

THE ANCIENT COTTER.

BY F. B. DOVETON.

I met him but the other day
In our most lovely lane,
An ancient coter, gaunt and grey,
A toothless, ragged swain!
His jaws were sunk, his eye was dim,
His heavy head was bent—
I spoke, as was my wont, to him,
As on his staff he leant.
He answered in a stupid way—
Words fitting such as he!
I thought how vast a barrier lay
Between this man and me!
For I could boast a cultured mind,
God's smile illumed my face;
But here was nothing but a hind—
Stupid sense, or wit, or grace!
A gleam shot through his dull grey eyes,
His fingers clutched my stole,
And then beneath the pitying skies
Crawled on that sordid soul!
I went my way and held my head
Aloft in conscious pride—
"Ah, what a gulf there yawns!" I said,
How infinitely wide!
Between this animated clod,
Half-cousin to yon swine,
And one who bears the stamp of God
Upon his brow divine!
No sound of earth or from the sky
Has meaning in his ears,
Whilst all my being is shaken by
The music of the spheres!"

And now he holds the golden key
To portals vast and dim—
The deep oppressive Mystery
Is all laid bare to him!
'Tis I who, blind and fettered, move
That ferny lane along,
Whilst he is list'ning far above,
To soft seraphic song!

THE MARQUIS JEANNE HYACINTH DE ST. PALAYE.

BY J. HENRY SHORTHOUSE.

In one of the mountainous districts of the south of France, which in the last century were covered with forests, the highway ran up through the rocky valley by the side of a roaring torrent. On the right hand and on the left the massive foliage descended to the banks, and filled up the small and intervening ravines with a bosky shade. Here and there a lofty crag broke out from the sea of green leaves, and now and then the pointed roofs of a château or the spire of a village church witnessed to the existence of man, and gave an interest and a charm to the beautiful scene.

It was a day in the late autumn of the year 1760. The departing smile of nature, which in another hour would be lost in death, was upon every tree and leaf. The loveliest tints and shades, so delicate that at the moment of their perfection they trembled into nothingness, rested upon the woodlands on every side. A soft wind whispered through the rustling leaves laden with mellow odours and with the pleasing sadness that comes with the falling leaf. The latest flowers of the year with unconscious resignation wasted, as it might seem, tints which would not have disgraced the warmest hues of summer upon heaps of withered leaves and dry moss, and rotting wood. The loveliest hour of the year was the last.

The highway crossed an ancient bridge of great height with a cunningly pointed arch. Just beyond the bridge a smaller path turned up on the left hand as you ascended the valley. It wound its way up the wooded valleys as though with no definite end, yet it was smooth and well kept, more so indeed than the highway itself, and doubtless led to some château, by the orders of whose lord the peasantry kept the road in good repair. Let us follow this road on an evening at the end of October in the year we have already mentioned, for we shall meet with a pretty sight.

Some distance up the road on the left was a small cottage, built to mark and protect the path to a natural terrace formed, as far as art had had a hand in the proceeding, by some former lord of the domain to command a view of the neighbouring mountains and country. Several of these terraces existed in the wood. At the point where the path entered the private road of the château the wood receded on every side, and left a wide glade or savannah across which the sunshine lay in broad and flickering rays. Down this path there came a boy and girl, for they were little more, though their dress and the rank of life they held gave an appearance of maturity greater than their years. The lady was of supreme beauty even for a heroine of romance, and was dressed with a magnificence which at any other period of the world would have been fantastic in a wood. She was clinging to the arm of a handsome boy of some two-and-twenty years of age, whose dress by its scarf and some other slight peculiarities marked the officer of those days. His face was very handsome, and the expression on the whole was good, but there was something about the eyes and the curve of the lips which spoke of violent passions as yet unsubsided.

The girl came down the path clinging to his arm, her lovely face upraised to him, and the dark and reckless expression of his face was soothed and chastened into a look of intense fondness as he looked down upon it. Rarely could a lovely autumn afternoon receive its finishing touch from the passing of so lovely a pair.

