

Myrtle

By Erckmann-Chatrian

CHAPTER I.

Just at the end of the village of Dosenheim, in Alsace, about fifty yards from the gravelly road that leads into the wood, is a pretty cottage surrounded with an orchard, the flat roof loaded with boulder-stones, the gable-end looking down the valley.

Flights of pigeons wheel around it, hens are scratching and picking up what they can under the fences, the cock takes his stand majestically on the low garden wall, and sounds the *révellée*, or the retreat, for the echoes of Falberg to repeat; an outside staircase, with its wooden banisters, the linen of the little household hanging over it, leads to the first story, and a vine climbs up the front, and spreads its leafy branches from side to side.

If you will only go up these steps you will see at the end of the narrow entry the kitchen, with its dresser and its pewter plates and dishes, its soup-tureens puffing out like balloons; open the door to the right and you are in the parlour with its dark oak furniture, a ceiling crossed by brown smoke-stained rafters, and its old Nuremberg clock click-clacking monotonously.

Here sits a woman of five-and-thirty, spinning and dreaming, her waist encircled with a long black taffety bodice, and her head covered with a velvet headdress, with long ribbons.

A man in broad-skirted velveteen coat, with breeches of the same, and with a fine open brow, looking calm and thoughtful, is dandling on his knee a fine stout boy, whistling the call to “boot and saddle.”

There lies the quiet village at the end of the valley, framed, as you sit, in the little cottage window; the river is leaping over the mill-dam and crossing the winding street; the old houses, with their deep and gloomy eaves, their barns, their gabled windows, their nets drying in the sun; the young girls, kneeling by the river-side on the stones, washing linen; the cattle lazily lounging down to drink, and gravely lowing amidst the willows; the young herdsmen cracking their whips; the mountain summit, jagged like a saw by the pointed fir-tree tops—all these rural objects lie reflected in the flowing blue stream, only broken by the fleets of ducks sailing down or the occasional passage of an old tree rooted up on the mountain-side.

Looking quietly on these things, you are impressed with a sense of the ease and comfort of which they speak, and you are moved with gratitude to the Giver of all good.

Well, my dear friends and neighbours, such was the cottage of the Brémers in 1820, such were Brémer himself, his wife Catherine, and their son, little Fritz.

To my own mind they come back exactly as I have described them to you.

Christian Brémer had served in the chasseurs of the Imperial Guard. After 1815 he had married Catherine, his old sweetheart, grown a little older, but quite fresh and fair, and full of grace. With his own little property, his house, and his four or five acres of vineyard, and Catherine's added to it, Brémer had become one of the most substantial bourgeois of Dosenheim; he might have been mayor, or adjoint, or municipal councillor, but these honours had no attractions for him; and what pleased him best was, after work was over, to take down his old gun, whistle for Friedland, and take him a turn in the woods.

Now it fell out one day that this worthy man, coming home after a day's shooting, brought in his bag a little gipsy girl two or three years old, as lively as a squirrel, and as brown as a hazel-

nut. He had found her in the bundle of an unhappy gipsy woman who had died of fatigue or hunger, or both, at the foot of a tree.

You may well imagine what an outcry Catherine raised against this new uninvited member of her family. But as Brémer was master in his own house, he simply announced to his wife that the child should be christened by the name of Susanna Frederica Myrtle, and that she should be brought up with little Fritz. As a matter of course, all the women in the place, old and young, came to pass their observations upon the little gipsy, whose serious and thoughtful expression of countenance surprised them.

“This is not a child like others,” said they; “she is a heathen—quite a heathen! You may see by her eyes that she understands every word! She is listening now! Mind what I say, Maitre Christian! gipsies have claws at the ends of their fingers. If you will rear young ferrets and weasels you must not expect your poultry to be safe. They will have the run of all the farmyard!”

“Go and mind your own business!” shouted Brémer. “I have seen Russians and Spaniards, I have seen Italians, and Germans, and Jews; some were brown, and some were black, some white, and others red; some had long noses, and others had turned-down noses, but I found good fellows amongst them all.”

“Very likely,” said the ladies, “but those people lived in houses, and gipsies live in the open air.”

He vouchsafed no reply to this argument, but with all possible politeness he put them out by the shoulders.

