

The Storyteller.

A FISHERMAN'S STORY.

"Ah, oui, Mademoiselle! all is very beautiful this morning." The old Breton fisherman looked up from his net-mending and nodded his picturesque coiffed head approvingly toward the sea curled at his feet,—a calmly sleeping lioness, caressed by sunbeams. "Moi, I love the sea in all her moods, and she has as many as a woman. She is grand—ah, grand in a storm!" His bright blue eyes kindled. "It is only the thought of our boats at the mercy of the waves that makes the hearts of those on shore beat faster. Mais, que voulez-vous? The good Lord Jesus, while He dwelt on earth, chose poor fishermen like ourselves for His companions. He knows the dangers of our life, and He is always on watch la haut,—contentedly the brown, sinewy hands resumed their shuttle-like activity.

"But there are many wrecks upon this coast, are there not?" said the traveller. "They told me at the inn the bay had won its name—La Baie des Trépassés—from the number of dead cast—"

"Ah, but it was thus named before we had our lighthouse—before we had our lighthouse!" interrupted the fisherman quickly. "When it is too dark to know whether the eyes are closed or open, and a tempest is driving your barque straight against those knife-like rocks yonder, what could you expect but wounds! Since the lighthouse has been built, there have not been over a score of wrecks in a year. But in those dark days the good God did not forget us. One night He sent the light by a miracle.

"A miracle!" exclaimed Mademoiselle. "In the world where I dwell they declare, alas! that the age of miracles is long since past."

"Here among us miracles happen constantly," replied the Breton, proudly. "I will tell you the story, if you wish. It is over sixty years ago now,—ma foi! but Time travels with all sails set, and is never becalmed. There were just ourselves here; no Casino,—non, no Casino, nor any of those new affairs that have followed in the track of strangers—voyageurs. And Ramin lived over yonder, below the Falaise. As a young man, he had served on the ships of the king—a helmsman; but when I first remember him he was old, poor body! leaning on a staff, and all his people gone home before him—all except one granddaughter, a Christmas child—Noella. Ah! but she had the beauty of many maidens in one, as welcome to meet as a favouring breeze, good, pure from the soul outward. And from a baby one could see the grace of Heaven growing within her like a flower in a vase. While others of her age would be playing together, she stole away to sit at the foot of Calvary.

"Mademoiselle has visited our Calvaire on the cliff? Only the crucifix is not the same now; the new one is of bronze, but that first one—there are relics still in Our Lady's chapel—it was carved in wood. On one side a figure of the Blessed Mother in all her sorrow, and St. John upholding her—every one large as life and beautifully painted in most lifelike colours. Whenever the rain had faded them, Monsieur le Curé saw that they were restored. Indeed they were so well painted that little Noella, the first time she had been carried there by her grandfather, believed the great crimson wound in Our Lord's side was freshly bleeding; and she knew no peace until Ramin, holding her up at arm's length, permitted her to stroke the wound with the corner of her little white apron—"To make well the hurt of the dear Lord Jesus." And Monsieur le Curé has wiped his eyes when Ramin told him, saying: "Ah! how few of us grown men have done all we could to wipe the blood and pain from the real wounds suffered for our sakes!" And the next Sunday relating it in his sermon, he wished that the tender, pitying heart of this new child—Veronica might beat in the breast of all mankind. Moi, I was only a lad then, but I have his very words, thanks to the good memory my father left me!

"And all at once Noella was a woman. It is strange how fast they grow, these children—boys and girls both. I can never be used to it. My Angèle, one morning she was lying here in my rough arms like a pearl in a shell: the next, as it seemed, she was a bride—a mother. So, too, my Paul: his little brown head just in reach of my hand, like a cane to lean on, and asking a thousand questions about the boats and the sea. Before I could answer half of them he was gone to try his own sail: to steer through the tempests; and I left alone, looking after him into space. Mais, of course it is the will of the good God, or it would not be.

"One afternoon Noella brought her secret to Ramin: Victor loved her,—Victor the brave, the generous, the true; the tall, strong, eldest son of Gaspard, who never failed in any of his duties; who, like her, went to pass an hour every day before the Calvary, and then walked home with her—or at least half the way: who once had suddenly stopped and taken both her hands, crying, "I love thee,—love thee, my Noella! Wilt thou be my wife?" And she had answered: "Yes, if grandpère also will say 'Yes.'"

"But grandpère at first he answered: "No. Attends donc, mon enfant. Wait till I can see. The thought of losing thee has made it very dark to my old eyes." (Moi, I think I said the same to my Angèle.) And Noella laid her soft cheeks close to his and whispered: "Thou wilt not lose me, grandpère; and thou wilt find a son." But "sons" that break into our lives, Mademoiselle, through the round window of our daughter's wedding-ring, they never are the same as those God sends us,—non, jamais. And when she added slowly, "If thou wouldst sooner I should stay with thee, I stay; but I will never marry any one but him." Ramin felt warm tears falling on her face, and heard a sigh that left his heart all fluttering like a captured petrel. And soon he, too, said "Yes," and Easter week they were betrothed at St. Pierre.

