

The Storyteller

THE BELL-RINGER OF GARLAU.

I.

It is a quaint old parish in the depths of the Morlaix, on the other side of the ridge of Dourdu. A chain of hills surrounds and isolates it. There it lies in a nest of verdure, far from the public highway. Neither by the pointed spire of its tower nor even the voice of its sweet-toned bells ringing joyous carillons on Sundays or holydays does the world know of its existence. The odd, pretty name of Garlau came to it from some long-forgotten saint. The entire village is composed of the church, the presbytery, and a few stone houses built close to the cemetery, their old-fashioned roofs projecting over the sacred enclosure.

In one of these, surrounded to its very doorsill by flowering elder bushes, lived, at the time of this history, Agapit Quesseveur, better known under the affectionate sobriquet of Gapit. At the age of sixteen, he had begun as an apprentice to a cooper at Morlaix. Then one evening before his time was up he had returned to the village—but how thin, how tall, how entirely changed! For a long time he hovered between life and death. His limbs, it was said, were afflicted with a strange disease, for which there was no remedy.

His mother, a widow, to whom he alone of five children had been left, took excellent care of him, using all the unguents she knew of; and often repaired besides on pilgrimages to famous miraculous shrines. He improved, but remain infirm—his body bent almost in two at the waist, leaving him an object of commiseration and astonishment to the kind neighbors, who pitied while they deplored the spectacle of the head of a youth united to the body of an old man.

It was months before he could bring himself to venture out: his misfortune seemed to him like a disgrace. By way of consolation the Cure said to him one day:

'We must submit to the will of God, Agapit.'

'Yes, Monsieur le Cure,' he replied. 'But it is hard to do so—with the proper spirit.' Then, with a deep sigh, he wiped a tear from his pale cheek. 'I am a useless being,' he continued: 'unable to either help myself or anyone else.'

Although this thought afflicted him very deeply, there was still another, unwavering, unsuspected, which caused him still greater suffering, filling his soul with intense sadness.

Little by little, nevertheless, he began to go out, to walk about; and in order to be less of a charge on his mother, who subsisted by carding flax, he undertook certain light tasks around the house and garden. Some of his old energy seemed to return in the performance of them; he dreamed of a possible restoration, and hope began to stir anew in his heart.

One Sunday in early spring he made his appearance at High Mass. He noticed with gratification during the service that curious eyes were seldom turned upon him, and this was in itself a source of great consolation. When Mass was over he joined the group of young men who took up their usual station in the graveyard, with his back to the bevy of girls issuing from the church porch on their way homeward.

'God be thanked you are on your feet again, Gapit Quesseveur!' said one of these, in a pleasant voice, which seemed a fitting accompaniment to her bright eyes and cheerful countenance.

'Yes, Jeanne Louise,' he responded in a low tone.

He could not utter another word. Pale and embarrassed he stood before her, all the blood in his body seeming to gather about his tumultuously beating heart. But his large, beautiful eyes looked pleadingly up into hers; and the girl, herself a little disconcerted by his seriousness, withdrew her gaze and feigned to look for someone in the crowd, as she said with an effort at carelessness:

'Since you are feeling so much better, Gapit, if you should be coming our way stop in some time and have a glass of cider.'

'Yes, Jeanne Louise,' he answered for the second time.

She turned away with a kind smile; and as he watched her form disappear between the trees, his soul once more descended into the ocean of bitterness which now so often threatened to overwhelm it.

He had sat beside Jeanne Louise Mevel at catechism; they had made their First Communion together; and often, under the pretext of hunting for birds' eggs, he had accompanied her with other young girls of the

parish far along the road which led from the village to Kergoz, where her parents owned a flourishing farm.

Their fathers had been boyish friends, and, later, companions in the same regiment. Pierre Mevel had been cross-bearer at the funeral of Agapit's father, who had died early, when the boy was fifteen. Afterward he had kindly proposed taking the orphan into his service, provided his widowed mother intended him to spend his life on a farm.

'But look you,' Pierre had said to the widow. 'He is your only one, and you have nothing. He can never make much headway as a farm laborer. He is intelligent, learns quickly at school, and in your place I should give him a trade. It will not be so hard, and ought to be far more profitable.'

It was on account of this advice that Agapit Quesseveur had been apprenticed to a cooper at Morlaix. And laughingly—but earnestly Gapit thought then—Pierre had said as he bade him farewell:

'When you are able to earn three francs a day, Gapit, come back to Kergoz and under our roof-tree you shall find a dove waiting for you.'

And Agapit had set forth, tears on his cheeks but laughter in his heart, as he trudged along, all his worldly possessions slung in a bright-colored handkerchief over his shoulder.

Alas! thus he had set forth, and how had he returned? Dragging a body under the grasp of an incurable malady. Gone were his youth, his vivacity, and his ambition; all that remained to him, the now hopeless love of his happy childhood. Never would he be able to earn them now, those three francs per day which were to have been the price of his heart's desire; never would she be his on earth, the sweet white dove of Kergoz.

Slowly and sadly he took his way homeward, and as he paced beneath the trees bitter thoughts began to take possession of his soul. If it had not been for the advice of Pierre Mevel, he might now be a strong and healthy man. If he had never left his native village, the mysterious malady which had wrecked his youth and happiness might never have afflicted him.

Then his reflections changed, and he began to wonder whether perhaps, conscious of this and regretting it, the farmer might not still be willing to take him for a son-in-law. Might it not be possible Jeanne Louise herself would look upon him with favor? She had, indeed, appeared glad to see him; had invited him, as one who meant what she said, to take a glass of cider at the old farm house. But these later reflections were short-lived, for Gapit Quesseveur was no craven heart.

'Away with ye, cowardly hopes, unmanly thoughts!' he exclaimed almost aloud. 'Get ye gone and forever! What am I that I should dare to think of crossing the threshold of Pierre Mevel as a suitor for the daughter who is to him as the apple of his eye? No, never again until these limbs have recovered their power, until I can stand erect among my fellows, until I can present myself in the stature and strength in which I gloried of old—never until that day comes shall my feet cross the threshold of Kergoz.'

Five or six months later the bell-ringer of Garlau, a very old man, was stricken with fever and died after a few days' illness. Gapit Quesseveur had often given him a helping hand, persuaded that the exercise necessary in ringing the bell was beneficial to his spine, wherein the seat of his disease seemed to be located. He asked for the place and obtained it.

From that moment life assumed a new aspect to Agapit. His mother was growing old, and he need no longer be dependent upon her. While the position yielded only a regular income of fifty francs a year, there were additional fees for marriages, christenings, and burials.

'I am no longer a pauper,' he said to himself, as for the first time he summoned the parishioners to High Mass.

He was, besides, an incomparable bell-ringer. He loved the music of the chimes with the love of a true artist. Suffering had refined his whole being, and now he gave expression to his pent-up feelings with the only music known to him. He had a veritable passion for the bells.

'He makes them say whatever he pleases,' remarked one villager to another as they passed, to the sound of the carillons, within the porch of the old village church.

But it was when he saw Jeanne Louise approaching to High Mass that he set forth all his energies, giving vent to his feelings in a very exultation of harmony. Seated one morning on the edge of the stone wall with the bell-cords in both hands, he said to the young girl:

'Well, did you like my music to-day, Jeanne Louise?'

'Very much indeed,' she answered, with a radiant smile, blushing slightly as she spoke. His eyes were