

THE MILL OF ST. HERBOT—A BRETON STORY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "PATTY."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROTHERS AT THE MILL.

It seemed to Jean Marie, when he recovered from his anger, that he had acted foolishly in quarrelling with Coeffic.

It was possible that Madame Rusquec had commissioned the tailor to find a husband for her pretty daughter, and that Coeffic had given him the first offer.

He struck his fist fiercely on the table as he thought of this—what more likely than that Coeffic would go and make a like proposal to one of his unmarried neighbours.

"And no one but such an ungoverned idiot as I am would make two bites at such a cherry as Louise is."

The vision he had seen at the cascades seemed to flit across the great dingy room, and to fill it with sunshine. He went out and worked till much later than usual. Next morning, too, he did an unusual spell of work, and was even more brusque and silent than before, but to Jeanne's surprise he came in early in the afternoon, and asked for his Sunday suit and his best hat. Dressed in these, with carefully brushed hair and black heavy shoes instead of dirty sabots, Jean Marie looked a very remarkable man, and one not ill-suited to go a-wooing.

"What is doing?" the quiet old servant thought, as she watched him stepping, cudgel in hand, along the road; "never before did our master put on his best clothes on a week-day, unless for a fair or a Pardon."

Christophe had started soon after dinner for the mill, but he had not gone with the set purpose of visiting Madame Rusquec; he had told Mathurin to expect him, and he hoped that the old man might speak to Louise; but he did not feel that he had an excuse for presenting himself at the mill; he could only take his chance of what might happen.

Mathurin did his errand clumsily.

"I told Christophe to come and see you," he said next morning to Louise; "I told him he would be welcome. See how fine he has made Méjid, and all to please you."

"Méjid looks best with his tail loose"—Louise tossed her head and her eyes sparkled with anger—"what right have you to speak for me to any bachelor? You can welcome your visitor if you choose—to me he is a stranger."

She turned abruptly away, for she had begun to cry with vexation. That Christophe, who already thought her forward, should be told she would welcome him was too hard to bear. She would go away and hide herself in the wood, and let him have his journey for nothing.

She ran off among the trees, and though Mathurin called to her she would not heed him. Mathurin shook his head and repeated to himself some sage, if stale, reflections on the conduct of young girls. The old servant had kept silence about Christophe's visit till past mid-day, so that soon after Louise's retreat the young man appeared. Mathurin looked at him shyly, without any heartiness of welcome.

"Where is she?" the young man asked. Mathurin nodded towards the wood. "I will go down to the cascades"—Christophe hoped he might find Louise in the wood—"I will come back again by-and-by, when you are less busy, Mathurin."

The old man watched his tall, straight figure disappear, and then he went on chopping wood.

"Well," he thought, "it may be that we old folks can't get the same meaning out of words as young ones can. May be they two will meet in the wood and set all right their own way, but I doubt if there is wisdom in it." He slowly shook his head.

Christophe went on a little way, and then breaking through a thick bit of copse he came in sight of the cascades. Louise was not visible, but the beauty of the place caught his eye and arrested him. Like most of his fisher comrades of the place he had his keen sense of enjoyment; no one had heard he was dreamy-natured spite of his keen sense of enjoyment; no one had heard him talk of the scenes he had witnessed on the far-off southern coast, and yet he had spent many an hour musing on a ledge of rock overhanging the cascade. There was a strange mixture in the scene. The trees around him clothed in the soft, reposeful tints of spring, the calm sky streaked with a few long, pearl-coloured cloud-lines, the strangely rounded grey rocks here and below, and in the midst of this sweet harmony of peace—the discord of the roaring, foaming fall flinging itself more than a hundred feet down the stony valley. The contrast kept Christophe gazing there in a kind of pleasant wonder. Besides the intense love for his native wilds, so special to a Breton, the scene had for him the attraction of freshness. He had not been at St. Herbot since his return, and as a boy, when the mill was his father's, he had been used to spend long days at the cascades.

Meantime Jean Marie had reached the mill, and had found Madame Rusquec alone, seated, as usual, at her spinning-wheel. On the way the farmer had pondered on an excuse for his visit, and, after he had been greeted and asked to sit, he cleared his throat and began, feeling more ill at ease than he had ever felt in his life.

"Do you find Mathurin sufficient for his work?" he said.

Madame Rusquec's large serious eyes looked at him as if they would draw out his meaning.

"Mathurin does what I bid him, and that is all I want; he suits me; he is old, but then a younger man would be less thoughtful, and would care more to please himself."

"Then you are content as it is?"

"Yes," but she thought, "why does he ask this? A man like farmer Mao does not come all the way from Huelgoat only to ask how I like my servant."

She waited, but Jean Marie seemed stricken dumb by her last reply. This had uprooted an idea which had grown this afternoon, and which had sent him back to the farmhouse from his work, to ask for his Sunday suit.

Why should not he go to the mill and see what his chances were with Louise, and also rid himself of his brother by installing him as manager to the widow. Jean Marie loved his brother, but he did not care to watch his desul-

tory work, it was a constant blister to him. At the mill Christophe would be free of his supervision, and could idle if he pleased. But a stronger motive than this prompted Jean Marie's visit. The sudden maddening jealousy that had seized him when Christophe spoke of his age would not be stifled, it kept on bursting into fresh life, like a flame on old timber. Even when he thought it subdued, for he felt it was causeless, it suddenly blazed up again as fiercely as ever.

