

"For La Belle France"

By Evelyn R. Caverley

It was a bright August morning. In the quaint, little villages in Brittany everything was excitement. The peasants had been early astir so that now, the household tasks completed, the population were thronging on the street in the full splendour of holiday attire.

Rosy-cheeked girls were there, bedecked in their best dresses, dresses which had been carefully preserved and which had passed from mother to daughter for generations. Very pretty indeed were those dark blue cloth dresses, so richly embroidered and bedecked with tinsel that the original material could scarcely be distinguished. And to this an added charm was given by the brilliant silk apron, the cross of gold for the neck, the broad sash of velvet ribbon, the gold chain with the locket and charms that hung from it, the lace collar and the "Coif", the great feature of a Breton woman's costume. This latter adornment was of real, old lace, standing high above the head, with wider lace wings and loops and fastened to its cardboard frame with wonderful gold and silver pins. Then, too, how picturesque were the masculine portion of the population in their finely embroidered blouses and big wooden shoes!

Today a "Pardon," the great religious festival of the year, was being held and every Breton was trudging to the shrine of his patron saint, there to burn a candle as an offering of his thankfulness and to pray for the forgiveness of all his sins.

Already, big wagons drawn by fat horses, whose heads were bedecked with rosettes of pink and blue paper, were coming in, the little, round bells attached to the harness tinkling gaily as the wagons rumbled along.

On the outskirts of the village were peasants trudging along the highways, their big, wooden shoes making a rattling clatter as they moved. Intermingling with the peasants were innumerable carts, carriages and diligences, packed inside and out with serious faced men and women.

Seated in one of these little carts were two people who seemed oddly out of place in that throng of shrine-seekers. The girl, who was very young and very pretty in her quaint costume, seemed almost too happy and joyous an atom to be mingling with this sombre mass of humanity. And handsome Alanik Rosel, beside her; in his deep eyes shone happiness also, Nannie and Alanik were but newly wed and the joy that laughed in their hearts illumined their young faces.

On all sides were other faces, serious, with lips moving voicelessly in prayer, and as though becoming observant of this, at length, Nannie sat suddenly erect and cast an accusing glance at Alanik, who reading the glance guiltily dropped his eyes and tried to look as solemn as the occasion demanded. But grave thoughts cannot long endure where love is singing. Soon they were smiling happily at each other again.

Arrived in the village, the multitude assembled in the square before the church, which at high noon became packed with kneeling figures. Finally, after certain religious ceremonies were performed, the Bishop appeared. He raised his hands and evoked a blessing on the people. The "Pardon" has been said.

Magically then, the scene changed from one of devotion and prayer to one of rejoicing and merry-making. Hawkers wandered through the crowds loudly crying their wares. Jokes flew from mouth to mouth and peals of laughter rang out.

Now, no restraining influence prevented Nannie and Alanik from being as happy as they wished, and their friends crowded about them to congratulate them and wish them all joy and a happy life together. And so midst the happy throng they passed, eyes softly seeking eyes and hand in hand, happy as children and like children enjoying the various wonders of the veritable midway of life and color.

Suddenly, above the laughter and shouts of the merry makers, there sounded the shrill notes of the "binious", the Breton bagpipes, and away rushed the crowd to the grand dance which closes every "Pardon".

There a band of gaily-dressed dancers formed in line for the stately gavotte of the "Pardon". This dance was of religious

origin and was always performed with great ceremony. To the best dancer or the dancer who longest endured, was given a broad, blue ribbon with silver tassels, as a prize.

The wild gavotte music began and the dancers who had stood hand in hand, awaiting the signal, broke into fours and the dance was on. Nannie and Alanik danced with the others. Gradually couple after couple began to fall out and the excitement arose to fever heat. Now but two couples remained, Nannie and Alanik were one of these. Friends of each couple shouted encouragement. At length Nannie and Alanik danced alone. They were the victors. Amidst laughter and cheering Nannie received a crown of tinsel and flowers, and shyly and proudly adjusted the ribbon of honor on her husband's shoulder.