“Go away,” he cried; “I don’t want your advice. It is time to air the rooms, and then I have to go and attend to the stables.”

But, after all, the rejected counsels were not so bad, as the event unhappily showed a dozen or fourteen years afterwards.

Fritz was always delighted to feed the cattle, and take the horses to the pond, and follow his father and learn to plough and sow, to reap and mow, to tie up the sheaves and bring them home. But Myrtle had no wish to milk the cows, churn the butter, shell peas, or peel potatoes,

When the maidens of Dosenheim, going out to wash clothes in the morning at the river, called her the *heathen*, she mirrored herself complacently in the fountain, and when she had admired her own long dark tresses, her violet lips, her white teeth, her necklace of red berries, she would smile and murmur to herself—

“Ah! they only call me a heathen because I am prettier than they are,” and she would dip the tip of her little foot in the fountain and laugh.

But Catherine could not approve of such conduct, and said—

“Myrtle is not the least good to us. She won’t do a single thing that is useful. It is no use for me to preach, and advise, and scold, she does everything the wrong way. The other day, when we were stowing away apples in the closet, she took bites out of the best to see if they were ripe I She has no pleasure but in gobbling up the best of everything.”

Brémer himself could not help admitting that there was a very heathenish spirit in her when he heard his wife crying from morning till night, “Myrtle, Myrtle! where are you now? Ah, naughty, bad girl! she has run away into the woods again to gather blackberries.” But still he laughed to himself, and pitied poor Catherine, whom he compared to a hen with a brood of ducklings.

Every year after harvest-time Fritz and Myrtle spent whole days far away from the farm, pasturing the cattle, singing, and whistling, and baking potatoes under the ashes, and coming down the rocky hill in the evening blowing the shepherd’s horn.

These were some of Myrtle's happiest days. Seated before the burning hemp-stalks, with her pretty brown face between her hands, she lost herself in endless reveries. The long strings of wild ducks and geese which traverse, about the end of autumn, the boundless heavens spread from the mountains on the east to the western hills, seemed to have a depressing effect upon her mind. She used to follow them with longing eyes, straining them as if to overtake the wild birds in the immeasurable distance; and suddenly she would rise, spread out her arms, and cry—

“I must go! I must go! I can't stay!”

Then she would weep with her head bowed down, and Fritz, seeing her in tears, would cry too, asking—

“Why do you cry, Myrtle? Has anybody hurt you? Is it any of the boys in the village?—Kasper, Wilhelm, Heinrich? Only tell me, and I will knock him down at once! Do tell!”

“No; it is not that.”

“Well, why are you crying?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you want to run as far as the Falberg?”

“No; that is not far enough.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Down there! down there! ever so far! where the birds are going.”

This made Fritz open his eyes and his mouth very wide.

One day in September, when they were idling along by the woods, about noon, the heat was so great and the air so still that the smoke of their little fire, instead of rising straight into the air, fell like water and crept among the briars. The grasshopper had ceased its dull monotonous chirp, not the buzzing of a fly was to be heard, nor the warbling of a bird. The oxen and the cows, with sleepy eyes half-closed, their knees bent under them, were resting together under a spreading oak in the meadow, now and then lowing in a slow, protracted way as if in idle protest against such hot weather.

Fritz had begun by plaiting the strands of his whip, but he soon lay down in the long grass with his hat over his eyes, and Friedland came to lie near him, gaping from ear to ear.

Myrtle alone suffered no inconvenience from the overwhelming heat; sitting on the ground near the fire, with her arms wreathed around her knees, full in the sun, her large dark eyes slowly surveyed the dark arches formed by the branches of the forest.

Time passed on slowly. The distant village clock had struck twelve, then one, and two, and the young gipsy never stirred. In the woods and jagged mountain-tops, the crags, the forests, descending into the valleys, she heard some mysterious call. They spoke to her in a language not unknown to her.

“Yes,” she said to herself, “yes; I have seen all that before—long ago—a long time ago.”

Then with a quick, sharp glance at Fritz, who was in a deep sleep, she rose to her feet and began to fly. Her light footsteps scarcely bent the grass beneath her; she ran on and on, up the hill; Friedland turned his head round with a careless glance, then stretched out once more his languid limbs, and composed himself to sleep.