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The valley was perfectly solitary: not a single sound was heard, nor living creature seemed astir. It was as if nature understood, and held her breath to further the purposes of their lonely walk. Only for a moment however. At the instant they left the path and entered upon the grassy verge that bordered the way to the château, they both started, and the girl gazed before her with an expression of wild alarm, while the young man's face grew darker, and a fierce and cruel look came into his eyes. But what they saw would seem at first sight to give little cause for such emotion. A few yards before them, walking leisurely across the grass from the direction of the road, appeared a gentleman of some twenty eight or thirty years of age, of whom at first sight there could be no question that he was one of the most distinguished and handsomest men of his day. He was carefully dressed in a style which only men of exceptional figure can wear without extravagance, but which in their case seems only fitting and right. He wore a small walking sword, so hung as not to interfere in the least with the contour of his form, with which his dress also evidently harmonised. His features were faultlessly cut, and the expression, though weary and perhaps almost insolent, bore slight marks of dissipation, and the glance of his eyes was serene and even kindly. He saw the pair before him and instantly stopped. It is probable that the incident was equally embarrassing on both sides, but the visible effect was very different. The two young people stood utterly silent and aghast. The lady was evidently frightened and distressed, while her companion seemed prepared to strike the intruder to the earth. On the other hand, the Marquis, for such was his rank, showed no signs of embarrassment.

"Pardon, Mademoiselle," he said; "I perceive that I have committed a *gaucherie*. Growing tired of the hunt, I returned to the château, and hearing from the servants that Mademoiselle had gone down into the forest to visit her old nurse at the cottage by the terrace, I thought how pleasant it would be to go to meet her and accompany her home. I had even presumed to think," he continued, smiling, and as he spoke he turned to the young man with a gesture of perfect courtesy—"I even presumed to think that my presence might be some small protection to Mademoiselle in the wilds of the forest. I was unaware, of course, that she was guarded with such loyal and efficient care." He paused for a moment and then continued with greater dignity and kindness of expression, "I need not add, Mademoiselle, as a gentleman whose name hitherto, I believe, has been free from taint, I need not add that Mademoiselle need fear no embarrassment in the future from this chance encounter."

It was perhaps strange, but it seemed that the politeness and even friendliness of the Marquis, so far from soothing, irritated the young man. He remained silent, but kept his black and angry glance fixed upon the other.

But the girl seemed differently affected. She hesitated for a moment, and then took a step forward, speaking with her clasped hands before her, with a winning and beseeching gesture.

"You see before you, Monsieur le Marquis," she said, "two as miserable young creatures as I hope, exist upon the earth. Let me present to you Monsieur le Chevalier de Grissoles, of the regiment of Flanders."

The gentlemen bowed.

"—Who has known me all life," continued the girl, speaking rapidly; "who has loved me—whom I love. We meet to-day for the last time. We should not have told you—I should not have mentioned this to you—because I know—we know—that it is useless to contend against what is fixed for us—what is decreed. We meet to-day for the last time; the fleeting moments are running past—ah! how quickly—in another moment they will be gone." . . .

Here the emotion that overpowered her choked her utterance. She stopped, and to prevent herself from falling, she clung to the Chevalier's arm.

The Marquis looked at her in silence, and his face became perfectly beautiful with its expression of pity. A marble statue, indeed, might almost have been expected to show emotion at the sight of such beauty in such distress. There was a pause. Then the Marquis spoke.

"I am most honored," he said, "to be permitted to make the acquaintance of Monsieur le Chevalier, whose name, if I mistake not, is already, though that of so young an officer, mentioned with distinction in the despatches of Monsieur de Broglie. For what you have said to me, Mademoiselle—and what you have descended to confide to me has torn my spirit—I fear I can offer you but little consolation. Your good sense has already assured you that these things are settled for us. They are inevitable. And in the present case there are circumstances which make it absolutely essential to the interests of Monsieur le Comte, your father, that these espousals, at any rate, should take place at once. Even were I—here he turned to the Chevalier with a smile—"even were I to pick a quarrel with your friend, and a few seconds sooner than in the natural course of events it probably would, allow his sword to pass through my heart, I fear the result would be simply to substitute another in my place, another who, I, with perhaps a natural vanity, may fancy, would not place matters in a happier light. But let us not look at things so gloomily. You say that this is your last hour of happiness; that is not necessary. It is true that the espousals must take place at once. The interests of your father require this. But there

is no need that Mademoiselle's feelings should not be consulted with regard to the final consummation of the nuptials. These need not be hurried. Monsieur le Chevalier may have other opportunities of making his adieux. And I hope that my influence, which, in after years, may be greater than it is at present, will enable me to further any views he may have with regard to higher commands in the service of his majesty."