They were in the midst of wild congratulations, when a sudden hush gripped the throng. A French officer was speaking from the raised platform where the musicians sat. Towards him surged the crowd, and amazement and incredulity looked from those simple, peasant faces, as the import of his words sank home.

"Germany has declared war upon France and the Republic calls upon every last year's conscript to shoulder arms at once."

Stupidly the words were repeated from mouth to mouth. They could have but one meaning, War! Ah! there must be a mistake surely! Up until this moment no word of the agitation which was to shake the world, had penetrated this remote and peaceful, little village. But there was no mistake. Gradually those simple-hearted people understood. France was again calling upon her sons, to go forth to defend her honour.

It was Nannie who first recovered from the shock of the news. Last year's conscripts would report immediately for action, the officer had said. As she grasped the significance of the command, she clutched at her husband's arm.

"Alanik, my Alanik," she whispered, "You will have to go."

At her touch and words, the big fellow roused from his torpor. As he looked into her anguished face, the instinct of protection awoke within him and he gathered her closer to him. The clasp of his protecting arms loosened Nannie's emotion and she began to sob. As a mother soothes her child, Alanik soothed her, and tenderly supporting her, led her to a quiet street. There, after a time, they were able to look duty in the face. Nannie would not have her husband desert La Belle France in her hour of need; no never! So, with a clinging kiss and without a murmur of protest she gave him up.

Soon the village was in a state of confusion and excitement. At six o'clock a special train was to convey the men to

Rouen, where they would join their regiments. The situation was too critical to permit of a moment's delay. When Alanik and Nannie reached the station, a large crowd was already there. How different from the merry crowd of the morning! Wives, mothers, sisters and sweethearts sat with white, drawn faces beside their loved ones. Nannie stood beside her husband, saying no word, but staring with big unseeing eyes straight in front of her where lay duty. Her hand lay in Alanik's. His arm was about her drooping shoulder.

At length the train thundered in. Oh, the sad parting! Alanik clasped Nannie to his heart and kissed her once—twice, then with one long look into her brave eyes he released her, and dashed for the moving train.

Nannie stood erect and smiling where he left her, watching the fast disappearing train. As it swung about the distant curve, she fell unconscious upon the platform. Kind hands lifted her. Kind friends carried her away. Kind faces bent above her as for days she lay prostrate with grief.

Then, gradually, she began to recover. At first, the sight of her little home where she expected to be so happy was a torture to her. But wonderful letters came from Alanik, letters of love and encouragement, and by degrees her poignant grief wore away. As news of the grim struggle reached her, she realized that she, too, must be brave.

She, herself, superintended the harvest-

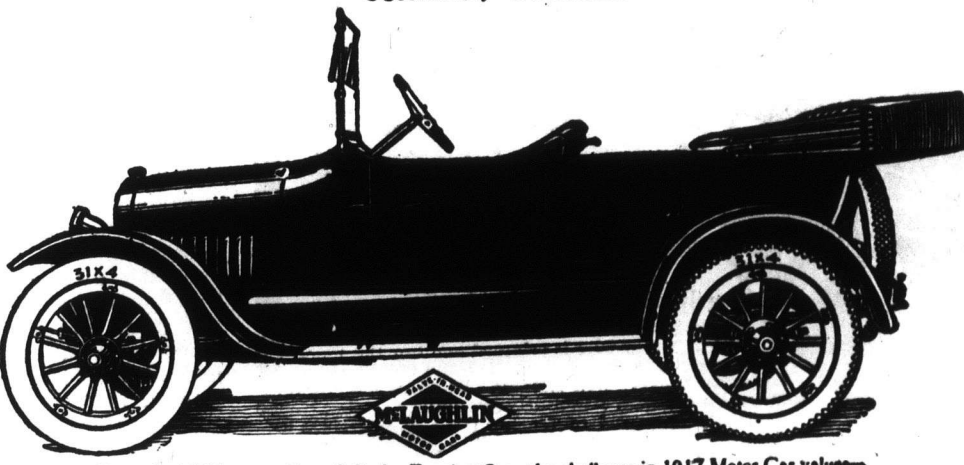


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