

Anne of the Isles

*A Breton Tradition*ⁱ

A long time ago in Finistère, near to the place where the town of Audierne was built, there was a village whose name is no longer known. Its outermost houses were on the edge of the sands, and washed the shingle of their walls in the waves during the high equinoctial tides. To one side of the village was the sea, to the other, a heath—a heath as arid as the sea, and as vast. Bread was often lacking in the hovels.

Now the people of the region either did not know, or had forgotten, the good God who comes to the help of those who suffer. They whispered; they blasphemed. And when, in the distance, the warning cannon boomed in the Baie des Trépassés,ⁱⁱ they fell to their knees and gave thanks to the Devil, then went down to the shore in crowds. The more furious the tempest was, the more joy they felt in their hearts. It was for them that the tempest worked.

“The sea has its crops,” they said, “as does the land; the tempest is the day of harvest.”

That was what they called the ships in distress which the torment threw on to the coast. When the crop—which is to say, the broken vessels—ripened, they ran to fall upon the shipwrecks.

“Equal shares!” they also said. “To us, the goods and the brandy; to the sea, the corpses!” And on the sands themselves, a hideous feast began. They drank, they slept, and then they drank again. Sometimes, a villager, overcome by drunkenness, might fall down a second time, and then awake, pale and dying, and drink again—and when he fell down again, it was never to rise again. When there was no longer anything to drink, they went back to their huts. Inertia followed intoxication. Those who did not die in the orgy died of starvation. Such was the way in which the people of the coast lived, before the town of Audierne was built.

People talk about the islands of America, which are full of tobacco and gold—people talk about them, but where are they? Who has seen them, save for sailors—and sailors are all liars. They lie dreaming in their string hammocks, and it is with their dreams that they entertain us on their return. The truth is that there are no islands in the world as beautiful as the isles of Brittany, and Ouessant is the most beautiful of those isles.

One day, the King said to Milord Jean:ⁱⁱⁱ “Ask me for one thing that is in my gift, my man, and you shall have it.” Milord Jean did not ask for Nantes, nor Rennes, nor Saint-Malo, nor even Douardenez. He said: “My King, I would like Ouessant, the beautiful isle.” The King smiled, but he did not know Ouessant. He had never seen it proudly raising its head in the middle of the Ocean. He had never seen the white diadem of mist crowning its forehead on summer mornings. The King did not know Ouessant.

In the days before Audierne was built, Ouessant had only one village, whose inhabitants were scarcely any better off than the people of the coast. They lived by pillage. When shipwrecks were lacking, they set their boats on the water and extorted ransom from the pious monks of the Île de Sen. The latter prayed to the Lord night and day for the conversion of their pagan neighbors, but the people of Ouessant—and especially those of the coast—had no wish to believe in a religion that commanded them to help shipwrecked sailors instead of finishing them off.

This is what happened on one autumn evening, in mid-September, when the tide was high.

The bell of the little monastery of Sen had just sounded the Angelus. All the doors had already been closed, so great in the convent was the fear of the pirates of the Yroise.^{iv} Occasional lights appeared here and there at barred windows; the candles were being lit in the chapel. Just as the first lines of the prayer became audible outside, a side-door of the convent opened and closed noiselessly and an old man, leaning on a long white staff, began to descend the sandy slope that led from the holy house to the sea.

He seemed to be very old, and walked with difficulty. From time to time, he paused to catch his breath; he lifted his head then and studied the sky anxiously.

The Moon, running behind the clouds like a white ship surrounded by vapor, occasionally emerged all of a sudden, and cast its light boldly upon the old man’s forehead. He was a man who had reached the utmost limit of life. His face was calm and gentle. His bald head was surrounded by a crown of white hair, so fine that it resembled the wisps of spring fog that play upon the crosses of calvaries at first light, describing silvery diadems about the divine forehead of Mary’s son.

The night was calm, but for an inhabitant of that region there were several manifest signs in the air of the approaching storm. The subsiding clouds were darkening in color on the horizon; the mist was breaking

up, allowing expanses of sea to be glimpsed here and there; a few mute flickers of light split the sky in the distance.

The monk continued on his way; the poor old fellow was making haste; rivulets of sweat formed on his wrinkled cheeks. As his face was struck by the first gust of the sea breeze, which suddenly sprang up, he released a dull groan.

