

The Storyteller

THE BELL-RINGER OF GARLAU.

(Concluded from last week.)

'Father,' said Jeanne Louise on the evening of Easter Sunday, as they sat together eating their supper, 'they say Gapit may never come to himself again before he dies.'

She was very pale and her voice trembled. She had spoken but little since the day before.

He will surely die, then?' inquired Pierre Mevel.

'So it is feared.'

'Too bad! Grita Quesseveur has indeed been sorely afflicted.'

'She is alone, father.'

'No women to help her?'

'Ah, yes! They are in and out, but no one to stay with her. May I go, father? It will not be so hard for her then.'

'To stay there, Jeanne Louise?'

'Yes, father.'

'But you know what that would seem to mean?'

'Yes, father.'

'That you are the next thing to being the wife of Gapit—his betrothed?'

'Father, I love Agapit Quesseveur. I have loved him all my life. If he had not been unfortunate, you would have given me to him, if he had asked for me?'

'I would have done so, my daughter. I said as much six years ago when he left for Morlaix.'

'To him?'

'Yes, to him.'

'I did not know it. Still it makes no difference. Had I not been sure you would never give your consent, I should have married him even as he is. But I knew that my first duty was to you. When he began to get better I asked him to come again to Kergoz, hoping that in time you might not be averse to him as a husband for me. There is enough and to spare for all, and life would have been easier for him and happier for me. I will deny nothing. I loved him, I love him still. His misfortune is nothing to me: I shall always love him. I beg that you will allow me to go and stay with his mother, and help her to take care of him till he dies.'

'And if he should live, Jeanne Louise? What then?'

'Then it shall be as you wish, father.'

'And who will take care of me while you are gone?'

'Jeanneton can do everything necessary, as she did when I was a child. I will write to you very often. And if you wish, Pierrette can come over from the dairy.'

'You may go, Jeanne Louise,' said Pierre Mevel, after a moment's reflection. 'And the good God can take care of us all.'

Jeanne Louise left the table, gave some directions to the surprised but kindly Jeanneton, packed a small bundle, and in half an hour was walking briskly beside her father on the road from Kergoz to Garlau. The widow welcomed her as though she were an angel from heaven, and without further ado the two women took up their watch at the bedside of the unconscious boy.

As one waking out of a dream, Agapit began to realise what was passing around him; and with it came a revelation so astounding that it seemed to him he must have died and come to life again. He had entirely recovered consciousness, and this revelation had become a certainty before the two women were aware that his brain had cast aside the cloud which had enveloped it since his dreadful fall.

He spoke his first conscious words to the patient, loving mother, who hung above his every breath; and, after she had wiped the tears from her eyes, she was hastening to tell Jeanne Louise, busy at something in the kitchen, when she met the doctor face to face and communicated to him the joyful news.

'He will live, he will get well,' said the physician, after a careful examination. 'The wound is healing; no bones were broken. Take good care of him and feed him well, Grita. He will be ringing the bells for Pentecost, or I am no prophet.'

The good news spread fast. Neighbors came with their congratulations, Pierre Mevel among them. But for thirty-six hours after the announcement Agapit caught only one fleeting glimpse of Jeanne Louise, as she stood on the threshold of his room, thinking him asleep. Thus seven days passed, and one morning he said to his mother:

'Do not come in, or do not let anyone come in for an hour. I wish to be alone.'

'You will not try to get up or to dress yourself, Gapit? The doctor said perhaps to-morrow, or next day, and then I will help you.'

'Go away, little mother!' he said, affectionately kissing her toilworn hand. 'Be not afraid, but do as I ask you; and to-morrow or next day, when the doctor says I may get up, you shall help me.'

'It is perhaps to make a thanksgiving all alone that he wishes it,' she explained to Jeanne Louise in the kitchen; and the young girl agreed with her.

A little more than an hour later she was passing through the garden close to the window of the room where Agapit lay. From his bed he could have touched the low sill. She did not look up, but he called her.

'Jeanne Louise,' he said, 'will you not come in to see me?'

'If you like, Agapit,' she answered, still with head averted, as she passed swiftly from his sight.

His eyes fixed on the door, he waited for her to appear; which she did very soon, lingering a moment on the threshold. He stretched out his hand.

'Come here, Jeanne Louise,' he said; 'come close to my bed. I want to see you and talk to you.'

She came and sat down beside him, thinking that never, save in pictures of the saints, had she seen anything half so beautiful as that pale face, amid its halo of clustering curls, against the dark background of the old carved Breton closet bed.

Her lips quivered, her eyes filled with tears. She could not utter a word. But his voice was calm as he asked:

'Jeanne Louise, why are you here?'

'To help your mother: she was all alone, you know.'

'And your poor father? He did not object—he was willing?'

'Yes, or I should not have come.'

'That was kind. Jeanne Louise, you are so kind, so very good! But do you know what the people will say of you?'

'Yes, Agapit, I do know.'

'You thought I would die when you came—perhaps?'

'I did not know—I feared that you might.'

And yet you were willing to be thought the betrothed of poor Gapit the cripple?'

'Yes, Agapit.'

'That meant but one thing, then, Jeanne Louise?'

She understood him at once.

'But one thing,' she rejoined, a deep flush overspreading her pure, pale face. 'And it was true.'

'That you loved me?'

'That I loved you.'

'But now—now that I am not going to die?'

'It is the same—if you wish it.'

'And your father?'

'I cannot say. My heart he cannot change, but he has the power to order my life. I shall not disobey my father.'

'And I shall not ask you to do so, Jeanne Louise. What I want now is to beg your pardon for having dared to offer myself to you at Kergoz on Good Friday.'

She looked at him manely, her eyes overflowing. Perhaps he read what was in her faithful heart—the conviction that he was renouncing her forever, and that it grieved her.

'I have still something to say, Jeanne Louise,' he continued. 'Death has come too close for either to deny that we love each other—that if I were a man like other men, hale and sound, I should claim you for my wife. But I must tell you—I must let you know just what I am, in order that you may decide if I be worthy of the love you have given me. I have been a wicked sinner, and you shall know my sin.'

'You, Agapit? I cannot believe it.'

'Yet I am going to tell you even before I confess it to Pere Navagot. When I left you that day, I resolved to kill myself. Now, I did not know—whether by throwing my miserable, useless body into the river or in some other way. The devil had entered my heart, and I did not care what became of me. I could not have you for my wife and I was a burden on my poor mother. That night as I lay in bed I resolved to throw myself from the little window of the bell tower when I went up to ring for the "Gloria in Excelsis" on Holy Saturday. But as I mounted the stairs—were you praying for me, Jeanne Louise, in the church that morning?'

'Ah, indeed yes, for my heart was full of you!'

'And my mother—I am the whole burthen of her prayers, poor woman—she was praying for me, too. Well, as I ascended the stairs a sudden horror of what I was about to do came over me. I grew afraid. I hated myself. I begged pardon of God for the great offence I had determined to commit against Him. I resolved to take up the cross which had been laid upon me and bear it to the end of my life. And then,