

A Funeral Seen Beforehand

By A. Le Braz

Marie Creac'headic, a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, was a servant at the farm of Kervezeun, near Briec. Not far from Kervezeun a blind old man was drawing near to death, in a lonely cottage. He was the cousin of Marie's father (in Breton parlance her uncle), and she went sometimes to see him.

One morning she was returning from Quimper, where she went daily to sell milk in a little hand-cart. It was winter time and hardly light. Marie came all at once upon a four-wheeled cart drawn by a horse, which a peasant she knew was leading. She had only time to get out of the way on to the grassy edge, with her little hand-cart. The large cart passed her, and she saw that it held a coffin. Behind it came the Cross-bearer, then a Priest, the Rector of Briec, and afterwards the funeral followers. Marie was surprised to see that the chief mourners were the nearest relatives of her blind uncle.

"Ah!" she said to herself: "My uncle must be dead."

She returned to Kervezeun, feeling somewhat sad, and rather vexed that the death of the old man, of whom she was very fond, had not been communicated to her.

The mistress of the house, noticing that she had a strange look, said to her; "What has happened to you, Marie?" "This has happened;—I chanced to come across the funeral of my uncle, and no one has taken the trouble to let me know of his death."

The mistress of the house began to laugh.

"You were dreaming, child! You certainly were not wide awake when you saw what you say. If your uncle were dead it would have been known in the neighbourhood."

"Well," exclaimed Marie, "I will make sure." And she ran as fast as she could all the way to the cottage.

She found the blind old man lying, as usual, in the shuttered bed near the hearth. But his face was pained and his breathing hardly perceptible. One of his daughters who was there, together with other relatives, begged Marie to join them in watching by him through the night, adding that it would probably be his last. She did not fail to do so.

Being rather fatigued with the day's work, she grew drowsy at the end of an hour or two. All at once, it seemed to her, something heavy struck against the door. She waked with a start, but noticed that the other watchers were sound asleep.

The door, however, was open.

Marie saw that a coffin was placed by invisible hands upon the "*banc-tossel*" (a sort of bench which adjoins the bed in Brittany)—She was much alarmed, and hid herself as much as possible. She endeavoured to cover her eyes. But if she could not see she could bear, and she heard unseen hands moving about the shavings and the hemp which, according to custom, were at the bottom of the coffin.

At that moment her uncle gave a deep sigh. When the dawn came he was found to be already cold.

Marie Creac'headic went back to Kervezeun, much upset, begging that she might be allowed to go to the funeral. But the mistress of the house represented to her that her customers in the town would expect their milk, and that after all, she was but a distant relation, and that she had amply fulfilled her duty to him by sitting up all the night.

The poor girl was obliged to yield. She took out her little cart and set out for Quimper. She met the funeral,—the real one, this time,—at the same turn in the road where she had come upon the other.

Fearing to be reproached for not joining the mourners, she entered a field, the gate of which was open, and there she waited, looking through the hedge until the procession should have passed. She was about to leave her hiding place, when terror held her motionless, for along the road there came an old man with trembling steps and livid face. It was her blind uncle following his own funeral.

Poor Marie fainted with fright, and was found an hour later lying unconscious in the ditch, by some people who were crossing the field. They carried her back half dead to Kervézeun.

(Related by Marie Manclcec, dressmaker, Quimper.)