“Holy Mother of God, pray for us,” he murmured.

He tried to increase his pace, stumbling over the shingle, often being forced to stop to wait for a glimmer of light to show him his path.

Suddenly, several lanterns appeared on the Breton coast, which began to vacillate like the lanterns of ships bobbing on the waves.^v Sometimes moving in a straight line, sometimes changing direction abruptly, they imitated the motion of a tacking ship.

The monk stopped as if overwhelmed.

“Lord God!” he cried, falling to his knees. “Will you not permit that the Devil should be vanquished in the hearts of these miserable savages?”

Anne was the daughter of Joël Bras, more commonly known as the priest of the isles. Joël, during his lifetime, had been the last relic of a once-powerful community whose name was familiar to the old.^{vi} He could conjure storms with the aid of the ninth string of his harp, and ride on the shaft of a lance to pay visits to the evil spirits. He was a powerful and redoubtable man; the people of Ouessant and the coast feared him. It was said that his dwelling-place contained incalculable treasures. When the servants of the true God had come to establish themselves on Sen, they had wrought several conversions at first—but Joël had become irritated. He had threatened to compose a song so fearsome that the sea would quit its bed and whiten the highest roofs of the village with its foam. Joël was believed, and the holy monks were persecuted.

Joël, however, had passed from this life, and his daughter, the beautiful Anne of the Isles, had inherited all his influence. Anne was a pagan, like her father, but she was gentle and compassionate; more than one unfortunate shipwrecked sailor owed his life to her. If the deceptive lanterns of the coast sometimes suddenly ceased shining, no longer drawing sailors in peril to certain death, it was because Anne had a bow and arrows, and her arrow never missed its mark.

Like all the priestesses of that time, she was sworn to celibacy, but the false religion she professed now had only the feeblest empire over the hearts of the men of Ouessant and the coast. The last priest was dead; Anne was beautiful. The young men of the region, who knew no other god than their passions, looked at her with desire.

The boldest of them, Niel Roz de Kermor, leapt into his boat one evening and disembarked on the shore of Sen, beneath the cliff where Joël’s daughter made her home. Niel tied up his boat and climbed the cliff. The following day, the boat’s debris was strewn upon the sands of Ouessant, and no one ever saw Niel Roz de Kermor again. After that, everyone trembled at the mere mention of the name of Anne of the Isles. The blood of Joël ran in her veins. She was a priestess and a magician. Woe betide any man whose path crossed hers!

In the evening, when fog enveloped the bay, her boat was sometimes seen, playing like a light wisp of spray upon the highest summits of the waves, then descending precipitously into the troughs between the billows, before climbing up the turbulent slopes to fall and rise again. The fishing-boats turned aside from her course. Not for all the gold in the world could a man have been found between Douardenez and the isles of Ouessant to cut across the wake of her skiff. Even if it necessitated a long detour, they would take to the open sea rather than cross that magic barrier—where, it was said, Death hid just beneath the surface, lying in wait for his prey.

Anne seemed to encourage this custom herself, and avoided the gazes of men. It only took a minute for her to lose herself in the mist or behind a rock. Neither reefs nor submerged rocks could inhibit her progress. The slightest draught of water seemed sufficient for her skiff. Perhaps she even knew how to leap like the flying fish of which ocean-going mariners tell—fish that have wings and fly just like birds, or so the sailors say.

During storms, she lowered her sail and quit the rudder. One might see her then sitting in the stern of her boat, immobile, with her arms folded, in an attitude of intrepid indifference. Then, where the fishing-boats foundered, Anne’s boat would pass by, stroking the water with its keel, scarcely moistening the timbers of its hull in the foaming waves. Storms respected Anne, who was Joël’s blood.

No one could say that this powerful virgin was a malevolent creature. If Niel Roz de Kermor had been punished, it was because he had been reckless.

A time came, however, when Anne of the Isles began to board her skiff more frequently, and to come much closer to the coast. When the weather remained calm, she kept her distance, as she had before, but when the sea wind surged into the bay she came running. Her boat, ever swift and sure of its route, ploughed the sea—in more than one sense of the word. Anne searched for unfortunates in need of her help.

