

The Winding Sheet of Marie Jeanne

By A. Le Braz

Marie Jeanne H  lary had lived for many years alone in a little house close to the shore. Her greatest delight was to watch the piles of fine linen which she spun, and which she took to the village to be woven, growing higher and larger on the shelves of her wardrobe.

One evening she fell ill, went to bed, and never got up again.

Her nearest neighbours were the Rojon couple, whose farm was about a mile and a half from her cottage, across the fields.

The poor old woman had lived alone, and died alone.

The next day, farmer Gon  ri Rojon, having gone down to the shore for some fish, was surprised to see Marie Jeanne's door closed.

"She has perhaps gone on a pilgrimage," he said to himself.

He told his wife on his return.

Two days passed on.

On the third day Rojon's wife said to him,

"I shall walk down to Marie Jeanne's house to see if she has come back."

When she reached the old woman's house, she found the door still shut. It occurred to her to look through the window, and she saw a very sad sight. The corpse of Marie Jeanne was lying half out of bed, the head upon the "*banc-tossel*" (bed-bench, or steps).

Rojon's wife ran breathlessly back to the farm. "Bring a crow-bar," she got out at last, "and come with me!"

The house door was soon opened by the crow-bar.

A pestiferous odour came from the dead body, which was becoming decomposed. Nevertheless, Rojon and his wife raised it from its position and laid it on the table.

"We must see to the burial," said the man. "Look in the wardrobe and see if you can find a clean piece of linen to shroud her, for the sheets upon the bed are ragged and soiled." When Rojon's wife opened the wardrobe, she stood amazed and delighted. The shelves of the press were piled with heaps of new linen, white as snow, and soft as silk, all smelling of lavender.

"Oh, what lovely linen!" cried the woman. And immediately the Evil One put a covetous thought into her mind.

You know how dearly housewives love good linen, and how proud they feel when there is a great wash on hand, to hear it rattling in the wind as it lies upon the meadow grass, and then to see it laid in heaps upon the shelves of their oaken presses. The dream of Rojon's wife had always been to be able, like Marie Jeanne, to spend her days in spinning fine flax, and to have it woven into nice linen. But, poor woman, she had so much to see to in her house, having a husband and four children, to say nothing of cattle and poultry to care for. During the twelve years she had been married, her spinning-wheel had stood idle in a corner of the kitchen, and the only spinners were the spiders!

And so the Evil One whispered to her:

“You and your husband are here alone together in the dead woman’s house. Not one of the neighbours is yet aware of her death, and no one knows exactly what her press contains. No one therefore would be surprised were it to be found empty.

“There is no one to claim inheritance, for Marie Jeanne Hélyary lived alone, and gave out that she had lost all belonging to her. What she has left would go under the hammer for the benefit of the Government, which is richer than any one else, and which has never done anything for Marie Jeanne Hélyary. You, on the other hand, have always done all you could for her, and you are now going to render her the last services, and see to her burial. Is it not fair that you should take whatever you choose from the house, for she herself has no further need of anything?”

Thus spoke the devil, the ceaseless tempter!

Léнан Rojon was an honest woman, but she was a daughter of Eve, and, like Eve, she listened to the devil.

“Look here, Gonéri,” she said, “there is no difficulty about a shroud. There is sufficient linen here to shroud a hundred corpses. Come and look!”

Like his wife, Gonéri Rojon was wonder-struck.

“If you will,” she continued, “we can take all this linen, except just what is needed to shroud poor old Marie Jeanne.”

“After all,” meditatively observed Rojon, “why should others have it rather than we?”

“There is enough here to make six dozen fine sheets, as many tablecloths, and at least two dozen shirts, to say nothing of undergarments for women and children. What do you think, Gonéri?”

“Yes, indeed, I agree with you. You had better stay here to watch beside the old woman. Meanwhile, I will take down the pieces of linen, and carry them to our house. No one will hear or know anything of it. I will leave you only one piece, out of which you can make a shroud while I am going backwards and forwards.”