The words were those of ordinary compliment, yet the manner of the Marquis was so winning that had it been possible it would have affected even the Chevalier himself; but if a highwayman is threatening your life it is not much consolation that he offers to return you a franc piece.

The Chevalier remained cold and gloomy.

The Marquis looked at him for a moment; then he continued, addressing himself to the girl—

"But I am intruding myself on Mademoiselle. I will continue my walk to the terrace, the afternoon is delightfully fine. As you are aware, Monsieur le Comte is hunting in the valleys to the west. All the *piqueurs* are withdrawn to that side of the forest. I should hope that Mademoiselle will not again be interrupted in her walk."

Then without another word he courteously saluted the young people, and continued his walk up the path. He never turned his head, indeed he would have allowed himself to be broken on the wheel rather than have done anything of the kind, but the others were not so reticent; several times they stopped and looked back at the Marquis as he paused every now and then as if to admire the beauties of the scene. At last he reached the corner of the cottage and disappeared from their view.

The beauties of the scene, however, did not entirely occupy the mind of the Marquis. At the most enchanting point, where opening valley and stream and mountain and distant tower burst over his view, he paused, and murmured to himself, "Some men, now, might have made mischief out of this. Let us wait and see."

II.

The Château de Fronténac was built upon a natural terrace half way up the slope of the forest with the craggy ravines clothed with foliage surrounding it on every side. It consisted of two courts, the oldest of which had been built in the earliest days of French domestic architecture, when the detached buildings of the mediæval castle were first brought together into a compact block. In accordance with the singular notion of those days that the south and west were unhealthy aspects, the principal rooms of this portion of the château faced the north and east. They consisted of vast halls and saloons succeeding each other with apparently purposeless extension, and above them a suite of bed chambers of solemn and funereal aspect. These saloons and bed chambers have been left unaltered for centuries, and the furniture must have been antique in the reign of Henri Quatre. The other court had been built much more recently, and, in accordance with more modern notions, the chief apartments faced the south and west. From its windows, terraced gardens descended into the ravine, and spread themselves along the side of the hill. The architecture had probably, when first the court had been added to the château, contrasted unpleasantly with the sombre pile beyond; but the lapse of centuries with their softening hand had blended the whole into a unity of form and color, and adventurous plants creeping silently over the carved stone work of the straggling fronts wrought a soft veil of nature's handiwork over the artificial efforts of man.

The saloons in this part of the château were furnished more or less in the modern taste with cabinets of ebony and ivory of the days of Louis Quatorze, and burl work of the eighteenth century; but as the modern articles were added sparingly, the effect on the whole was quiet and pleasing. The De Fronténacs, while enjoying the more convenient portion of their abode, prided themselves upon the antique apartments, and kept them in scrupulous repair. In these vast and mysterious halls all the solemn meetings and ceremonies of the family had place. Here when death had touched his own, the De Fronténacs lay in state; here the infant heir was baptized; here the important compacts of marriage were signed; here the feast of Noël was held. It is true that for the last century or so these ideas had been growing weaker, and the usages of modern life and the fascinations of the capital, had broken in upon these ancient habits, and weakened the attachments and associations from which they sprang; but the De Fronténacs were a fierce and haughty race, and never entirely lost the characteristics of their forefathers. Now and again, at some distaste of court life, or some fancied slight on the part of the monarch, they would retire to their forest home, and resume for a time at least the life and habits of a nobler and a prouder day.

In the largest of these old saloons, the day after the meeting in the forest, the whole household of the château was assembled. At a long table were seated several gentlemen well known in Paris as among the highest of the *noblesse de la robe*, and rolls of parchment and masses of writing, with great seals hanging from their corners, covered the table. The walls of the saloon were hung with portraits of several epochs of art, including the works of artists then alive; for it was a peculiarity of the De Fronténacs that venerating, as they did, the

antique portion of their château, they invariably hung the portraits of the family as they were painted in these old and faded rooms, reserving for the modern apartments the landscapes and fancy pictures which from time to time they purchased.