Superstitious fishermen often grew fearful in seeing Anne's skiff pounce upon their distressed ship, as a sparrowhawk falls upon its prey. They trembled and invoked the impotent gods of their forefathers. As Anne approached, the fishermen, paralyzed by fear, would cover their faces with their hands and let themselves fall into the bottom of their boat. When they got up again, they found themselves safe and sound on the shore; Anne and her skiff had disappeared.

Some of them finally became bold enough to dare, in these moments of supreme peril, to keep one eye open and watch this woman surrounded in mystery. They saw her put her hand to her forehead and then to her breast, then to each shoulder in turn, murmuring unknown words, as the monks of Sen did. They saw her throw a little grappling-hook on to their boats, hoist her sail, and thus take them in tow. They went quickly then, so quickly that they lost their breath. To these, the daughter of Joël said as she left: "Remember! And do for others as I have done for you!" Then her skiff would set forth on the waves again, and lose itself behind the billows.

This conduct had changed the course of the superstition. Anne was regarded as a favorable divinity; she was still feared, but she was loved, and if she had demanded anything but pity for shipwrecked sailors, they would undoubtedly have obeyed her.

When the monk arrived at the goal of his nocturnal excursion, the sky was completely covered by thick clouds. The swell was mounting, and the sinister racket that is the precursor of the tempest was audible in the distance over the waves.

The old man had stopped on a bare and arid cliff standing sheer above the Ocean. He released a profound sigh of relief, like that of a man who has just completed an onerous task. Rapping the rock with his iron-tipped staff, he sat down.

Nothing in that wild and remote place seemed to motivate the monk's joy; there was no cross to which he might have come in pilgrimage, and no roof for half a league around to which he might have come for a rendezvous. Even so, the old man waited patiently. He held his head in his hands, reflectively.

A voice, which was exquisitely soft, but also strong and vibrant, pronounced these words close at hand: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Dom Geoffroy, I greet you. Be welcome." And, as large drops of rain driven by a furious wind lashed the monk's bare forehead, a small and gentle hand seized his in the shadows.

A moment later, he was sitting on a wooden seat in a kind of hall illuminated by a resinous torch. Kneeling beside him was a young woman of 18 years, whose charming face almost disappeared beneath a profusion of blonde hair cascading over her shoulders. She inclined her head and spoke; the monk listened. When she fell silent, the monk began to speak in his turn, and in the name of the Lord he forgave the sins that she had just confessed in the secret tribunal.

Anne of the Isles—it was her—got up and pushed back her beautiful curls. "Father," she said, "I thank God for having sent you to me at this hour, for the storm promises to be terrible, and my duty is calling me."

Dom Geoffroy did not reply. He studied the young girl in a contemplative manner, seemingly plunged in a profound reverie. He was doubtless thinking of that divine clemency which, causing a salutary herb to grow beside the poisonous one, had placed an angel of devotion and charity in the vicinity of the ferocious people of the coast.

The very place where he presently found himself encouraged his reverie. It was a kind of semi-subterranean hall constructed in a large anfractuosity in the rock.^{vii} A massive granite table in the middle—on which were engraved certain symbols, customarily employed by sorcerers and priests of the sinister religion followed by the people of the coast before Audierne was built—told of the ceremonies that had previously been conducted in this refuge.

The gilded sickle that had served Anne in the days when her father had initiated her into the secret knowledge was suspended on the wall next to old Joël Bras' harp and sacred knife—but the harp, the blade and the sickle were covered in dust, while the image of Christ hanging above the young woman's bed shone, testifying to the respectful care lavished upon it every day.

From outside, on the heights of the cliff, none of this was visible. The roof of the subterranean dwelling, almost as old as the ground, was covered along its entire length by a bed of moss and sea-wrack similar in every respect to the surrounding vegetation.

“My daughter,” the monk said, eventually, “you are strong and you are courageous, but you will not be sufficient to your task tonight.”

“There’s a ship in the bay,” Anne replied. “I know that.”

“There are two ships, my daughter.”

“May God protect them,” Anne murmured. “If the efforts of a Christian woman can save them, Father, they shall not die.”

“Noble child!” Dom Geoffroy said, putting his hand on Anne’s shoulder. “The courage of faith is within you; but it is unnecessary to tempt Providence, and tonight you shall have an auxiliary.”

“Who?” demanded the young girl, excitedly.

“Niel Roz de Kermor,” Dom Geoffroy pronounced, slowly, fixing her with a piercing and troubled gaze.

