

The Storyteller.

PIPAN'S MOTHER.

PIPAN came out on the doorstep, and stood rubbing his eyes at the sun. The bells were ringing for Mass, from two or three towers hard by, and the sun's almost level beams, shining sideways upon the cobbles that paved the street, told him the same tale. It was not yet seven o'clock. Inside there the other children were sleeping still, in the little stuffy back room. It was better to be out here, though the breeze was blowing the dust from the loosely laid stones in the street.

Pipán sat down on the steps and put up one chubby hand to shade his eyes from the dust cloud. He was a beautiful boy, 'good enough for a priest,' the gossips were wont to say, and they urged Dame Laroque to bespeak him a place in the seminary school when he should be old enough. Père Anton had influence there. But Dame Laroque's only reply was a toss of the head and a brusque request that the gossips would drive their own pigs to market, and leave her to manage hers. Pipán might have yellow curls and blue eyes, and he might be a fool for all that. Never was such a stupid boy. Seven, and knew naught but his prayers—could not spell out a word in his book. Was that the stuff of which their priests were made? Whereat the gossips retired, to shake their heads over a woman who could speak so of priest and child. From Daelburg she had come; and Daelburg was all but over the border of Protestant Germany. And she had small part in Pipán, his fair hair, and heavenly eyes—she, the tall, sallow, dark, peasant woman, with her black-haired, Belgian mate. The rest of her flock was nothing to look at; but Pipán was otherwise cut. Always dreamy and thoughtful, he lived apart from his brothers, at home, at school and at play, and earned, not undeservedly, the nickname of 'Pipán the Dreamer.'

The church bells ceased of a sudden, and the silence that followed was filled with the chime from the belfry, announcing that seven had struck. Pipán was roused from his seat on the doorstep by the foot of Dame Laroque, as she came out, basket on arm, bound for market. Pipán followed her as she passed, and slid his arm through the basket.

'Silly child! I want thee not. Go, play like the rest.'

'I would rather go with thee, maman. Shall we go to Mass on the way?'

'Is thy head gone daft, Pipán? At seven on market morning?'

'I would take but a few minutes, maman. It might be done.'

'That means thou wouldst go, I suppose. Well, slip into Saint Bavon as we pass. I've naught thou canst help me carry.'

The boy's dreamy eyes looked up at the mighty tower they were nearing, with a strange fervour of joy. He pressed the hard, housewifely hand with a kiss, and turned into the shadow of the porch. Dame Laroque looked after him a moment.

'Tis a strange world,' she muttered. 'I half wish I'd not taken him in. But he was a cherub, in truth. And I had no children then—Chut! what's done is past undoing. I've better to do than look for trouble.' She trudged on to the market place.

Nearly seven years before, when Dame Laroque was still a dweller in Daelburg, her husband had come across a toddling child, in the street next his own, and had taken him home. The enthusiastic young wife begged to be allowed to keep him. Rabutin felt that a search should be made for the baby's parents, but his own relations with the local authorities were not such as to make him anxious for their further acquaintance, and a few half-hearted inquiries resulted in nothing. The same motives which withheld him from the bureau impelled his removal to Evequelines shortly after, and Pipán was received there as his own son. The growing cares of her own brood weakened Dame Laroque's affection for her foster child, and Pipán now stood in an anomalous position in the household that had adopted him.

What lay over his past and future was far enough from Pipán's small mind as he toiled up the broad flight of steps leading to Saint Bavon's west doors. He entered the church in the wake of a market woman in white frilled cap and long black cloak distended with market baskets. In the width of dim nave and aisles there could be seen the figures of women and men kneeling upon low prie-dieux.

The sights which struck a stranger were familiar to Pipán, who stepped up the aisle scarcely regarding them. From babyhood the dim church had been his home and playground. A hundred times he had passed through it on his way from one street to another. Sunday after Sunday had found him among the long rows of well-brushed little boys kneeling painfully through High Mass on their hard, narrow, wooden benches. Day by day he had come to the chapel where Père Anton catechised. He had sometimes knelt with maman for a short few prayers by the altar marked *Ite ad Mariam*, and had puzzled his childish mind repeatedly over the mystery of the Mother of Sorrows. But there was one spot dear to him, and thither this morning he went to the shrine where the great sculptor's 'Mother and Child' smiled down on the murmuring silence, from its pure white marble throne.

Pipán had been well taught. He knelt over his beads a short while; but, raising his eyes to the object of his prayers, the spell of that beauty caught him. The rosary hung forgotten on his wrist as he gazed in a reverie. There was something, deep hidden away beyond his angelic face, that struggled for expression at the sight of the master's inspiration. Its humanity reached his own, and made him the mouthpiece for the longing of the world about him. Unconsciously he breathed aloud:

'Mother of mercy! day by day
My love of thee grows more and more.'

and as he did so a figure brushed softly by him, and a hand was laid for an instant upon his head. As he raised his eyes in some astonishment a bending face met his and lightly kissed him. Then it was gone, and a black-robed figure was retreating down the aisle.