And Gonéri Rojon started, loaded like an ass. He did not yet feel the burden of his sin upon his shoulders. Yet it should have weighed heaviest of all upon him!

In half-an-hour he had returned.

He found that the corpse of Marie Jeanne was not yet shrouded. His wife, on her knees upon the ground beside a piece of linen, her scissors in her hand, could not make up her mind to use them

“Pon my word!” exclaimed Gonéri, as he entered; “it doesn’t seem to me that you have got on much!”

“Don’t you think,” answered Léнан, “that it would really be a great pity to throw away this beautiful white linen on a poor decaying corpse? Doesn’t it seem to you that old Marie Jeanne, now that she is dead, would just as soon be wrapped in the sheets she slept in when she was alive?”

“No doubt you are right,” said Rojon, who, like many husbands of his class absorbed in agricultural toil, let his wife think for him, as well as for herself.

It was therefore determined that the new piece of linen should be left uncut, and that the old woman should be buried in her old sheets. And this was done.

That evening the passing-bell rang out from the church, telling of a death in the village.

A carpenter furnished the coffin, in which Marie Jeanne was hastily stretched, but poorly shrouded, as the body was, becoming disagreeable. Gonéri Rojon undertook all the funeral expenses.

All round the neighbourhood his generosity was applauded. On the following Sunday the Rector spoke of it in the pulpit, calling him and his wife true followers of our Lord.

They did not show any vanity because of these praises, which made people think better of them still.

But, underneath, they had not easy consciences. Lénan soon consoled herself in admiring the orderly and attractive appearance of Marie Jeanne's linen, lying in her hitherto empty press. But it was not quite so with Gonéri Rojon. The poor man could neither work nor eat nor sleep comfortably.

One night that he lay half awake, he suddenly started up. He heard someone knocking at the door.

"Who is there?" he asked.

No answer came.

He thought it might be some belated drunkard, although the approach to his farm was narrow. "Who is there?" he enquired a second time, and then a third time.

No reply came.

"Confound it all!" he cried,—furious because frightened; "I am determined to make you tell me who you are, and whether you come from God or from the devil!"

He made as though he would get up, but he had no sooner raised his head from his pillow than he felt his hair begin to stand on end with fear. The house door was wide open. He felt sure, all the same, that he had firmly bolted it before going to bed. But that was not all. The tablecloth, which had been thrown over the bread on the kitchen table, was being gradually drawn back, just as if it had been a sheet which a sleeper, finding the night hot, was little by little pushing from off him. Then, on the outspread tablecloth, there appeared the outline of a corpse. The loaf of bread, which was hardly begun, seemed to serve as its pillow. Ere long, Gonéri saw the head suddenly raised. He shut his eyes, desirous of seeing no more.

But he forgot to stop his ears, and he could not help hearing the little light footfall of the old woman as she went to and fro and up and down in the house.

Then there came the creaking of what seemed like the heavy doors of a press, ill-oiled and grating on their hinges.

After that, a broken, tremulous voice with mocking mimicry reiterated the exclamation that had fallen from Lénan's lips on first seeing Marie Jeanne's linen press. "Ah! what lovely linen! Oh! what lovely linen!"

Gonéri Rojon half opened his eyes. He felt a longing to see, beyond his will power to restrain.

The moonbeams came obliquely through the hinges of the door, and traced a great star of white light all across the earthen floor. Just outside it an old woman was kneeling. In her right hand she held a pair of scissors. Gonéri only saw her side face, but he was able to recognise her. She was the dead Marie Jeanne!

"It would be a pity," she went on saying to herself, continuing to mimic Lénan's voice and manner, "to cut up such a beautiful piece of linen to wrap up a poor decaying corpse; old Marie Jeanne, being dead, would just as soon sleep in the sheets she had on her bed while living."

