

THE MILL OF ST. HERBOT—A BRETON STORY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "PATTY."

CHAPTER II.

THE MILL.

The village of St. Herbot is about four miles from Huelgoat, but the mill of Rusquec lies high above the solitary grey old church, and stands at the beginning of the cascades. In summer-time the cascades are comparatively quiet. One hears their roar as one mounts through the thick steep wood which overhangs the road; but it is subdued, not like the awful thunder that in winter and spring-time seems to make the old tree trunks rock, as the torrent swelled by the mountain floods falls more than one hundred feet, and then rushes violently along the rocky river-bed for nearly six hundred feet farther. Such rocks too! huge boulders of granite, and yet mere playthings in the hands of the giant Guéord, who flung them, so tradition says, into the river-bed, in order to clear the ground of his friend, a Druid who dwelt on the hill which overhangs the torrent.

The ground all round the mill is strewn with these rocky fragments, and it is a hard matter to get space for even a cabbage garden—that necessity of a Breton household. The cottage belonging to the mill is so perched among the rocks, that it is a wonder it has not been carried away when the torrent, which sweeps so close by, has been more swollen than usual. The house is a miniature of the Braspart farmhouse, except that one steps at once into the family room; there is no entrance passage, and the sweet breath of the cows comes through an arched opening on one side; cocks and hens cluck in and out through this opening, in search of stray crumbs, which Louise or her mother may have let fall from their supper.

There is no table spread for this meal. The old woman in her black gown and white muslin cap, the long lappets of which are pinned behind her head, sits on one side of the open fireplace, with a red bowl on her knees; Louise sits opposite. She is dressed like her mother, except that she wears greenish blue instead of black, and that the long broad-hemmed ends of her cap reach nearly to her waist. She has a keen appetite, for while her mother plays with her wooden spoon, and looks seriously into the fire, the girl goes on swallowing spoonful after spoonful of the crêpe and sour butter-milk which makes her supper.

A much larger red bowl, filled with the same uninviting-looking meal, is on the long oak table that stands across the room, between the front door and the back window, for the only light from the front of the house comes through the open half of the entrance door.

"Mathurin is late for his supper," the girl looked at the bowl on the table; "he will be hungry, poor old man! hast thou anything in the pot, mother, to warm him with this cold, windy evening? he works so hard."

"Thou art a spendthrift, Louise." Madame Rusquec's heavy severe face did not soften even when she looked at her pretty daughter; "meat costs too dear to eat every day, and Mathurin had ragout at dinner-time."

"Well, mother, thou knowest best, and the money is thine, but it seems to me that men need meat more than we women do; they have more need of strength."

Madame Rusquec shook her head, and drew down her long upper lip.

"Thou hast yet to begin life, Louise; thou knowest nothing. Mathurin works fairly, but then he is a paid servant; if he were my husband would he take so large a share of labour? No, no. Wait, child, wait; thou art but a child. I am not vexed with thee"—this because she saw tears in the bright blue eyes—"thou canst not have the knowledge without the sorrow, and I would keep thee from sorrow as long as I can."

The pretty, round childish face still worked nervously.

"Mother," the girl sat thinking for some minutes before she spoke; "if husbands make their wives work so hard, why do women marry?"

Mère Rusquec raised her head, which had sunk on her breast, and looked sharply at her daughter.

"Child, there are many reasons. They marry to live; for though a girl may have a portion, there may not be enough to keep her for life, and if she is to work, she may as well work for two as for one; then they marry for company, it is dull to be always alone, and there are the children at home if the husband stays abroad. Bah!" she ended impatiently, "a girl marries because she is asked; she knows it is what she is made for, and when God sends her a husband she takes him."

Louise smiled as she listened—she said to herself, "Perhaps all husbands are not tyrants; if a bachelor sends to ask for me I will marry him if he is handsome, and if he will take me to all the fairs of the neighbourhood. Yes—yes; I will marry."

"Mother, didst thou take the first bachelor who asked for thee?"

Madame Rusquec's heavy, straight eyebrows knit together, and her thick lips parted and opened inquiringly, showing her large teeth.

"Idle questions are not good for thee nor for me. I took the man I liked, and he was thy father, Louise. No need to trouble thy little head by asking questions."

She got up and drew a quaint old spinning-wheel close to the half-open door, and was soon plying her distaff and filling the cottage with the whirr of the wheel.

Louise was not so active-minded as her mother, she slowly washed up the red bowls and set them on one of a row of black shelves, and the spoons in a curious rack just below; then she went and looked out of the back window.

"Mother," she called out presently, "why has not any bachelor asked for me?"

The whirr of the wheel suddenly ceased, and Madame Rusquec's thread snapped.

"The child is a fool though she is so pretty," she muttered. "Thou art spoiled, Louise," she went on, "and Mathurin says it is my fault; he says if I gave thee more to do instead of doing all myself, thou wouldst have less time for talking, thou wouldst have something more useful to think of than a bachelor."

"Then why dost thou spoil me, mother?"

