to this day.

All rites and usages, however, which, for theological or moral reasons, the clergy has resolved to destroy, it has succeeded in destroying, except in very rare and exceptional instances. And many against which it has not as yet waged war, will not continue very much longer. The ideas of the Breton clergy on these questions are gradually being transformed; at the same time, schools are being multiplied; contact with the towns is growing easier; and each of these circumstances combines to cause the old customs gradually to fade away. If, in another fifty years, they are still extant, they will be no longer regarded as sacred rites, but as traditional observances merely.

III

Breton beliefs with respect to the Dead have frequently a strange similarity to the folk-lore of other lands and races, some still pagan, and some semi-Christian, as Servia and Transylvania.

In common with these countries, Bretons hold the opinion that souls do not go straight into the other world at the moment of death, and that even those who are destined to go there soon afterwards remain for some time in the neighbourhood of the places where they dwelt in the bodies they animated; that they assemble in a corner of the forest, or on the seashore, taking their flight finally in companies for their long journey to the distant dwelling-place of the dead, situated under the earth or beneath the waters. There is hardly an island in the South Pacific Ocean where similarly some solitary place is not pointed out as that wherein the dead assemble before quitting for evermore the abodes of the living.

In Brittany it is held that the souls of those who have been drowned in the Bay of Douarnenez linger for the space of a week in the Grotto of Morgat before going into the other world.

There are some souls, say the Breton legends, who linger longer still in a state which is neither life nor death. One of these current at Bégard relates the story of a young woman who had drowned herself from jealousy, but who, owing to the protection of the Blessed Virgin, continued to live on a mysterious kind of existence for six years, fed by the bread given to the poor by her mother, and clothed with the old garments she distributed to them. Her husband was not really a widower, and only became one at the end of those six years.

This idea of death as at first incomplete, and gradually accomplished, would seem a sort of echo of one which is very ancient, traces of which exist in many aboriginal races.

The very material notions concerning the soul, held by the Bretons in olden times, crop up still in many of their practices and in their funeral customs. The trivet must not, they declare, be left upon the fire, because the dead, who are always cold, and who creep up to the hearth in the night-time, might get burnt by sitting upon it. The dead are thought often to linger in the thorn hedges which surmount the banks by the roadside. It is said to be desirable to make some noise before ascending these slopes, so as to give them time to depart.

On St John's night (Midsummer night, June 24th), the souls come and sit on the flints which have been placed beneath the logs of the bonfire (*"Tantad"*), when they have cooled.

On All Saints' night (eve of All Souls, November 1st), a repast is left for the dead on the table of every kitchen, composed of curds, hot pancakes and cider. When they come to partake of this repast they are said to be heard moving the seats about, and sometimes they alter the arrangement of the plates and dishes in the pantry. The singers who go about that night from house to house chanting the "Plaint of the Poor Souls in Pain," tell how they have often felt the cold breath of the Dead upon their neck and brow.

It is hardly necessary to remark that similar fancies are to be found amongst many uncivilized peoples, and that the custom of preparing food for the spirits of the departed is almost universal amongst such. The soul is by them usually regarded as being a body more subtle and more attenuated than the visible body, but equally composed of matter, albeit of a kind so fine as to be often invisible, and the belief that it can be injured or wounded is wide-spread.

There are, moreover, other resemblances between the Bretou beliefs (collected in the narratives of this book by M. Le Braz), and the ideas concerning the soul held amongst certain savage nations. It is supposed in Brittany that a soul is sometimes condemned to expiate its sins until an acorn picked up on the day of death shall have grown into an oak large enough to be of use to some human being.

This would not appear to be so much an expression of an arbitrarily fixed term of punishment, as of an idea that the life of the tree and that of the soul are in some sort of mysterious affinity. In New Zealand, in Borneo, on the Western coast of Africa, it is a general belief that the life of every human being depends upon some particular tree, and especially upon one planted with certain ceremonies on the day of his birth.[2]

IV

Brittany is pre-eminently the Land of the Departed. The Dead mingle with the living in close companionship; they are associated with their daily and hourly existence. Their souls are not regarded as imprisoned in the tombs of the churchyard. They wander at night along the highways and the lonely lanes, they haunt the fields and the plains, as thick as the blades of grass in the meadow, and as the sand on the seashore. They return to the houses in which they dwelt in their mortal bodies, bringing tidings from the other side; the messengers of penance or of blessing, they glide about the silent homesteads at

[2] The same idea would seem to obtain even in some parts of rural England. See "The Woodlanders," by Thomas Hardy.—Translator.

