

## THE ROCK OF SAINT AARON

THE town of Saint-Malo is well known to the tourists who land there on their way to Paramé or Dinard or the remoter summer haunts of Lower Brittany. Well known at least externally, and as to its more obvious features—the old walls, the single pointing spire, the great castle of the Duchess Anne, the beautiful surrounding waters—but scarcely at all beyond these. And yet there is much to know for those who care to look for it; a whole world, as it were, of history, of tradition, of by-ways that lead into a rather wonderful past.

There is, for instance, a very ancient and picturesque quarter not far from the Cathedral, yet only to be reached by twisting alleys and narrow lanes, where you will pass by the *Cour La Houssaye*; this is no more than a widening of the way, a little airier than its surroundings, perhaps, but not so important as its name would convey. Yet here stands the House of the Duchess Anne, where she lodged before she carried the white Ermines of Brittany into the shield of France; a haunted place, as the old grandmothers will tell you, with its ancient walls, its turret stair and the window whence she saw the Rider on the White Horse . . . . but that is another story and not the one that I wish to tell you to-day. So we will pass on and, threading these tortuous ways, come presently to a narrow quiet street at the end of which stands the House of the *Dames-de-Saint-Aaron* and behind it the little chapel—very rarely open to visitors—which is the real core and heart of the city, and to every Malouin, doubly, trebly, sacred ground. For here, much more than a thousand years ago, lived and died one of the very early saints of this part of Armorica, the Clos-Poulet.

## *Blackfriars*

Most of us know something of that wonderful flock of Celtic missionaries that travelled over from Ireland and Wales and Scotland to this little Britain beyond the seas; and here, where they came to teach and pray, their names are still familiar and unforgettten. Local legend has gathered about them, dates have grown misty, but they are still gratefully remembered and loved. And here, on the summit of this rock, before the waters swept in over the forest of Scissy, dwelt one of the earliest of these British missionaries, Saint-Aaron, where presently he was joined by the greatest of his disciples, Saint-Malo, who landed on what is now an island far out in the wide bay, but was then dry land and the port of Aleth—or as it has now become in the passing of time, Saint-Servan. Here where we stand on the highest point of the old town, was then but the barren top of a nameless rock rising above the forest, the marshes, and the distant, treacherous sands; no town, no hamlet, no man-built habitation at all. There may have been, in the beginning, the small protection of a shallow cave; even this is doubtful. But presently there was a rude heap of uncemented stones fashioned by the hands of Saint-Aaron himself into a primitive sanctuary. For long centuries after, the people of the neighbouring town of Aleth had no other name for this spot than the *Rocher Saint-Aaron*.

Here in this poor hermitage the good saint lived and taught; and when the fogs crept in from off the sea, he sounded his great conch-shell to warn and guide wanderers in the forest below. And here in his old age he died and was buried by his disciple and successor Saint-Malo, who was to give his name to the town which long after was founded on this same rock. But if Saint-Malo, first Christian Bishop of Aleth, was remembered, Saint-Aaron also was not forgotten; for in the tenth century his body was removed to the Cathedral and laid beside many other of the early missionaries

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who had come to evangelize the Clos-Poulet and the rest of Brittany. There for long years he lay in peace; but when the Revolution laid profane hands on the churches, his body was taken up secretly and brought back to be re-buried here in the dead of night, without state and without ceremony. And so it happens that on this spot where so long ago he lived and died, he sleeps to-day; and in this small and hidden little oratory on the summit of his rock, Saint-Aaron is still at home.

Yet his body, though it lies here, is not quite complete; one arm of him is still guarded as it has been for centuries in the Treasury of the Cathedral. I do not know where it was hidden during the days of the Red Terror, but it came back, it seems, as soon as peace returned to France—though I hope it is no longer needed for its ancient uses. For when in days gone by the English ships came in sight amid the mists to the northward, the Honourable Chapter walked in solemn procession through the streets and round the ramparts, bearing with them the Arm of Saint-Aaron in its golden case and singing as they went the litany that claimed his help and protection against the ancient enemy; the litany that was sung in every church in Saint-Malo when the warning came that the English were in sight —

*A furore Anglicorum  
Libera nos, Domine!*

—whereat the town took confidence, and feared no longer. And therefore, the Malouins will tell you, she remained virgin and impregnable, being guarded by her ancient saints; and therefore also the Arm of Saint-Aaron does not lie to-day in the chapel that bears his name. But this small oratory with its quaint wooden figures of Aaron the hermit and Malo the first Bishop of Aleth, where the guide will not enter but remains

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kneeling and reverent on the threshold—this is veritably the beginning and the birthplace of the city, the first of it that emerges from the mists of time; the cradle of its history, of all that has come and gone upon this rock in the passing of centuries. It is in truth sacred ground, and it has been sacred already for more than a thousand years.

The present chapel is not old, as things go in Saint-Malo; it was erected early in the seventeenth century over the spot where still stood at that time the rude hermitage of uncemented stones that according to tradition was the cell built by Saint-Aaron's own hands. However that may be, there is still under the existing floor the rough rock-surface which has almost certainly been untouched and undisturbed—save where his bones lie—since that far-off sixth century when the feet of the saint daily trod it. That is wonderful enough, and in the main is reliable history. But there is legend also, and the good folk of Saint-Malo are still ready to tell it.

It seems that in the early spring of the year 709 (and it is not my fault that the dates do not coincide; the legend is precise and declares that it was in Lent) when Hoel was king in Brittany, he lost his way one day when he and his court were hunting in the great forest of Scissy. They had been out long and it was growing late; the king was faint with thirst and hunger, when in the distance he heard a friendly tinkle and following the sound he came to the steep rock in the middle of the forest on the summit of which Saint-Aaron was ringing his little bell for the Angelus (again I take no responsibility).

‘For the love of God,’ cried the king, ‘give me, father, but a crust of bread and a cup of water!’

‘Wait, my son, and you shall all of you have a good Lenten supper,’ was the reply, and the good saint

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hurried away to the hidden basin beside his cell, that was fed by a spring of sweet water.

In a couple of minutes he returned, bearing with him on a great wooden platter the wonderful fish that needed no cooking and was his sole sustenance. He went from the king to his followers, serving each with an ample slice; and lo! the fish was whole again after each helping and at the end, being returned to the pool, 'commenced to swim about and praise God.'

Hoel was amazed—but less, it seems, at this miracle than that there should be so rare a thing as a fish upon this rock so far removed from the sea. He asked Saint-Aaron how this could be, since he himself had none. 'Game we hunt and cattle we own,' he added, 'but fish are afar off in the great waters.'

Whereupon the good saint, pointing to the distant blue line beyond the furthest forest, promised his help, 'for you shall gather,' he said, 'that which shall be brought to your very threshold, wherewith to keep your Lent.' And incontinent, according to the old legend, *le bon Dieu* sent His sea inland on the great tide; and ever since then the waters have lain deep over what was once the wide forest of Scissy, and ever since then fish has been plentiful in the Clos-Poulet for all those who keep their Lent faithfully.

And here is something at least of history; for this great engulfing tide did sweep in and surround Saint-Malo in the year 709—and as to the rest, well, Saint-Aaron himself is no legend, and this rock where his memory is still preserved, was indeed his home as it is now his grave. And about the time of the feast, in the summer days of June, you can visit his resting-place.

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