Myrtle disappeared in the midst of the brambles which border the common wood. At one bound she cleared the muddy ditch where a single frog was croaking amongst the rushes, and twenty minutes after she reached the top of the Roche Creuse, whence you may have a wide prospect of Alsace and the blue summits of the Vosges.

Then she turned to see if anybody was following her. She could still distinguish Fritz asleep in the green meadow with his hat over his eyes, and Friedland and the sleeping cattle under their tree.

Farther on she could see the village, the river, the roof of the farm-house, with its flights of pigeons eddying round; the long, crooked street and red-pecti-coated women walking leisurely up and down; the little ivy-covered church where the good *curé* Niclausse had baptised her into the Christian faith and afterwards confirmed her.

And when she had sufficiently contemplated these objects, turning her face the other way tower is the mountain, she was filled with delight to mark how the densely-crowded firs covered the hill-sides, up to their highest ridge, close as the grass of the fields.

At the sight of all this grandeur the young gipsy felt her heart beating and expanding with unknown delight, and again running on she darted through a rift between the rocks, lined with mosses and ferns, to reach the beaten track through the woods.

Her whole soul—that wild, untrained soul of hers—was rushing with her and impelling her onwards, kindling her countenance with a new ardour. With her hands she clung to the ivy, with her naked feet she clung to the projections and the crevices to push on her way.

Soon she was on the other slope, running, tripping, leaping, sometimes stopping short to gaze upon surrounding objects—a large tree, a ravine, a lonely sheet of water, or a pond full of flowers and sweet-smelling water-plants.

Although she could not remember ever having seen those copses, those clearings, those heaths, at every turn in the path she would say to herself, “There, I knew it was so! I knew that tree would be there! I was sure of that rock! And there’s the waterfall just below!” Although a thousand strange remembrances passed with momentary flashes, like sudden visions, through her mind, she could not understand it all and could explain nothing. She had not yet been able to say to herself “What Fritz and the rest of them want to make them happy is the village, and the meadow, and the farm-house, and the fruit-trees, and the orchard, and the milch-cows, and the laying hens; plenty in the cellar, plenty in the granary, and a nice warm fire on the hearth in winter. But what have I to do with all these things? Wasn’t I born a heathen, quite a heathen? I was born in the woods, just as the squirrel was born in an oak, just as a hawk was hatched on the crag and the thrush in the fir-tree!”

It is true she had never thought of these things, but she was guided by instinct; and this mysterious force drew her unconsciously about sunset to the bare heaths of the Kohle Platz, where the gangs of gipsies that wander between Alsace and Lorraine are accustomed to stay the night, and hang up their kettles among the dry heath. Here Myrtle sat down at the foot of an old oak-tree, tired, footsore, and ragged; and here she long sat motionless, gazing into vacant space, listening to the rustling of the wind amongst the tall fir-trees, happy, and feeling herself quite alone in the wide solitude. Night came. The stars broke out by thousands in the purple depths of the autumn sky. The moon rose and silvered with soft light the white stems of the birch-trees, which hung in graceful groups along the mountain sides.

The young gipsy was beginning to yield to sleep when cries in the distance roused her into an impulse to fly.

Hark! She knows the voices! They are those of Brémer, Fritz, and all the people of the farm searching for her!

Then, without a moment’s hesitation, Myrtle flew, light as a roe, farther into the forest, stopping only at long intervals to listen attentively and anxiously.

The cries died away in the distance, and soon the only sound she could hear was the loud beating of her own heart, and she went on her way at a less rapid pace.

Very late, when the moon's rays became less brilliant, unable to stand out against her fatigue any longer, she sank down on the heath and fell fast asleep.

She was four leagues from Dosenheim, near the source of the Zinzel. Brémer was not likely to come so far to look for her.

CHAPTER II.

It was broad daylight when Myrtle awoke amidst the deep solitudes of the Schlossberg, beneath an old fir-tree overgrown with moss and lichen. A thrush was whistling overhead; another was answering in the distance far down the valley. The morning breeze was fanning the rustling foliage; but the air, already warm, was loaded with the sweet perfumes of the ground-ivy, the honeysuckle, the woodruff, and the sweetbriars.