Gonéri Rojon felt a cold sweat break out all over his body.

The old woman made a pause, and then went on, "Well, no! no! no! I am determined to be buried in the linen that I spun!"

Then she repeated three times, with emphasis,—

“*I must* have my shroud! *I must* have my shroud! *I must* have my shroud!” Having said this, she disappeared. Out of consideration for his wife, Gonéri had not awaked her. At dawn she awoke of herself, and then Gonéri said to her, “Wife, what do you suppose is the first thing you must do when you are up?”

“Yes, husband; I am going to gather green rushes for the cattle, and then I shall wash and dress the children.”

“No,” said Gonéri; “you must make yourself tidy, and try to get to the church at the time that the Rector hears Confessions, and you must tell him of our sin in Confession.”

“What are you talking about, Gonéri? What business is it of yours?”

“I have not finished,” continued the man. “I shall go with you, carrying on my shoulders the stolen linen which is there in the press. Do not forget to ask the Rector what is to be done with it.”

“What is to be done with it?” answered the woman angrily. “I know best about that,—I, and not the Rector! Don’t worry yourself about that linen!”

“I have cause to be worried,” said Gonéri. “Your peace and mine, in this world and iii the next, is at stake.”

Then he told his wife what had happened in the night.

Léнан no longer made objections. She herself put the bundle of linen on her husband’s shoulders, and went on before him towards the village. Having reached the church, she crept into the Rector’s Confessional, whilst Gonéri waited with his burden down near the Font.

When Léнан had confessed everything, the Rector said, “Come back this evening, my daughter, and let your husband come too. As for the linen, you will leave it in the Sacristy, and I will exorcise it. I hope that before this evening I shall have ridded it of the evil influence which now hangs about it, and which is nothing else but the sin of you both.”

Léнан and Gonéri returned to the farm, but the evening found them back in the church, saying prayers with the Rector.

When midnight struck, the Rector beckoned to Léнан.

“The time has come,” he said. “Fetch the pieces of linen out of the Sacristy. Do not be surprised to feel them as light as a feather. Go and spread them out, one at a time, on Marie Jeanne’s new-made grave. Be especially careful not to spread a second, until the first has disappeared. Your husband and I will remain here praying while you are doing this. When you have quite finished, you will come and tell us all that has happened and what you have seen.”

Léнан did not exactly enjoy going thus to make restitution at midnight in the village churchyard. And Gonéri was not altogether comfortable, as he remained by the Rector’s side in the church, praying for his wife’s safe return. He was greatly relieved when he saw her reappear through the Sacristy door, safe and sound. She was, however, trembling violently.

“Well, Léнан?” said the Rector.

“Oh!” she replied, “I have seen what no one else has ever seen, or will ever see!”

“Explain yourself, Léнан?”

“Reverend Sir, I went straight and unfolded one piece of linen over the grave. A wind immediately arose, and the piece of linen, making a sighing sound, was carried away. I

unfolded a second piece. The same wind arose as before, and the second piece of linen was carried away like the first, but without any sound. Then I spread out the third. This one made a slight rustling like a breeze in spring through the young leaves, and then it spread itself out like a sail, and flew away from me up towards the stars. The earth above the grave then seemed to open, and I saw Marie Jeanne lying bare and uncovered in its depths. I unfolded a fourth piece of linen. This time, instead of flying upwards, it sank into the ground, and the dead woman wrapt herself in it, making a shivering noise as if very cold. There still remained the fifth and last piece. I was going to open it and spread it out when four angels from Heaven took it out of my hands, and I heard a most melodious voice pronounce these words, 'You are forgiven!' And that was all."

"And enough!" said the Rector. "You and your husband may go in peace, Lénan. But ever remember that if it is wrong to rob the living it is still more horrible to rob the dead. As for Marie Jeanne Hélyary, you may rest assured that she will trouble you no more.

(Related by Baptiste Geffroy, Penvénan, 1886.)