

A Very Precious Stone

By A. Le Braz

A great feast had been held that day at Kerbérennes, the great house of the parish of Langoat. The youngest of the children was almost an infant, and it was feared that he might cry, and disturb the guests, so the servant was desired to take him out, and amuse him during the dinner. The maid to whom the task was committed could think of nothing better to amuse the baby than to throw stones into a large and deep reservoir that stood in a corner of the farmyard. The pebbles made a splash as they fell in. The sound delighted the child, so the maid went on with the game till the guests left the table. She was then called in to assist in washing up.

She was thus occupied, when all on a sudden a shower of pebbles was dashed against the front of the house. Some fell even in the middle of the kitchen, through the window, and through the open door.

The maid started aside greatly amazed. Pebbles rattled violently against the furniture, and plates fell smashed by the girl's side. She screened her face with her hand and tried to see from whence all these stones could come. She came to the conclusion that they came up out of the reservoir, and doubted not they were the same, she had thrown in a while before. She said nothing about *that* to her master and mistress, but simply showed them the stones lying about, which had occasioned so much mischief.

The proprietor of Kerbérennes set it down to the spite of a neighbour who had not been invited to the feast. As for his wife, you may fancy how distressed she was to see her polished furniture scratched, and her plates and dishes broken to pieces.

That night they all went to bed in no good humour.

The young servant was the last up, as was her duty. She had covered over the kitchen fire with ashes, and was just about to go to her bed, when there entered a poor, bent, most miserable looking old woman, from whose ragged garments water was dripping.

She shivered so terribly, poor old creature, that the maid felt great pity for her, in spite of the unseemliness of the hour she had chosen to come to a Christian house.

"You seem very cold, 'my good woman?'" said the servant.

"Yes," said the old woman; "I am cold. I am indeed cold!"

"It must be raining fast for your clothes to be so wet?"

As a matter of fact, it was a starlight night, without a cloud; but the girl's head had been so dazed by the occurrences of the day, that she had no idea of what the weather was.

"Come close to the hearth, good mother," said she. "I will light up the fire."

The poor woman sat down on a stool at the corner of the hearth, but she went on shivering with cold in spite of the flaming fire of dry wood which the servant had re-kindled.

And as she shivered she sighed and sighed! "Alas, my God! Alas, then, my God!"

"For our Saviour's sake," entreated the young servant, "do not go on lamenting in that way. My master sleeps hard by, and he went to his bed very cross. If you wake him, it will be the worse for you!"

She had hardly done speaking in a low voice when the master did awake.

"What's the reason for this fire?" he cried.

He could not see the old beggar woman. Had he seen her he would have come out of bed, though he did not desire to do so, being heavy with sleep after the day's festivities.

He repeated his question, however, although half asleep.

"What's the reason for this fire?"

The servant was about to answer, when three violent knocks sounded on the bed-head.

The master became still.

Who had given those three knocks? The servant could not imagine. The old woman had not stirred. With her hands crossed upon her knees she might have been a corpse, but for the ceaseless murmuring of her lips, and the shivering of her poor old frame.

The servant felt her afternoon's fright coming back upon her with double force.

"Warm yourself, good mother," she said. "You have plenty of fuel near you to keep in the fire." And she sped to her bed at the other end of the kitchen. Having laid herself down, she feigned to sleep, but she kept watch, although very drowsy.

At the first cock-crow she beheld the poor woman rise up and disappear.

"She must be a dead woman," she thought to herself. "She had to go, because the hour was come!"

As soon as the dawn appeared, the girl dressed herself, although she had had no rest, and with a rapid step made for the village. At the church she found the Rector, vesting himself for the celebration of the first Low Mass.

"In God's name, Reverend Sir, hear my Confession at once!"

And she told him all the story of the reservoir and that of the beggar woman.

The Rector said to her: "Peace be with you! All this matter will be cleared up, for it has all happened by the permission of God. The poor woman will visit you again. Be ready to receive her, and do so, as you did yesterday, as best you can."

The poor girl returned home comforted.

That evening the Rector's prophecy was fulfilled. The old woman re-appeared. The servant had taken care to have a good fire ready, and the hearth was all aglow.

As on the night before, the beggar woman, when she had seated herself, began sighing, but she no longer shivered, and her wretched clothing was almost dry; even her sighs seemed less dismal.

The girl felt more at her ease with her; still she slept no more than she had done the night before, and at dawn she went again to the Rector.

"This evening," he said, "the dead woman will come to you again. It will be for the third time. You have gained the right to question her. Ask her why her garments were so dripping the day before yesterday. I am sure she will explain everything to you."

This rector was a wise adviser. He understood his priestly office as few do.

On this evening a servant made up a real bonfire on the hearth, like a "*Tantâd*" for St John's night. At the usual hour she saw the old woman enter and take her old place on the stool in the chimney corner, not only without shivering, but also without a sigh.

The servant began the conversation.

"May God be praised, you seem in a better condition, good mother! How was it that your clothes were so wet the first time you came here?"

"I can tell you now, my good child," answered the poor woman; "for fifty years I have been making my expiation in the reservoir in this farmyard."

"Then I am afraid I may have harmed you the day before yesterday, when I threw stones into it to amuse the child?"

“On the contrary, you have delivered me! I could not get out of that cistern except with a stone in my hand, a stone thrown by the hand of a living person.”

Saying this, the old woman began feeling in the pocket of her petticoat.

“Here is the stone,” she exclaimed, “I will leave it with you that it may bring you good luck!”

“But then,” asked the girl, “it was not you, was it, who threw back out of the reservoir all the stones I had dropped into it, into the house?”

“Certainly not. It was my evil angel. Happily, he was not able to throw back every one. I held fast in my hand the stone that was to set me free. That stone I have now given to you. Keep it carefully. I could not make you a better present in return for the service you have rendered me. But if you part with it your good luck will go with it.”

“I thank you,” said the servant. “I will treasure this most precious stone as the apple of my eye! If you are now going to Heaven, let my mother know that you have seen me.”

“Yes,” answered the poor woman, “but I am going to ask you yet to do me another kindness.”

“Speak I I am at your service.”

“I require two Masses, which you must get said for me, in the chapel of St Carré, by the Rector who has bidden you treat me kindly.”

“It shall be done.”

The servant had no sooner uttered these words than the old woman vanished in a thin, white mist.

The Rector of Langoat went on the following Sunday to St Carré, and there celebrated the two Masses solicited by the beggar woman.

The young servant heard both. As she was returning bare-foot, she saw a little cloud of dust arise before her on the road, and this little cloud gradually assumed the appearance of the poor old woman, only her face looked quite young, and shone with unearthly brightness.

The dead woman’s expiation was past!

(Related by Marie Corre, Penvénan, 1886.)