The young gipsy opened her eyes with astonishment; remembering, with surprise and delight, that the voice of Catherine would no more trouble her, calling, "Myrtle! Myrtle! where are you, you idle child?" she smiled, and listened to what gave her pleasure, the note of the thrush singing among the trees.

Near at hand a spring was bubbling out of a cleft; the girl had but to look round to see the living stream running, sparkling and clear, amidst the long grass. From the rock high overhead hung an arbutus loaded with its gorgeous freight of scarlet berries.

Though Myrtle was thirsty she felt too idle to move amongst all this beauty and all this harmony, and she dropped her pretty brown face, smiling and admiring the daylight through her long dark lashes.

"This is how I am always going to be," she said. "How can I help it? I am an idle girl. I was made so."

Dreaming in this lazy way, the picture rose up in her mind of the farm-yard with the proud cock strutting among his hens, and then she remembered the eggs, how they used to find them in the straw in some corner of the barn.

"If I had a couple of hard-boiled eggs," she thought, "just like those Fritz had yesterday in his bag, with a crust of bread and a little salt, I should like it very well. But what signifies? When you can't get eggs you have blackberries and whinberries."

A scent of whinberries made her little nostrils dilate with expectation.

"There are some here," she said; "I can smell them."

She was right. The wood was full of them.

In another minute, not hearing the thrush, she raised herself on her elbow and noticed the bird picking at the arbutus-berries.

Then she went to the brook and took a little clear water in her hollow hand, and observed that there was plenty of watercress.

Then she remembered what she had never taken the trouble to think of before, some words of the *curé* Niclausse about the birds of the air that God provided for, and the lilies of the field that were more beautiful than the glory of Solomon, and she remembered the lesson about not being anxious for food and clothing, and thought that that would just suit her, for she did not think of any of the teaching of the same great Teacher about industry, and frugality, and living honestly, and so she came to the satisfying conclusion that the true heathens were Catherine and all her

people, who were so foolish and wicked as to plough, and sow, and reap, while she was the good Christian, because she was as idle as the day was long.

She was still dwelling on these satisfactory deductions when there was a sudden rustling among the dead leaves and a noise of footsteps.

She was going to run away when a gipsy lad of eighteen or twenty appeared before her—a tall, lithe, dark fellow with thick woolly hair, shining black eyes, and thick parted lips.

His eyes glittered as he cried—

“Almâni!”

“Almâni!” replied Myrtle, moved with much interest.

“Ha, ha!” cried the lad, “what gang do you go with?”

“I don’t know—I am looking for it.”

And without any concealment she told him how Brémer had found her and brought her up, and how she had escaped yesterday from his house.

The young gipsy grinned, and showed a long double row of white teeth.

“I am going to Hazlach,” he cried. “To-morrow there’s a *fête* there; our band will all be there—Puffer Karl, Melchior, Blue-Titmouse, Fritz the clarionet, Coucou-Peter, and Magpie. The women are going fortune-telling, and we play the music. If you like, you may go with me.”

“I will,” said Myrtle, looking down.

Then he kissed her, laid his bag upon her back, and grasping his stick in both his hands, he cried—

“Now you are my wife! You will carry the bag for me, and I will keep you. Forward!”

And now Myrtle, lazy as she had always been at the farm, started off with all possible willingness.

He followed her, singing, and tumbling over on his hands and feet to express his joy!

From that day Myrtle has never been heard of. Fritz almost died of grief when he found that she did not return; but a few years later he found comfort in marrying Gredel Dich, the miller’s daughter, a fine, stout, active girl, who made him an excellent wife; and Catherine, his mother, was quite pleased, for Gredel Dich was quite an heiress!

Only Brémer could not be comforted; he was as fond of Myrtle as if she had been his own child, and he drooped visibly from day to day.

One winter’s day when he had got up, and was looking out of the window, he saw a ragged but pretty gipsy girl passing through the village covered with snow, and with a heavy bag upon her shoulders, and sat down again with a deep sigh.

“What is the matter, Brémer?” asked his wife.

There was no answer. She came close. His eyes were closing. There he lay dead.