

# *The Diabolical Architect*

Dom Iehan, the rector of Noyal-Pontivy, was, with good reason, happy with his parishioners. When he had arrived in the country, the small town, at the top of the hill that, at the source of the Blavet river, faces the great Branguili woods, was only a mass of poor shacks that exuded misery through all their openings. There was not yet even a church.

Dom Iehan had a reputation for not mincing his words. He went right to the point. "I must," he declared, have a place to say Mass; otherwise, I must harness my Bas-Breton pony and return to Vannes to ask the bishop for a flock more concerned with their duties."

The inhabitants of Noyal were, and they still are, decent and fervent Christians. The thought of seeing the Bas-Breton pony part for Vannes greatly upset them. What would the people in the neighboring parishes say?

They soon got to work and one might believe that things did not lag. The rich provided money and stones, the poor, the work of their hands, and, at the end of the year, the church was built. It resembled, more, one must acknowledge, a vast warehouse than a cathedral; whitewashed walls and bright ochre illumination, windows hardly big enough to allow seeing the priest at the altar, a floor of large, badly-sized stones. Nevertheless, it pleased the Noyalais, who happily assembled there each day, and who unconsciously abandoned forbidden pleasures to engage in religious ceremonies.

Dom Iehan was elated: "We're doing marvelously. I shall make little saints of my parishioners." And he multiplied the offices and the songs, lest the crowd should miss even one. Ah! The fellow was right to be content.

There was, all the same, a villainous character who, hidden there in a corner, was miserable about this general transformation. That one was the devil of the parish, for, as everyone knows, the parishes, just as they each have their own angel, also have their old particular devil. He had the name Satibus, a horrible little demon, hardly three inches tall, bandy-legged, and lame, with the head of an owl, two humps on his back and one on his stomach, but more cunning than ten tailors. Cornibus, the supreme master of Hell, had chosen him out of a thousand, to try to

debauch the excellent parish of Noyal, and until that day, he had succeeded well enough.

The building of that church and the change that occurred in the minds of the inhabitants in overturning his efforts, had exasperated him. He had beautifully whispered the seven deadly sins into their ears and strove to slip them into their hearts, but he could have spared himself the trouble. The most faithful of his friends instantly turned their backs on him.

Since the damned Dom Iehan allowed himself to take away Satibus' livelihood, he knew very well that, in time, Satibus would mix some bitterness into his happiness and throw some discordant notes in the middle of his prayers and his pious chants. The little devil swore that he would not let the place give in, and immediately he had become involved in a fight without mercy. One must remember that Satibus had been in Noyal for a long time.

One evening, at the end of a ceremony that had attracted such a multitude of people that the font of holy water ran dry, Satibus had successfully slipped into the church. He was alone. Before him, there were only rows of pews garnished a short time ago, confessionals where people destroyed his work so well, the pulpit from where anathemas fell so thickly onto him and his brothers. He therefore now had the leisure to finally give his grudge free reign.

With one flick of his wrist, everything went topsy-turvy. An awful black mass began. Candles and chandeliers flew around, the pews knocked together with a clash, the confessionals danced the ronde, and the pulpit lifted its feet in the air. It was enough to disturb the dead in the graveyard.

Jolted awake, the inhabitants ran to the church, Dom Iehan at their head. He had recognized the work of his most intimate enemy.

"Wait a minute, you cursed devil," he grumbled, "You will not bring this church to Hell." And, aspergillum in hand, his stole at his neck, he dashed forward. Satibus ran towards the door. It was bolted. He hid behind the altar, then in the baptismal fonts, but the rector was hot on his heels, ceaselessly. Satibus heard his *Asperges* and his *Vade retro*, and he fell into the holy water like cast lead, onto his spine. His skin and horns were scalded.

Not knowing where to find a way out, he finished by taking refuge in a corner. He was there, just like a cat with bristly fur standing up to a dog. He slipped through a hole in the wall, with a sigh of relief.

Dom Iehan and his parishioners let out an exclamation of anger. How they regretted not being able to better chastise the horned villain who had reduced their church to such a pitiable state!

However, the evil thank God, was not irreparable, and the inhabitants of Noyal promised themselves to rebuild the wall and put everything back in place, as soon as day had come. They counted on their guest.

The devil is tenacious and one cannot impose upon him easily.

As Dom Iehan and his parishioners searched for a well-earned rest after this stormy hunt, Satibus, taking refuge in the ossuary, was dressing his wounds, and, as he watched them pass by, he murmured: "Good evening, my friends! Sleep well! *I'll* continue the work. I will prove to you how I can perfect a makeshift job."

On his tiptoes, he re-entered the church and then his beautiful work began. As though pretending to knock over the edifice, he pounded at the walls with his horns, creating holes which he then enlarged with his claws. There were soon as many holes as drops of holy water on his back. The church resembled an immense strainer, where air and light circulated with pleasure.

He then took to the beams which, arranged horizontally, held up the ceiling, twisted them, broke them in half and straightened them, their extremities leaning one atop the other, a prodigy of equilibrium suspending them in the air. Without a doubt, Satibus had accomplished an architectural miracle. The church, in spite of its fortifications and the cracks in its ceiling, remained upright, appearing to be more solid than ever.

One judges the amazement and the indignation of the Noyalais, when, the next day, their tools in their hands, they arrived to repair the damages of the night before.

It was clear that the devil had completed this act of malice, and the evil was graver than they could imagine. Their house of prayers, with its broken arches, resembled the spits that coalmen built in the forest of Branguili to roast their logs rather than a church.

Their cries of distress reached the throne of Saint Noyale, their patron, in the destination of the blessed. "This outrage is addressed to you," they said to her. "It's up to you to avenge us."