"Several times after that I met them coming back from their cliff-walk, each face alight, as one sees the altar on fête days when every candle burns; hand clasped in hand, their shadows making

one (a boy's eyes, Mademoiselle, take note of everything); and there were others who had dreamed of one day walking in Victor's place beside her,—dreamed as youths dream—"

The old man, grown young again from his plunge in Memory's gushing stream, paused in his story long enough to sigh and take a new position.

"Eh, bien, the miracle, it happened on the eve of that June day set for their wedding. A strange purple shadow hung about the horizon, though in mid-sky there was not a cloud large as a mackerel. And the heat!—ah, terrific! Not enough breeze to fill a baby's cap. The sea smooth as a pane of glass, glinting in the sun-glare, and blue as the cloak of Our Lady's picture, with one or two narrow rows of white fringe trimming the edge of the shore. Since before dawn Victor had been "out" in his new boat, La Promesse, and with him his partners, Jean and Eugène, two as lusty lads as ever cast a line. Ramin had come down to change a greeting with the ancient comrades that always sat, smoking an afternoon pipe, upon the quay. And when suddenly the sun was blown out like a torch by a gust of wind, poured from a funnel-shaped cloud, the question passed between them: "Hé, ami, what does that signify?" And some responded: "A coming storm. God temper it, and send our boats all in before it breaks." Others shook their heads and silent watched the sea.

"For, Mademoiselle, it was a sight to watch. The blue had changed to purple, then to green, then black, matching the ominous cloud which, like a ship of war, bore down upon us from the south. Each moment the wind gained strength, while the waves grew into giants. The women, even to the oldest, came running, tottering out, to stand in frightened groups, wringing their helpless hands, looking from sea to sky, from sky to sea. Soon, one by one, we saw the boats blown in, till we could hail all safe—all except Victor's.

"But, child dear, we must not fear," said old Ramin, striving to cheer Noella, sobbing by his side. "No surer boat than his, no finer sailor than Victor. There is yet time: the tempest's dance will not commence ere midnight."

"But even as he spoke the midnight fell—all light passed from the earth and heaven, save when some dazzling spears of fire flashed here and there among the clouds, showing the foaming, wildly-driven waves, rolling, tumbling in, and mingling their roaring with the thunder; while flocks of shrieking sea-gulls flew straight into our faces. That was a night to live through and remember. The end of the world seemed come, and each one trembled for his soul.

"But through it all we thought of poor Victor. With us fisher-folk, as the good God knows, we are one family—one blood, one heart; braving the same dangers, sharing the same hopes and joys and pains. The mothers, sweethearts, wives of those who had made port, were they who cried the loudest. "Ah, the poor Promesse, poor Victor! And oh, the poor Noella! the poor Noella!"

"Yonder on the cliff they tried to light a fire; the women circling it, holding their skirts extended, and the men pouring oil upon the kindling sticks. For a few moments we could see the welcome flame twisting, struggling with the four cruel winds, and then tout d'un coup—the rain, a deluge! If any boat had borne the beating of the waves, it must surely be dashed to atoms, seeking a landing in that awful dark. So in a sudden lull we heard the silvery tinkle of a bell: Monsieur le Curé, in his white surplice, bearing the crucifix, preceded by one choir-boy (in a lightning flash I recognised him, with a cry I could not stifle—my youngest brother, petit Jean; he died in his twelfth year, a little angel), passing down to say the Office of the Dead and send out absolution to the wrecked across those raging waters.

"At the sight of this, Ramin, weeping like the women, stretched forth his arms to find and hold Noella. But she was gone!—through night and storm, over the path which from the earliest years she loved to take—the path to Calvary. Up, up, and up, till she had reached the height, and laid her sweet white face, all wet with tears and rain, against the cross, and twined both arms about it as—they found her. To me who knew her, Mademoiselle, it would seem strange if her heart's cry had not been heard and answered.

"Meanwhile, below, we listened to the chanting of the priest; his rich, familiar tones filling the slowly lengthening lulls; while the boy's responses seemed mere sparks of sound flickering in the wind like our poor lanterns. And, then, all at once—ah, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!—from the unseen mouth of the chancel yonder we heard another voice ring through the night—the voice of Victor! "Hard apart there! Laissez arriver!" And in one instant more the keel of La Promesse grated on the beach.

"Silently, with gesture of the hand, Victor made a path for himself through the throng that rushed to meet him,—walking as one sleeps, with open eyes, but seeing naught before him, hastening on into the gloom. But Jean and Eugène remained to tell us how it was.

"Ah!" said Eugène, making the Sign of the Cross, and often stopping to find his broken voice, "before the good God who hears and judges us, you, Monsieur le Curé, and you, my friends and people, through this fierce storm in which you say my hair has turned foam-white with terror, Victor has steered our boat with sorcerer's cunning: through midnight darkness steady kept his course, and gained the shore as though he had been seeing by a light." And so indeed he did—the light the good God sent him by a miracle.

Then the old fisherman made perfect his sweet story by Victor's explanation, given when they found him kneeling by the side of Noella.

As the tempest raged its maddest, when all hope of succour had quite gone, he suddenly had seen a shaft of light, invisible to either of his comrades,—a broad white ray, cast downward from the cliff, whose peak the Calvary crowned; and by which, clearly as at noon, he took his course and crossed the harbour bar, past all its rocks and hidden perils.