the midnight hour, and they may dimly be perceived from out screened bed-steads, crouching over the dying embers on the hearth. They enter into long voiceless conversations with the servants as they are tossing the pancakes with their wooden prongs. They frighten thieves away from the orchards. They come, by the permission of God and of the Blessed Virgin, as the protecting spirits of the household to watch over those they have left behind them exposed to the dangers and the snares of life. Mothers, who during their earth lives have been pitiful of those poor sad souls who go unprayed for and neglected, come, after their own death, to caress their little wailing children in their sleep, tending them, rocking them, and wiping away their tears. hi some cases, however, it is the memory of the possessions they have left behind, of their well-fenced farms, of their red cattle with shining hides, of their corn-fields waving like a sea of golden sunshine, that brings the dead out of their graves, and an old labourer will return to his plough and guide it with a firm hand through the fertile furrows, the yearning after old associations drawing him from out the silent realm of disembodied souls.

All the Dead, be it observed, are not regarded as kindly. Some, on the contrary, can be cruel to those who are still amongst the living, and it is not well to approach them too nearly. When night closes in, it is said to be wise to remain indoors. It is not good that Christians should walk the roads when the sun is gone down, lest they be exposed to dangerous encounters. The Dead rule the night. They dislike to be disturbed, and they know how to administer severe lessons to the indiscreet. The perils of the night can be escaped only by supernatural protection, or by daring incredulity. Many travellers would not have returned home alive if their good angel had not accompanied them all through the weary way. There is, nevertheless, no fear for one who carries a child not yet baptized,[3] neither is there for such as recollect in time to invoke the name of God, and to say to the spirit: "If thou comest from God say what is thy desire; if thou comest from the devil go thy way, and let me go mine."[4]

There are also believed to be souls who haunt the houses where they have dwelt in the body, in order to torment their successors therein. The moment of the soul quitting the body is often terrible for those about the bed, and it is frequently no light task to watch beside the dead. The Evil One prowls around the dying and the newly dead to seize the souls of the wicked, and many are the strange sounds that break the stillness of the night while the yellow tapers gleam.

But when a saint departs it is far otherwise. The air is filled with exquisite music, the sound of distant silver bells is heard, and a soft humming as of bees around the perfumed torches.

Wandering human spirits—those who haunt the houses and the plains, and hold converse with the living, are almost always suffering souls who have not yet completed the due expiation for their sins.

The lost are lost for ever. Once imprisoned in hell with the devils they do not return, and are heard of no more. Ghosts, however troublesome, are generally souls in pain. A

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[3] The belief being that the evil powers will not be permitted to prevent its baptism.—Translator.

[4] The night-prowlers are not by any means always and only human souls, but often elves and sprites of various kinds, of whom *"L'Ankou,"* the Death-foreteller, seems to be the most terrible. There are also the *"Kanorez-nos"*—the night-washers; the *"Ar-Hopper-Nos"*—the night crier; the *Ar-Buguel.Nos"*—the child of the night; the *"Korandonet"*—dwarfs, who appear in triangular fields. According to popular belief these have never lived a human life, but have always been the haunting spirits of waste and solitary places.—Translator.

soul may occasionally be permitted to leave the flames of hell for an instant to warn those who are praying for it to cease to do so, because each prayer increases its torments; but the case is exceptional.

The elect are not shut up in Paradise as the lost are in hell, but they rarely quit Heaven. The Dead, still needing help are chiefly those who come as protecting spirits of the household to sojourn amongst those whom they love, poor souls who are waiting till the goodness of God shall open to them the Heavenly Gates.

Some few legends, however, are recounted of the appearance of souls from out the Paradise of God, who have walked, clad in dazzling radiance by the side of the hero of the history, guiding him safely athwart a thousand perils to the end of his journey and the attainment of its object; but of their life with God, and of the mysterious world in which they dwell, they reveal nothing. They fulfil their mission almost in silence, disappearing like moonbeams into the celestial regions whence they descended. It does not seem certain that the popular imagination clearly distinguishes such from angels. One of these souls is often given, in Breton legends, the part ordinarily attributed to the Angel Guardian.

V

However great the number of the souls who consort with the living in their low-built stone houses, or who abide in the churchyards and in desert plains, they remain invisible to ordinary eyes, and few are the ears who hear in the quiet evening their soft and silent tread.

Nevertheless, this world is never without tidings of that other mysterious world, the world of departed Souls. Vague and distant echoes arise from thence continually, far-off sounds and sighs and tokens. No one dies without warning vouchsafed to some member of the family.