When the moment had arrived at which the contracts were to be signed, there was a movement in the room, and Mademoiselle de Fronténac, accompanied by her mother, entered and advanced towards the table. She was perfectly collected, and bowed to the Marquis with an unembarrassed grace. No one ignorant of the circumstances of the case would have supposed that anything approaching to a tragedy was being enacted in that room.

The Marquis signed more than one document, and as he stepped back from the table he ran his eyes carelessly over the room, with which he was unacquainted. Fronting him, above a massive sideboard with the full light of the opposite window upon it, was the portrait of a young man in the cuirass of an officer of cavalry of a previous century, whose eyes were fixed upon the Marquis with a stern and threatening glance. It seemed that, stepping from the canvas, there confronted him, as a few hours before he had met him in the forest, the Chevalier de Grissoles, whom he had found with Mademoiselle de Fronténac.

Nothing probably could have made the Marquis start, but he gazed upon the portrait with interest not unmixed with surprise, and as soon as Mademoiselle had retired, which she did when her signatures had been obtained, he turned to the Count with a courteous gesture.

"These apartments, Monsieur le Comte," he said, "are certainly as fine as anything of the kind in Europe. I have seldom, indeed, seen anything that can be compared to them. And doubtless the portraits upon the walls are of exceptional interest. By your leave, I will glance round them;" and, accompanied by the Count, he passed through several of the rooms, listening attentively to the descriptions and anecdotes which the different portraits required and suggested. There was somewhat of sameness perhaps in the story, for the French nobility had little scope of action other than the battlefield, and the collection lacked the pleasing variety of an English portrait gallery, where the variety of costumes, here a soldier, there a divine, now a lawyer or judge, and then a courtier, charms the eye and excites the fancy. The Marquis came back perhaps all the sooner to the great saloon.

The saloon was empty, and the lawyers and rolls of parchment were gone. The Marquis went straight to the portrait which had attracted his attention, and stood facing it without saying a word; the Count, after glancing carelessly round the room, followed his guest's example.

The vast hall was perfectly empty. The tables had been pushed aside into the windows, and the superb figure of the Marquis, standing upon the polished floor, would have been of itself sufficient to furnish the scene, but in proportion as the interest which the portrait had excited was manifested in the attitude of the Marquis, so much the more the figure on the wall seemed to gather life and intensity, and to answer look for look with its living opposite.

"That painting," said the Count, after a moment's pause, "is the portrait of a cadet of my family, or rather, I should say, of a female branch of it, a Chevalier de Grissoles. He was a youth of great promise, a favourite, and aide-de-camp, of the great Prince de Condé; and he fell at Jarnac by his master's side. Enough of him," and the Count's manner changed as he glanced round the chamber, and advanced confidentially to the side of the Marquis. "Enough of him; but I am not sorry your attention has been directed towards his portrait, because it enables me to introduce, with somewhat less embarrassment, a subject to which I have hitherto shrunk from alluding. I am sorry to say, Monsieur le Marquis," continued the Count, with an uneasy smile, "that the Chevalier whose portrait you see before you, was not the last of his race. There have been others who have borne the name, and there is one now. He is a lad in the regiment of Flanders, and was brought up in my family. Unfortunately he was allowed to attend Mademoiselle de Fronténac in her recreations, and a boy and girl attachment was formed between them, from which harmless child's play no one foreboded any evil. The young fool is constantly breaking away from his regiment, in which he is a great favourite, and is hanging about my daughter; and from what Madame la Comtesse tells me—I hardly like to say it, it is so absurd!—she is positively attached to him, seriously and devotedly attached. Positively I cannot sleep sometimes; this stupid affair has given me so much annoyance."

It did not increase the good humour of the Count, who was already in a sufficiently bad temper, to notice, as he could not help doing, that the Marquis did not seem in the least surprised at the information he had received, and what was still more irritating, that he seemed to regard it with perfect indifference. He appeared, in fact, to be much more interested in studying the portrait before him, probably admiring it as a work of art.

"My dear Monsieur le Comte," he said at length, "I am really sorry that you should allow yourself to be so much annoyed over what seems to me to be a mere trifle. This marriage contract, so honourable to me, is now signed: at the present moment *messieurs de la robe* are engaged, I doubt not, in arranging those pecuniary matters which you explained to me were