She came across to her mother and looked down in her face, putting one plump pink hand on the old woman's shoulder.

"Thou art set on asking questions, child. Who can always give reasons for what he does? It may be because I know that this is thy holiday time I wish thee to enjoy it; and see, all that thou thinkest of is how to shorten it by taking a husband."

Louise kissed the brown puckered forehead; but she pouted, and her fair face looked sad. She was very pretty, like a pink and white sweet-pea or a bunch of honeysuckle newly opened; her fair hair scarcely showed on her forehead, but through her clear muslin cap it was easy to see golden silky coils rolled round and round her head, leaving the delicate little ears visible. A deeper tinge of colour flamed up into her cheeks when she spoke again.

"But, mother, I may be lucky; all men are not alike—perhaps my husband will not expect me to work hard."

"There—there, silly child, have done—go and look for Mathurin. Perhaps the stones in the cascades will change themselves into loaves of bread and feed the beggars; perhaps wheat will grow among the boulders—there is no end to 'perhaps,' Louise, it is the largest word that was ever spelled with seven letters."

She fastened her thread together, and whirr, whirr went the wheel again.

Louise had gone back to the window, but this time she did not look out. Instead, she gazed earnestly at the tall, broad-shouldered woman stooping over the spinning-wheel as the thread slipped a little.

"It is all very well," she thought, a bright saucy look came on her face, "mother was a fine woman, no doubt, but she never could have been so pretty as I am. I get my looks from father. Mother has fine dark eyes still, but they are so sunk in her head, and she must always have had a sallowness. Ah, I shall have more chances than she had, I know—I know. It must be so sad not to be pretty."

She gave her mother a compassionate glance, and looked out of the window again.

There was not much to be seen beyond the early green of the trees, for the wood began here and stretched downwards over the whole breadth of the lofty hill, until it ended in the valley of St. Herbot. The trees wore the exquisite clothing which no autumn tints can rival in tenderness of colour though they may surpass in richness; and among the lovely green, and grey, and yellow of beech, and ash, and sycamore, the oak showed as yet only a russet bronze, which looked gilded in the strange, weird light of the setting sun.

"Here he is—here is Mathurin."

Louise clapped her hands, and went out to meet the old servant.

He moved with long strides through the trees—bent with age as well as with the weight of the package strapped on his back. His long white hair streamed from under his broad-brimmed hat, one lock fell over his wrinkled face, and he pushed it aside as he saw Louise springing over the stones to meet him.

"Give me your cudgel, old man," she said, gaily, "and tell me some news. Ah! I wish I were you, Mathurin, then I would find a reason for going to Huelgoat twice a week at least."

Mathurin smiled grimly. He stopped and drew a long breath as the girl pulled his heavy penbas out of his hand.

"If I had your young legs I might like it also; but I should like to see you climb the wood with this burden on your back, maiden."

"Tell me some news, quick—quick," she looked towards the cottage, as if to signify that she wished to hear the news out of her mother's presence.

"News—well, the Widow Coatfrec has lost a cow, and she is angry; she says she laid a whole tuft of the cow's tail on the saint's tomb and that he ought to have spared her. It seems as if St. Herbot had been asleep, for Pierre Kerest's pigs are dying of measles and every one knows how pious a man is Pierre Kerest."

Louise looked quite unmoved, there was not even a smile on her lips as she walked beside Mathurin.

"Yes—yes, but is there no news about people, as well as about cows and pigs?"

A cynical smile came on Mathurin's thin lips.

"Cows and pigs are of more worth than some people, but, in truth, there is no news. Stay," he had paused for a moment to think, "Christophe Mao, the young brother of the farmer of Braspart—dost thou remember him?"

"No"—Louise's eyes sparkled at this mention of a new bachelor—"I have seen Jean Marie Mao, but it is years ago, he must be ever so old now; but you say this brother is younger."

Mathurin frowned.

"Jean Marie Mao is not old, and Christophe is but a full-grown boy. I ought to know for I was at his birth. He has come home from the sea-fishing but lately, and the news is that he tells me he is not going back, he is going to stay on at Huelgoat, and to work for Jean Marie."

Louise felt full of sudden delight. She rarely went to Huelgoat, but she knew the names of its inhabitants, and since she was a child, although children were born and people died, marriages had been rare at Huelgoat, and no new inhabitants had come into its secluded monotonous life.

They were close to the cottage, and there was a glow of excitement in the girl's eyes as she put her hand on Mathurin's arm—

"Stop a minute, till you have told me what Christophe Mao is like."

But Mathurin was tired out, he wanted his supper.

"Like—why like a man, to be sure."

He pushed past her without the slightest deference, and went into the cottage.

"Like a man," thought Louise; "foolish old creature, just now he said he was a full-grown boy."

(To be continued.)

Try to understand politics and to study important questions as they arise, so that you may be always ready to support with all the influence you may happen to have, the measure and policy which you have satisfied yourself will be best for your country.—Thomas Hughes.