Pipán thought he must have fancied it; but he felt the kiss yet on his brow so fresh he put up his hand as if to touch it. Looking again toward the marble Madonna, he saw new meaning in her attitude, and with a sudden gust of feeling, truer than the monotony of the hymn, he hailed:

'Mother, mother, love me too!'

The worshippers about him stirred. One startled woman rose and came toward him. But Pipán fled, overwhelmed with confusion at his sacrilege, and certain that his misdemeanor would find a tattler to carry it to Dame Laroque, and then—oh, she never loved him as that Mother did her Child! She never gave him one caress. All mothers were not so. Some were like the Madonna; why could he not have such a one? Why not go and seek one? That woman in black, who kissed him, she had a gentle touch, and the glow of her eyes rested with him still. He would go find her and ask her to be his mother. No one at home would miss him. Batiste might have his porringer and spoon, for the new mother would give him a better.

Pipán was out in the street now, and his thoughts took a more practical turn as he marched along, away from Saint Bavon, and away from maman's home. How to find the new mother?—for such she would prove, he felt sure, with all a child's certainty of faith. Women in black were common. The market was full of them, but he dared not go there, for maman might see him, and take him back with her. He skirted the busy square, with its crowds of chaffers, buying and selling the produce of the country, and bent his steps over the uneven stones toward the quieter parts of the town. The chimes were ringing the three-quarters, and the birds twittered in the trees that bordered the street and shaded the houses. A few women sat on the doorsteps, at work on their lace pillows; but the majority were preparing breakfast within. He saw none there with long black robes. At a corner, to be sure, one stood at a street shrine, replenishing its vase of flowers, but it was not his new mother.

Pipán trudged on sturdily. Suggestions of breakfast came from the open doors on either side, and presently a little girl, in a loose blue pinafore and sabots, waved her wooden spoon from a doorstep, and called to him to sit by her side and share her meal of milk and bread. Pipán was hungry and tired, and the little girl looked kind. He sat down beside her, and they handled the spoon by turns. She laughed prettily, and shook the curls out from under her cap. Pipán laughed too, and they took to feeding each other, making mock mouths at the big spoon. When the bowl was empty they fell to talking, and became very friendly.

'What dost thou, so far from home?' she asked, presently. Pipán left off laughing.

'I look for a new mother,' he said.

'And why? Hast thou lost thine old one?'

'Of a truth, I have one, but she loves me not. So I look for another.'

'Funny boy! Children have but one mother. Art thou crazy? I believe yes. Oh, maman! maman!' she cried, jumping up and running into the house, 'here is a little boy who says he seeks a new mother. Come see him!'

But Pipán had gone, and was away down the street with a very red, serious face. Little girls were such silly things! He was near the canal, and a boat came gliding in from the country, drawn by two horses. A man in a blue blouse came whistling before them. Pipán sat down upon the grass and awaited his approach. Then he went and walked beside the boatman.

'Good-day, little fellow,' said he, good naturedly.

'Good-day, monsieur,' returned Pipán. 'Hast thou met a woman on the tow path, all in black, with eyes that look at thee?'

The boatman laughed.

'Many a lass I met, but none in black. And as for eyes, it's little they care to use them upon me, I trow. Belike if I were ten years younger, now—' he laughed, and shook his head. 'Is it thy sister thou'rt after, little one?'

'No, I have no sister. It is a new mother.'

'A new mother. That's something I don't know of. Art thou lost younger?'

'No, I look for a new mother, one that will love me like the mother in the church. Good-day, monsieur.'

The boatman stood agape, looking after Pipán, who had turned from him, and was pursuing his way toward the bridge that spanned the canal.

On the further bank stood a convent, and through the wide open gate Pipán heard the voices of the nuns, singing over their work. He went in, through the walled garden, gay with flowers, and up the steps to the door of the cool, airy laundry. There was a fresh sound of splashing water mingled with the hymn the sisters were singing, as they washed and rinsed and dried and ironed in the spacious room where the crucifix hung on a bare wall. Pipán stood in the doorway, and one or two of the sisters paused to smile upon him. He did not return their greetings, but scanned each face eagerly. His new mother, with eyes that looked at one, was she here, among these black-garbed women? One of them stooped to pat his cheek.

'What is it, dearie? Hast thou an errand with any of us?'

Pipán raised his eyes to her face, and sighed. 'No,' he said wearily, 'no; none of you is my new mother.'

The nun took his hand gently, and bent lower. 'What meanest thou, little one? A new mother? Hast thou not one already, on earth? And does not another await thee in the dear Heaven?'

'Yes, there, I know. But I would have her now, near me, as thou art near. The Madonna in the church smiles, but she is white and cold. My new mother is real, and her kiss is warm. Oh, I must find her soon.'