

The Ox's Warning

By A. Le Braz

It all happened a little before the "Great Revolution." I had it from my mother, who was sixteen years of age at that date, and who never told a lie in her life.

She was a cow-keeper at a farm at Briec.

I cannot tell you the name of the farm, but it must have been near the Plain.¹

I recollect that the master's name was Yves. He was an excellent man, and a clever man besides. He had studied at the College at Pont-Croix to become a Priest. But he had chosen to return to toil, not having, probably, a vocation. He had not, however, forgotten what he had been taught in his youth, and he was greatly respected by all the country side, for he could read all kinds of books; it was even reported that he could converse in many languages. One Monday he said to his waggoner: "I wish you to yoke the youngest pair of oxen, that I may take them to sell at the fair at Pleybeu."

That was his way. When there was question of buying or selling he never decided till the last moment, and he was always successful. They used to say that he had a familiar spirit who whispered into his ear at the last moment what was best to do. Certain it is that he made capital bargains.

So the waggoner yoked the two young oxen, and saddled a horse for his master. After having appointed everyone his day's work at the farm, he set off.

His wife, who had come out to the door to see him start, said to my mother: "As sure as I am here, Tina, my man will bring back a hundred crowns for those two young oxen.

My mother went away to drive the cows, of which she had charge, into the fields. At nightfall she had to bring them back. The path which she took crossed the high road. As she reached the crossing she met her master returning from the fair. She was somewhat surprised to see that he still had with him the pair of oxen which he had reckoned upon selling. You know that in Lower Brittany we do not shrink from speaking freely to our masters. "I expect," said my mother, "that the fair of Pleybeu has brought you in nothing."

"You are mistaken," answered her master in a strange tone; "it has brought me in more than I looked for."

"Fancy!" said my mother. At any rate he did not look very joyful; he was walking his horse, letting the bridle fall upon its neck; his arms were crossed, his head was bent, and there was a dreamy expression upon his face. The oxen walked along solemnly by his side, one on the right hand, the other on the left. They must, my mother supposed, have lost their yoke at the fair. They were both good and gentle creatures, although young. They had not yet been harnessed to the plough or to the farm carts because Yves was keeping them for sale, but it was evident from their quiet way of going along and carrying their heads, that they were fit to do good work. At the present moment, they, like their master, seemed revolving sad thoughts in their minds. The little cortege went

¹ La Plaine, "*Ar-Bléuneu*," is the appellation given to a vast marshy ground between Briec and Pleybeu. It is singularly sad and solitary, covered with reeds and rushes growing out of the bog.

silently along, the cows leading the way. My mother was considering what her master could possibly have meant. In what way had the fair brought him more than he expected.

He held the middle of the road with the pair of oxen. My mother walked on the grass by its side.

Suddenly, Yves addressed her: "Tina," he said, "I will take the cows home. Do you take the short cut and run as fast as you can to the village. Go first to the carpenter's and order a coffin six feet long and two feet wide. Then go to the Presbytery and ask whichever priest is on duty to bring his bag with extreme unction,² and to follow you to our house as quickly as possible."

My mother looked with amazement at her master. The tears were rolling down his cheeks. "Go," he repeated, "lose no time."

My mother took off her sabots and carried them in her hand, and flew barefooted by the short cut breathlessly to the village.

In an hour she got back to the farm, accompanied by one of the curates.

On the threshold they found the wife of the farmer. "You are too late," she said to the curate, "my husband is dead."

My mother could not believe her ears.

The mistress made the priest come in. My mother followed them into the kitchen. A mattress had been laid upon the table and the master was stretched upon it dead. He still had on the clothes he had worn during the day. The curate sprinkled the corpse with Holy Water, and began to say the prayers for the departed. When he had gone, my mother was sent to bed, for they were about to straighten the body for the coffin.

The bed was not at the further end of the house. Only a thin partition divided the room from the kitchen. I need hardly say that my mother had small desire to sleep. She pretended to go to bed, and to close the bed-shutters, but ere long she got up and listened at the partition.

There remained no one in the kitchen but the widow of Yves and two old women who were neighbours and who were accustomed to lay out the dead.

Out in the courtyard the farm labourers were talking, together with some others who had come to take turn in watching by the body. They were all wondering how it was that a man in such robust health could so suddenly have been smitten down.

My mother was asking herself the same question. Ere long she knew more, for she did not lose a word of the account which the widow was giving to the old women in the kitchen while arranging the body for burial.

"You know," said the farmer's wife, "that he never failed to sell when he wished to sell; so, when I saw him returning with the oxen, I reproached him; 'Yves,' I said to him, 'you have failed for once.' 'It is the first time and it will be the last time,' he answered. 'God grant it!' I exclaimed. He looked at me strangely, and said, 'that is a wish you will speedily regret, for sorrow is coming upon you.' 'Yes,' he continued after a pause, 'it is the first time you have had occasion to blame me about a bargain, and it will be the last, for I shall never try to make another. To-morrow I shall be buried.'"

"I should have liked to treat him as a croaker, but I recollected that long ago he had said to me, and had since frequently repeated, 'When death is at hand I shall be forewarned.' Seeing him so cast down, I grew frightened. I felt certain that he had received a token.

² Called in Breton, "*Ar sac'h dû*," a black velvet bag in which a priest carries his cotta and stole and the holy oils to the sick needing extreme unction.

“I asked him, tremblingly, ‘What has happened to-day?’

“ ‘Upon my sacred word,’ he said, ‘this is what took place: When we had reached the slope of the road near Châteaulin, the oxen which had hitherto gone quietly along, began to bellow loudly. Then one of them said to the other, in cattle language, ‘I think we are being taken to Châteaulin.’ ‘Yes,’ replied the other, ‘but we shall be brought back to La Plaine this evening.’ I exhibited them in the market place. People came and looked at them, and said, ‘That’s a fine pair of oxen, but no one enquired their price. It was the same all day. For a long time I kept down my annoyance, but when towards evening the ground began to grow empty, I could not help swearing and cursing under my breath. Really, by that time I believe I would have given the animals away, if only some one would have offered to take them. The black and grey ox began stamping with his hoof, and I gave him a kick. He looked at me sadly out of the corner of his eye, and said to me, ‘Yves, two hours hence it will be dark, and four hours hence you will be dead. Let us hasten back to the farm; you, to prepare your soul, and we to be ready for our morrow’s task, which will be to carry you to the churchyard.’ That is what my poor man told me,” said the widow. “Some men might have been angry with the ox, but Yves was a sensible man. So he followed his advice, and thanks to it, he did not die in the ditch by the roadside, like an animal, but in his own house, attended by a priest, and receiving the last blessing of the Church, like a good Christian.”

“*Doué do bardono ann anaôun!*” “*God absolve the Dead!*” murmured the two old women.

My mother made the sign of the cross and returned to her bed.

The following day the coffin was drawn to the village churchyard by the two young oxen.

This happened, as I have told you, a little before the “Great Revolution.” Since that time, it is said the cattle never speak, except at midnight on Christmas Eve.

(Belated by Naic, an old fruit-seller. Quimper; 1887.)