

The Two Friends

Two ploughmen from Botserhel, Pierre Le Cam and François Courtès, loved each other in a friendship so close that they hid nothing from each other and they shared everything, pain as well as pleasure. For ten years, they lived in such a perfect union for ten years, without the least disagreement between the two of them.

“Death alone is capable of separating us,” they often said.

Still, they swore that they first of them to die would, with God’s permission, come to inform the other one of his fate in the other world.

It was Pierre Le Cam whom the Ankou struck first: he was carried off in a terrible fever, having just turned twenty-five years old. Courtès never left his bedside while he was ill, and only walked away from his grave when the gravedigger had finished leveling the hallowed ground.

The night following the burial, he went to lie down at his usual time, but he did not sleep. His thoughts were too preoccupied with knowing where his friend was, what he was doing, and whether he was not too sad to have left the world of the living. Another reason why he did not let himself fall asleep was to wait for the visit of poor Pierre Le Cam, and for nothing in the world would he have wanted him to find him asleep.

When he thought of all these things, his heart full of sorrow, out on the cobblestones in his yard, he heard walking. By the sound of the footsteps alone, he recognized his friend, who was coming towards him. And indeed, almost immediately, the door to the stable where he slept opened slightly.

“I did not trick myself,” he thought.

As desirous as he was to see the friend he had loved again, he did not even allow himself to tremble in fear, when the voice that was so dear to him asked, in the darkness:

“Are you sleeping, François?”

He responded quietly:

“No, Pierrik. I was not sleeping. I was waiting for you.”

“Well! Stand up, and come with me.”

Courtès did not even inquire as to where he wanted to lead him, and stood up at once. When he finished getting dressed, he headed for the door, and, on the stone of the doorstep, he saw Le Cam standing, draped in a shroud. As he looked at him in this sad garment with a sorrowful air, Le Cam said to him:

“Alas! Yes, my friend, this shroud is all that I own henceforth.”

“And how did you get there?”

“It’s so that you can see that I have come to search for you, for I have the right to let you see it for yourself, if you consent to it, but not the right to tell you about it.”

“Let’s go,” François Courtès replied. “I am ready.”

His friend brought him rapidly towards the pond at the mill of Goazwad which was about a quarter-hour’s walk from the farm. When they arrived at the banks of the water, the revenant said to his companion:

“Take off your clothes, including your clogs, and make yourself completely naked.”

“Why?” the other interrogated, a bit troubled.

“To enter the pond with me.”

“What are you thinking of doing? The night is very cold, the water is high, and I don’t want to swim.”

“Calm down; you are not going to swim.”

“But still, no matter what happens, I have resolved to follow you, wherever you lead me: I will follow you.”

At that same instant, the dead man leapt into the pond and the living man was in there just as soon. The two of them sunk and sunk, until their feet touched the sand. Le Cam took Courtès by the hand. He was completely surprised to breathe underwater with such ease, as though he were out in the fresh air. But, for example, he shivered with all of his limbs and his teeth chattered as hard as rocks that one bangs together. It was so cold in this frozen pond.

After they had been there for perhaps an hour, Courtès, who felt numb, inquired:

“Must I stay here for long?”

“Are you in such a hurry to leave me?” replied the other.

“Certainly not, and you know very well that I am never happy unless we are together...But it’s horribly cold and I am suffering more than I can say.”

“Well! Triple your suffering, and you will have an idea of how much I suffer.”

“My poor Pierrik!”

“And also note that you are lessening it by your presence, and even that you are shortening the length of my ordeal by sharing it.”

“Then, I will remain here as long as is necessary.”

“When the *Angelus* of the morning sounds, you shall have your liberty.”

It finally sounded at the bell tower of Botsorhel, this *Angelus*. Courtès returned safe and sound to the place where he had left his herds.

“Farewell!” his friend, whose head was completely immersed in the water, said to him. “If you have the courage to begin again tonight, you will see me again.”

“I will wait for you like yesterday,” replied Courtès.

And he went to join the other men of the farm in the field, as though he had passed the night sleeping. The evening came and he lay down, but completely dress, so that he would be ready sooner at his friend’s call. Le Cam appeared at the same time as the previous night, and, like the previous night, they went to the pond. There, things passed in the exact same way, except that the suffering of the living man was two times crueler.

“Will you have the courage to begin again one more time, only one more?” the dead man asked him.

“Even if I were to die from it, I would be faithful to you to the end,” said Courtès.

When he arrived to labor, the master of the farm was struck to see how pale and worn out he was.

“This fellow,” he thought, “must have passed the night at the cemetery, on the grave of his friend whose death made him inconsolable.”

And he promised himself that he would spy on him the next night. He had to spy on him until midnight. As the moon was bright, he then saw the revenant travel across the yard, push open the stable door, enter it, then leave with François Courtès, then the two young men, one living and one dead, moving towards the mill: he slipped into the shadows of the embankment upon hearing their footsteps. A willow branch, which jutted out over the pond, allowed him to dive in as well and to listen to their conversation under the water.

“Oh! I can’t do this anymore! I can’t do this anymore!” complained Courtès.

And the other did not cease repeating to his friend:

“Courage! Courage!”

“No! I feel faint. I will never last till the *Angelus*!”

“Yes, yes! Be strong! Two more hours...an hour and a half longer...and thanks to you I will be saved! Think of that. Our pains will have ended and you will open up for me the joys of Heaven and you will soon join me.”

The farmer, behind his willow tree, sweated from anguish. He wished to flee and did not dare to make a movement. Finally, the sky became white: the *Angelus* sounded. Immediately, from the bottom of the pond, two great cries gushed out:

“François!”

“Pierrik!”

And the farmer saw a kind of smoke rise above the waters, then lose itself in the clouds, as Courtès, exhausted, had just collapsed at his feet, onto the bank. He hastened to leap to his aid, passed him his clothes, and, as he was not in a condition

to walk, carried him over his shoulders to the farm where the poor boy only had time to receive extreme unction¹ before taking his final breath.

Told by Jean Dénès – Guerlesquin.

Anatole Le Braz. *La légende de la mort chez les Bretons armoricains t.2*. Paris:

Honoré Champion, 1902.

Translated by Michelle Collins.

¹ In the Roman Catholic Church, the blessing of the terminally ill before they die.