

# “The Cemetery of the Innocents, Paris”

(France)

By William Walton

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The article begins:

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ANCIENT CEMETERY DES INNOCENTS IN THE RUE AUX FERS, PARIS, IN 1790.

Showing the charniers full of skulls. After a design by Bernier. The accumulation of remains during 8 or 9 centuries in this place had become so great an evil that in 1786 they were all transferred to the catacombs and a market was erected in this spot. From *Paris Known and Unknown*, George Barrie & Sons, Philadelphia.

### The Cemetery of the Innocents, Paris.

The ancient church and cemetery of the Saints-Innocents of Paris was one of the most celebrated monuments of the mediæval city, and in the details of its history may be found some of the most striking characteristics of the manners and customs of the so-called dark ages. The church was built by the king Philippe-Auguste, who came to the throne in 1180, and the funds were supplied by the banishment of the Jews from the kingdom and the confiscation of their property. The site, at the corner of the Rue Saint-Denis and Rue Aux Fers, was said to have been selected in expiation of a crime there committed, the murder by a Jew of a young man named Richard. The church was probably at first only a chapel; as late as 1445, it was an unpretentious edifice with a gable roof and a small tower. The cemetery, on which it faced, was, later, surrounded by a vaulted gallery, the famous *Charnier des Innocents*. This was the earliest known in Paris; the word seems to have been first used in the eleventh century,—an old historian, Raoul Glabier, tells us that, after a terrible famine, "as it was no longer possible to inter each body separately, because of their great number, the pious people who feared God constructed in divers localities charniers in which were deposited more than five hundred corpses." A dictionary of architecture, published in Paris in 1770, defines the word as meaning "a gallery or portico formerly constructed around the parish cemeteries, in which the catechism is taught, and in the lofts of which

are stored the fleshless bones of the dead. They may be found in several parishes of Paris." The cemeteries of six important churches of the capital and at least eight of those of the minor parishes, were surrounded by galleries, the richer ones illuminated by windows and furnished with elaborate funerary monuments. The two most important were those of Saint Paul and of the Innocents, the former the aristocratic cemetery and the latter, the popular one.

Even without the intervention of siege, famine or pestilence, the accumulation of corpses in the century-old cemeteries necessitated the constant removal of the bones to make room for new interments; a pious regard for the relics of the departed led to their storing in sheds and outhouses, chapels, the lofts of cloisters and churches, and the charniers. The use of the latter was not entirely discontinued until the end of the eighteenth century. Additions to them were constantly made, to accommodate the constantly increasing multitude of skeletons; the funds for their erection were apparently provided by pious legacies and donations. These long galleries enclosed from twenty to twenty-five arcades each, the sides of which were open, and the imperfect, or absent, roofs left their ghastly contents plainly visible. Fifteen of the arcades of the Charnier of the Innocents were decorated with paintings, a version of the *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, earlier than the famous one at Bale, and the inscriptions of which were intended "to

(photo caption) "Ancient cemetery Des Innocents in the Rue Aux Fers, Paris, in 1790. Showing the chambers full of skulls. After a design by Bernier. The accumulation of remains during 8 or 9 centuries in this place had become so great an evil that in 1786 they were all transferred to the catacombs and a market was erected in this spot. From *Paris Known and Unknown*, George Barrie & Sons, Philadelphia."

incite the people to devotion." The artist is supposed to have been one Jehan d'Orleans, valet and painter in ordinary to Charles VI. According to a contemporary record, the work was begun in August, 1424, and finished in the following Lent. The Dance at Bale was not executed till 1439, and Holbein—to whom it has been attributed—was not born till 1498.

A more imposing figure of the *Camard*, the flat-nosed, the death's head,—is the small alabaster statue, formerly known as the *Mort Saint-Innocent*, which stood under the fifth arcade, when issuing from the church, in the charnier of *Messieurs les Martins*, and had been executed by their order. It was kept enclosed in a box, of which the church wardens had the key, and on All Saints' Day it was exhibited to the people until noon of the next day. It is now preserved in the museum of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. It represents a corpse in the process of dissolution, standing upright, with a menacing expression, holding in the right hand the folds of a shroud or winding sheet, while the left rests on the top of a shield on which is engraved a quatrain, indicated by a dart formerly held between the fingers of the left hand, and which may be translated: "There is none living, however artful or strong to resist, that I do not strike with my dart, to give to the worms their share." Formerly attributed to the sculptor Germain Pilon, this statue is now thought to be older, and to have been executed by Francois Gentil, a native of Froyes. Another of the famous monuments of the cemetery was that known as the *Croix Gastines*, attributed to Jean Goujon; and when the cemetery was finally suppressed, in 1786, and the bones transferred to the catacombs, this cross was also transported to that locality and set up at the entrance, at the locality known as the Tombe-Issoire. Still another was an isolated cell, set up in the middle of the cemetery, just large enough to contain a person standing upright, which had been constructed by a recluse named Jeanne La Vallière, and in which she was voluntarily walled up by the Bishop of Paris, in the presence of a multitude of persons, on the 11th of October, 1442. Here she remained for a number of years, receiving air and food through a small grating. After her death, her place was taken by another, Alix, called La Bougote, who, it is related, lived so sanctified a life in her cell that, after her death, June 29, 1466, Louis XI. erected in her honor a marble tomb supported by four copper lions. Still a third was an involuntary recluse, Renée de Vendômois, accused of the murder of her husband.

Notwithstanding these gruesome witnesses and associations, the character of the enclosure, and the fact that it was used as a place of deposit for refuse and ordure of every kind by all the surrounding neighborhood, the cemetery was the favorite place of resort for the inhabitants, for dances and festivals, and, at

night, for debauchery and prostitution. As it was the place of burial for several parishes it was thronged by both the living and the dead; in the centre was a lantern, mounted on a pillar of masonry some five metres in height, and which at night diffused an uncertain light over both. The burials were to the number of two or three thousand a year; it was estimated that in the course of six centuries they had amounted to one million, two hundred thousand, in a space of about nine thousand, six hundred square feet. In 1780, when a commission was appointed to consider the advisability of closing the cemetery, the guardian in charge, one Maitre Poutrain,—qualified by the commission itself as "a drunkard,"—testified that during his incumbency the soil had risen to such an extent



CLOISTERS OF CHURCH DES INNOCENTS. Showing upper portions containing human skulls and the frescoes of the "Danse Macabre." From Paris Known and Unknown, George Barrie & Sons, Philadelphia.

that a square tomb near the church, then only about three feet high, had been originally just within reach of his outstretched hands, he standing on his toes. This commission owed its origin to an incident which occurred in July of this year, 1780,—a shoemaker of the Rue de la Lingerie, which ran along one side of the cemetery, having gone down into his cellar for a side of leather, was driven back by an insupportable stench, and it was found, upon investigation, that the cellar wall, adjacent to the *fosse commune* destined to receive some two thousand corpses of the poor, had yielded under the pressure and that the decaying bodies had filled the basement. The cemetery was officially closed, December 1, 1780, but it was not till April, 1786, that the transportation of the bodies and bones to the catacombs was begun. On the cleansed and renovated site was established the celebrated market of the Innocents, formally ceded to the city of Paris by Imperial decree, January 30, 1811.

WILLIAM WALTON.

(photo caption) "Cloisters of Church Des Innocents. Showing upper portions containing human skulls and the frescoes of the 'Dans Macabre.' From Paris Known and Unknown, George Barrie & Sons, Philadelphia."