Madame Rusquec was a discreet and a sensible woman, but she was very inquisitive, and a shrewd suspicion of her visitor's real business began to dawn upon her.

"Why do you ask about Mathurin, Monsieur Mao?" she said, and she looked more keenly at his serious face.

He sat clasping both hands on the cudgel standing between his knees, but he did not look at Madame Rusquec. His dark, deeply-sunken eyes roamed over the bit of landscape framed in by the arched doorway, the hill opposite grassed and crowned a-top with golden furze, and the huge round lumps of granite cumbering and choking the river-bed, which lay between the cottage and the hill.

"I had been thinking"—Jean Marie paused. Yes, it was better that the first step should be for Christophe. "You say Mathurin suits—but he gets older every year," he spoke more decidedly now that business was in question, "and you will find that the mill gets less profitable; my advice to you is to let a younger man come in as master, who will still allow you to take what the mill earns at present, and work the rest for his own profit."

Madame Rusquec had grown very rigid as she listened.

"I cannot part with Mathurin, he has served me faithfully,"

"You need not. Mathurin will serve willingly under the man I am thinking of."

Madame Rusquec had been a docile, submissive wife, but she had now for some years been a free agent, and she resented the farmer's interference.

"I think it is best as it is. When there is a young girl at home an old man is better than a young one."

Now, this was just the opening Jean Marie desired, he grasped his cudgel still more firmly and looked straight before him; and, as the words shaped themselves for utterance, Louise stood in front of the arched doorway. The widow rejoiced in the interruption.

"Come in, Louise," she called out, for the girl had not looked into the cottage, and had not seen the farmer, "here is Monsieur Mao from Braspart."

Louise looked pleased at this, she nodded and smiled as she came in; and as the farmer raised his dark serious eyes to her face, and she saw the admiration he felt, her wounded pride was soothed. She had not cared specially to see this man, and he had come unasked to see her again. Coeffic's words and his assertion that Jean Marie was the best match in Huelgoat came back to her mind, a flush rose in her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with a kind of expectation. She did not propose to herself to marry the farmer, but it would be triumph if he proposed for her.

"It is good of you to come and see my mother, monsieur"—she looked so sweetly at him, that Jean Marie's hopes rose high—"she has so few visitors."

A strange new feeling came to Jean Marie. Louise did not seat herself, but stood beside her mother, making a wonderful contrast in her dainty pink and white prettiness to the dark-eyed, heavy-featured, stiff woman at the spinning-wheel—Hebe beside Clotho. The farmer suddenly rose and stood opposite Louise—he felt uneasy to remain seated while this fair creature stood.

"Your hill is steep to climb," and then he smiled at Louise. "You have not forgotten your promise to be at the festival?" His eyes glowed as he waited for her answer.

Louise turned pale. She could not tell what it was that chilled her so suddenly in the glance of Jean Marie.

"Did I promise?" the words came hesitatingly, and she saw his whole expression change—he looked cold and hard again—in that moment Louise had remembered that she had been anxious to meet the farmer at the fête in order to make the acquaintance of his brother, and now this was done.

But still it was a triumph to be asked this by the best match in Huelgoat. "I am honoured that you should remember," she said. "I am thinking so much about the fête. It will be very pleasant; the days are dull here, there is no one to see."

Jean Marie was softened by her pleading, earnest voice. He looked at her attentively. "She is too young and innocent to deceive me," he thought; "I know that I incline to suspect all women, but this one is different from the rest." "Would you like a home in Huelgoat better than one here, Louise?"

He spoke as gently as he could, but something in the question, or the tone of it, made Madame Rusquec look up abruptly, and she saw Jean Marie's meaning in his face.

Louise guessed it also, but she did not want the farmer to be so hasty; she wished to be friends with him at the fête. And as she did not mean to marry anyone just directly, if Jean Marie asked her now, she would have to say, No.

"I should have neighbours if I lived in Huelgoat," she spoke carelessly; "but then I should miss the old place, and I was such a little child when I came to live here."

"The bird cannot always stay in the nest," Madame Rusquec said.

Just then Mathurin came in from the cow-stable.

"Mistress"—he nodded at Jean Marie—"there is Christophe Mao outside. I told him he would be welcome, but he will not come in for my asking."

Madame Rusquec looked at the farmer, and she started.

A grey shade had fallen on his face, and he was gnawing his under lip. His eyes were fixed intently on Louise; and as the mother followed his gaze, she saw that the girl had reddened to the edge of her muslin cap.

No one spoke till Madame Rusquec said, "Where is he, Mathurin?" and she passed the old man, and went into the cow-shed. Mathurin followed his mistress. Louise stood wondering how she should receive Christophe. She had forgotten Jean Marie in her delight at Mathurin's news, for she had grown tired of her own self-deception as she wandered alone in the wood; and when she came back to the mill again, and saw no traces of Christophe, she felt deeply mortified.