Anne shivered at that name. A sudden blush covered her cheeks—which, thereafter, became whiter than freshly-fallen snow.

“Niel Roz de Kermor!” she repeated.

“He is coming,” said Dom Geoffroy

“Here!” cried the daughter of Joël, agitatedly. “Niel Roz, here. Never!” Then, getting abruptly to her feet and making an effort to collect herself, she said: “Niel Roz de Kermor came in here once, Father. The door will never open to him again.”

“Alas!” the holy man said to himself. “Who will save the sailors in distress?”

“Listen to me, Father,” Anne of the Isles went on, in a calm but firm tone. “Niel Roz is a good sailor; let him embark in the convent’s boat.”

“The convent no longer has one, daughter. The pirates of Ouessant...”

“I understand. What do you expect of me, then?”

“I wanted,” the old man said, “to strike a salutary terror into the hardened hearts of the inhabitants of the coast. Niel has not reappeared among them since the fatal day when...”

“I know that, Father.”

“They believe that he is dead. If they saw him suddenly appear among them at the moment when they were occupied with their abominable task of stripping the wreck, perhaps they would be stricken by fear, to the extent of abandoning their prey.”

Anne reflected for a while.

“They would abandon it,” she said. “I believe they would. But it would be necessary to put Niel Roz in my boat.”

“It would indeed be necessary, daughter.”

They heard the noise of an iron-tipped staff knocking on the rock.

“Well?” said the monk.

Anne got up. “I’ll take Niel Roz to dry land,” she said.

ⁱ Féval adds a footnote to this subtitle, which translates as follows: “This tradition, which is still popular in Morbihan, but which the inhabitants of the Yroise coast have, by contrast, forgotten, was doubtless brought to Sourdéac (in Morbihan) by the vassals of the Marquis d’Ouessant, the lord of Sourdéac. The anachronisms that the rustic tellers have introduced into the story are obvious to everyone, and we felt that they should be retained in order to conserve the story’s color. We have written, so far as is possible, that which we have often heard recounted in Brittany, in the neighborhood of the ruined manor of the ancient lords of Rieux, who were masters of Ouessant for a long time.”

ⁱⁱ *Baie des Trépassés* translates as “Bay of the Dead.” The bay in question—so called because of the number of shipwreck victims whose bodies washed ashore there—although it was also rumored to be the site of the drowned city of Ys—is some 30 kilometers west of the port of Douardenez, within walking distance of both the Pointe du Raz (the westernmost point of the Brittany peninsula) and the much smaller port of Audierne, which is in Baie d’Audierne on the southern side of the point. The Île de Sein—which Féval renders as Sen—is visible from the point, a few kilometers out to sea.

ⁱⁱⁱ Féval adds a footnote to explain that the reference is to Jean de Rieux, Marquis d’Ouessant.

^{iv} Féval adds a footnote here to say that the Yroise is a gulf lying between Ouessant and the Pointe du Raz, some way to the south of the island. The more usual modern spelling is Iroise—the word is has the same etymology as of “Irish.” The channel passing between Ouessant and the Île de Sein/Sen retains its dangerous reputation—occasioned by its numerous sandbanks and submerged rocks—to the present day. Féval supplements his own footnote with the observation that the causeway of Sen (which he casually mistranslates as “the Saints”) is at the southwestern edge of the Yroise. It is, however, doubtful that he had ever visited the island, which does not rise more than six meters above sea level and certainly does not possess the cliffs he describes.

^v Féval inserts a footnote here, which translates as follows: “Several writers have described this phenomenon, and everyone knows about that barbarous practice which consists of hanging lanterns on the horns of hobbled cattle—which is to say, animals rendered lame by cords hindering their limbs. The limping of these animals as they walk along the edges of cliffs, imitates the swaying movement of a ship under sail, deceiving mariners who have entered the bay.”

^{vi} Had Féval not inserted a footnote here, his contemporary readers, as well as many modern ones, would certainly have inferred that the unvoiced term was *druides* (druids). The word he actually uses in his terse footnote is, however, *bardes* (bards).

^{vii} I have used the exact English equivalent of Féval’s *anfractuosité*, although it is a rather esoteric term, because “cave” would not do it justice. More usually encountered in the plural, it refers to a particular type of deep and irregular hollow produced in conglomerate cliffs by the differential weathering of their constituent rocks.