Certain individuals possess a special gift of sight, and the pages of the future lie partly open before them. Such can, to some extent, penetrate the secrets of death. They are constantly receiving warnings and foreshadowings. They apprehend signs hidden from the comprehension of those who are absorbed in the cares of this life. Human voices, and the sounds and movements of the material world, drown for most people the whispering voices of the Dead.

According to Breton belief, were we less taken up with our business and our pleasure, we should know almost all that goes on beyond the grave.

It is certain that some persons have greater endowments of this kind than have others. If a death is to take place in the neighbourhood, these receive some intimation. An old man, living near Quimper, was always warned when one of his neighbours was about to die, by knocks given by his stick on the wall against which it hung.

It is not certain, moreover, that those who deny the possibility of tokens are absolutely and always without such warnings, only they shrink from fearsome things, and desire to hear nothing of the other life. Many Bretons have a sort of involuntary shrinking from the mysterious world by which they are on every side surrounded, and which is so strangely interwoven with the actual and material world. All that concerns death has for Bretons a wonderful attraction, but is to some amongst them a terror likewise.

It is said to be dangerous to hold too close and frequent intercourse with the Souls who people the unseen world. It is even dangerous to know too much about the other life. Those who receive too frequent messages from the realm of the Departed are already marked by *"L'Ankou"* (the death-shadow). It is not unusual that one who has received strange revelations should die within a few weeks or months. It would seem as though the Souls, from their far-off dwelling-place, desired to draw the living to themselves, and that by coming amongst them they could enchant and enchain them, and carry them away captive to their silent land.

All these conceptions are of very ancient date. Belief in omens is linked with other and kindred ideas. Apparitions of departed Souls are believed both to foreshadow death and to cause it, and these tokens are not therefore considered as warnings from Heaven. Birds, animals, and, indeed, all creation, shudders at the approach of death. A bird flying round the house taps at the window, dogs howl, the magpie perches on the roof. No night passes without some signs announcing the presence of death. Death prowls perpetually round the living. The Bretons feel it ever present, and perchance it is the consciousness that its hand is ever uplifted to strike that gives them their strange sadness,—a sadness broken by occasional outbursts of merriment,—but, nevertheless, a grave and solemn sadness, which characterizes all of their race who have not imbibed the new French ideas.

Ceremonies, moreover, continued to the present day contribute to increase this vivid sense of the presence of death. For some of these, the faithful are assembled in the churchyards and the vaults, for others they are led on cold November nights along rough roads, whose hedges rustle with the rapid flight of swarms of Souls; and the wailing chants intoned by them are full of tragic and unutterable melancholy, as is above all that plaint of purgatorial pain, their sad supplication for prayers for *"L'Anaon"* (departed multitudes), which they sing in procession from house to house.

A lingering memory of its most mournful music must ever haunt the hearts of all who, in their screened wooden beds, lie listening to its strains, and must vibrate more strongly still in the souls of such as sing it in the chill, dark midnight of the All Saints' festival.

Amongst the Celtic race, the thought of death and of the after life is ever present. Everything combines to remind the Celt of death, and of the Hereafter; beliefs, ceremonies, legends, are all marked with the same tendency. This continual contact with death has deeply impressed the Breton mind. In no other land are those no longer in the body believed to be so continually mingling with those still in it.

The Dead may literally be said to retain their place in the family; the churchyard is but an extension of the hearth. Those who would communicate with their Dead visit it.

In great towns—in Paris, for instance—there is a sort of devotion to the Dead, but it is rather a devotion to their tombs than to the Dead themselves. There is no intimacy with them in it.

In Brittany it is as if the Departed had not quite gone away; indeed, that they are close at hand, although their abode is changed from the home to the churchyard. This explains the strenuous resistance of all efforts to remove the cemeteries from the villages. To Bretons it seems a sort of sacrilege, and a breaking up of the family, that the old should be forcibly removed from the dwellings of their children.

M. Renan regards the constant contemplation of the other life as a characteristic of the whole Celtic race. It is, at any rate, certain that their familiarity with death has imparted a distinctive peculiarity to the mind of the Celts of Armorica. In their very love songs a

sense of the fleetingness of all human happiness transpires. Love is a joy hardly tasted ere it has vanished. Love is nevertheless eternal, and lasts beyond life. The beloved one departed is no less loved than was that beloved one living. Love, alone eternal, and all else unreal, fleeting and fading as a dream;—that is the deepest thought of the sad, poetic Breton soul, and perhaps in no other land has that thought found such yearning and mysterious expression.