Saint Noyale had never been insensitive to the prayers of her people, and moreover, she had wanted for a long time to counter the damned Satibus. She threw herself at the feet of the Good Lord in order to plead for justice.

“How terrible!” replied the Good Lord. “The devil is now attacking the Church. His audacity is beyond the permitted limits. Go, my daughter, entrust the matter to Saint Peter. He is the cornerstone of all churches. He will know very well how to right the wrong that the devil has done to the church of Noyal.”

Saint Peter was already on the road to Brittany when his messenger angels encountered him. Since it was a matter of chastising the Devil, the duty pleased him. He left immediately for Noyal. The sight of the desolation to which he was witness excited him to the highest point of his anger. The good people did not dare to enter the church, nor touch its walls, and as they did not want to forsake Mass, they contented themselves by following Dom Iehan’s gaze through the large windows that the devil had opened. They had just applied buttresses against the two sides in order to prevent a fall that they believed to be imminent.

Their first words upon seeing the saint appear were: “Punish him!” Dom Iehan was the most upset. He threw his hands in the air. “You might as well throw the church to the earth,” he repeated, “or else it will fall on our heads.”

Saint Peter smiled knowingly. “Not at all!” he said. “The work of the devil is better than you expected and than he himself intended. His villainy is going to create confusion and glorify the Devil.”

With his right hand, he gave the sign of the cross, and that is how a singular miracle was produced. The holes in the wall were transformed into elegant doors and delicately-worked windows. The choir window, with its immense, wonderfully lit bay, resembled the entry to Heaven. The projecting stones were decorated with ornaments, the twisted beams of the ceiling were shaped into a graceful ogival vault<sup>1</sup>, and the buttresses became beautiful motifs of decoration that harmonized with the body of the edifice.

Instead of the building without style or taste that they had built, the Noyalais now had a superb church, which they have had since, with its three aisles, its columns, and its pillars decorated with flowers and symbolic animals, the fine piers of its vaults, and its skylights in shining colors, through which the rays of the sun shine gold and purple.

Now, only Satibus’ punishment remained. The apostle called him with a gesture: “Come here, cursed being, and look at this door. I forbid you from passing through it henceforth; you will no longer enter inside this church.”

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<sup>1</sup> A vault in the shape of an ogive, or “pointed or Gothic arch.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “ogive,” accessed August 05, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130832>. – Trans.

Never, since the master of Hell left him in charge of sowing evil in the hearts of the Noyalais, had the villainous little demon suffered such an outrage. How to satisfy his vengeance and re-establish his prestige? He left to ask his master, Cornibus and his two ministers, Crabonec and Lostehir, for a hand. They promised him their cooperation and the four of them departed for Noyal. They did not think of entering the church; that was forbidden, but it was not forbidden to climb on top:

“Hey! Go away, Peter the renegade,” murmured Cornibus maliciously, “I led you once to sin. I will know how to play a nasty trick on you. Patience! There will also be one for Dom Iehan and his parishioners.”

The four evil beings installed themselves on the roof of the church and began their work. Soon, the parishioners saw a strange construction that resembled nothing that they had ever known. It took root on the walls of the edifice and then it climbed very high into the azure, tapering off in the form of an arrow, as if the demons had sought to break into Heaven’s door. The tower of Noyal was built.

What was the purpose of this in the demons’ plans? The Noyalais knew when they saw the demons place a rooster at its summit, whose sonorous voice rose to the heavens. The treachery was obvious; it was to ceaselessly remind Saint Peter up there of his long-ago betrayal.

As for Dom Iehan and his Noyalais, they were also perfectly served. Their church became untenable. Installed on the tower, the four devils began an endless drinking binge, drawing wine from bronze cups as fast as cauldrons, accompanied with drinking songs that were scandalous to pious ears.

At the morning office, that is another story. They suspended the goblets from the scaffolds and hit the tops of the goblets with gavels, with such a racket that the choir could not hear each other anymore and Dom Iehan’s prayers were muddled.

They did so well that the noise reached Saint Peter at Heaven’s door. The rooster’s voice had also reached him and his indignation was great. He ran back to Noyal post-haste.

There was a free-for-all amongst the demons. Already, their bodies stooped over the summit of the tower’s buttresses, they were racing from the space, when the thundering voice of the apostle rang out: “*Chomet*<sup>2</sup>. All who are alive on top of

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<sup>2</sup> Stay.

this church shall die and remain fixed here until the end of time.” The demons did not budge anymore. Their bodies were petrified at its four sides, and they saw only gargoyles in their places whose grimacing figures jutted out over the cemetery. The rooster on top ceased to hurl its injurious cock-a-doodle-doos and turned to bronze content to spin as a weather vane with all winds. The cups fixed on the beams became bells, whose harmonious sound rang out all the way to Neuillac and Pontivy, Moustoir-Remungol and Naizan.

And that is how the Devil worked to the profit of the Noyalais. He was worth a church, whose gracious structure excites the admiration of artists, and gave them an imposing bell tower whose rooster proudly dominates the countryside, whose gargoyles who strike fear into the souls of sinners, and whose bells cause the ears of true Christians to rejoice. Over the course of time, other churches took the example of Noyal and people saw beautiful gothic edifices with towers, roosters, gargoyles, and bell towers rise all over Brittany. Once again, the Devil had unknowingly worked for the Good Lord; Cornibus and Satibus, Crabonec and Lostehir were excellent workers.

François Cadic, *Contes et legends de Bretagne*, Paris, Maison du peuple Breton, 1922.

Translated by Michelle Collins.