

AN ARTIST'S IDYL.

BY THEOPHILE GAUJIER.

It was in the midsummer of 18—that a lad of sixteen or seventeen years, but so small he appeared much younger, might have been seen in the Province of A—driving before him two or three dozen sheep. The youthful shepherd had that thoughtful, sad expression peculiar to those who spend much of their time in solitude. Romances had not turned Petit Pierre's head, for such was his name. He did not know how to read, nevertheless he was a dreamer. Day after day he would lean against a tree, his eyes wandering over the horizon in a sort of ecstatic contemplation.

What was he thinking of? He did not know himself. He saw the sunrise and sunset, the different tints of the foliage, the shadows of cloud and mountain, without taking heed thereof, but they influenced him nevertheless, and he thought it weak-spirited, almost an infirmity, to be thus influenced by water, woods, and sky. He would say to himself, "There is nothing so wonderful in all this; trees are not rare, neither is the earth, why should I stop to look at an oak or a hill, forgetting everything? Without Fidele I would have lost more than one sheep, and the master would beat me. Why am I not like the others—big and strong, always singing—instead of spending my time looking at the grass, my sheep?" One might have almost thought that Petit Pierre was in love—but he was not—sylvan shepherds are not so precocious, and this Corydon had hardly yet noticed a Phyllis.

Entering a meadow covered with fine grass, dotted here and there with clumps of trees, altogether a picturesque spot, Petit Pierre threw himself on a rock, and, leaning on his stick, looked not unlike a shepherd of Arcadia, while he gave himself up to his thoughts. His dog, sagaciously judging the sheep would not go far from a spot where the pasture was so inviting, with his head on his paws, and his eyes fixed on his master, lay at his feet motionless. The sheep disported themselves in their happy, heedless fashion. It was a charming, peaceful picture—so a young girl thought as she entered the meadow from another side.

"What a lovely spot for sketching!" she cried, taking her drawing materials from her maid, who was with her.

Throwing herself on a little knoll, regardless of her fresh white robe, and arranging her drawing materials, she began with a firm hand to sketch the scene before her. A great straw hat cast a transparent shade over her lovely features; a glimpse of her sunny hair, in a round knot at the back, made her not unlike one of Ruben's pictures.

Petit Pierre, absorbed as he was, had not at first noticed the arrival of this charming apparition. Fidele had raised his head, but seeing nothing particularly antagonistic, returned to his former sphinx-like attitude. When Petit Pierre glanced finally on the dainty white figure before him, he suddenly felt as if his heart had stopped beating. To overcome this emotion he rose to his feet, and whistling to his dog, left the spot.

But that had never entered into the young girl's calculations, who was about putting in the young shepherd with his flock as an indispensable accessory. She threw down her album and pencil and flew in the direction of Petit Pierre, and insisted on his returning to occupy his former position on the rock.

"You," she said, laughingly, "must stay in this position until I tell you that you can go—this arm a little more forward, and your hand a little to the left."

As she spoke, with her white, delicate hands she placed and arranged Petit Pierre in the position to suit her.

"What beautiful eyes he has, Lucy, for a peasant's eyes," she continued, with another laugh to her maid.

The model arranged to suit her, the light-hearted young girl returned to her drawing, which was soon finished.

"You can get up now and go, but it is only fair I should reward you for the fatigue I have caused you, remaining still so long, like a rustic saint."

The shepherd, very shamefacedly, very slowly, came to the young girl's side, who slipped a piece of gold into his hand.

"That is to buy a new vest for the Sunday fetes," she added.

The shepherd glanced furtively on the half-open album stood transfixed with amazement, without closing his hand where the new twenty franc piece glittered. The scales fell from his eyes; a sudden revelation came over him. In a half-stupified voice he said, following the different portions of the drawing.

"The trees, the stones, the rock, the dog—and I am here, the sheep, too, on this paper!"

The young girl, amused at his admiration and naive astonishment, showed him other drawings—lakes, chateaux, rocks—then, as it was growing dark, she rose, and with her maid disappeared on the road to a great chateau.

Petit Pierre followed her with his eyes as long as a fold of her gown remained in sight. The humble shepherd began to have a confused idea what it meant to watch the trees, the clouds, the landscape. The emotion he experienced on seeing anything beautiful assumed different proportions. He was neither then a fool nor an imbecile. He had seen on the chimney piece in the cottages images of Genevieve de Brabant, and the Mother of Sorrows, with her seven arrows embedded in her heart, but these coarse daubs, in yellow, red, or blue, unworthy of the savages of New Zealand, never awakened an idea of art in his head. The drawings in the album of the young girl, with their crayon shading and precise forms were something entirely new to Petit Pierre. The pictures in the parish church were so black and smoky one could distinguish nothing. Besides that he hardly dared to raise his eyes to them from the porch where he knelt.

That night Petit Pierre dreamed he was in a valley more beautiful than anything he had ever seen, while the beautiful vision that had drawn him in the afternoon came smiling toward him, saying:

"It is not sufficient to look—you must work."

So saying, she placed on his knees a board, drawing paper, and a sharp pencil, and stood over him while he began to trace a few lines, but with so trembling a hand that the lines ran into each other. Petit Pierre would have given anything not to have been so awkward—everything he drew grew into irregular and ridiculous zigzags. His anguish grew greater than he could bear, until the lady, seeing his misery, put a stop to it by placing in his hand a pencil whose point flashed like fire. Petit Pierre's difficulties vanished as if by magic. Out of confusion came order, trees throw out bold and hardy trunks, the trees looked natural, and plants with their foliage were true to life. His instructress, leaning on his shoulder, followed his work with an air of approval, saying from time to time:

"Good, very good! this is the way—go on!"

This dream made a great impression on Petit Pierre. From that day he seemed a different person—his head and his heart alike seemed on fire. He had suddenly awoken to consciousness of the talent within him, and determined if possible, to make something of himself.

Taking a coal from those smouldering on the hearth, Petit Pierre began his studies in charcoal on the outside walls of the cabin instead of on paper or canvas. What should he begin with? Make a picture of his best, or rather only friend, Fidele! For this orphan's family consisted only of his dog. His first effort, it must be confessed, resembled a hippopotamus more than a dog. By dint of trying over and over again—fortunately Fidele was the most patient model in the world—the hippopotamus was succeeded by a crocodile, then a calf, and finally a figure that resembled nothing so much as a member of the canine race. To describe the satisfaction that Petit Pierre felt when he had accomplished this would be difficult. Michael Angelo, when he had given the last touch to the Sistine Chapel, and laid down, with his arms crossed upon his breast to contemplate his immortal work, never felt a dearer or deeper joy. "If that beautiful lady could only see Fidele's portrait!" cried the little artist.

To do him justice, it must be said that this blindness lasted only a short time. He soon learned how unfinished was the sketch, how different from the real Fidele. The next time he tried to draw a sheep, and did a little better; he was gaining experience—but the charcoal broke in his fingers and the rough boards were very exasperating. "If I had paper and pencils I could do better, but how can I get them?"