

The Shadow in the Water

By A. Le Braz

“I was very young then, but I recollect it all as if it was yesterday, and now I have passed sixty-eight. I was about twelve at the time I am speaking of. I had been charitably taken as cow-keeper at the farm of Coat-Beuz in the parish of Kirfeunten, near Quimper.

That morning I had been sent to pasture the cattle in the meadows along the banks of the river Steir, where the grass had been mown the day before. Suddenly I shivered. Just before me in the water,—which thereabouts was still but clear,—I saw the outline of my master’s face, and the upper part of his body. I was even able to notice his gloomy look. I thought he was going to scold me for being idle, and I dared not look away. My confusion lasted two or three minutes. At length, astonished at receiving neither scolding nor blow,—for he was one with a quick hand, I took courage and sprang up. Imagine my bewilderment when I found there was no one in the field but my cows and myself!

Unless he had sunk into the earth my master could not have disappeared so quickly. On the other hand, there could be ‘no possible doubt that he had been there. It was most certainly his reflection that I had just seen in the water of the river.

I meditated on this strange occurrence all the rest of the day.

At nightfall I returned with my cattle. The first person I encountered on opening the gate at Coat-Benz was the master.

“He said nothing to me out there,” I thought, “but he is going to be down upon me now.”

Not at all, however. He welcomed me cheerily, on the contrary, accompanied me to the stable, and showed me kindly how to fasten up the cows, a task I had hitherto performed rather ill.

Seeing him in such a good temper after all, I began to chatter: “You must have been very hot this afternoon, Jean Derrieu, when you went through the meadows. You should have done like me, and bathed your feet in the water; that is so refreshing.”

“What are you talking about? I have not been near the meadows. The fair of St Trémeur was held to-day, and I have just come back from it.” Then I noticed that he had on his Sunday waistcoat.

“Really—I thought—I fancied,” I stammered awkwardly. Fortunately the gong sounded for supper just then. At table I did not open my mouth, but I felt very much troubled I can assure you.

I slept at the lower end of the kitchen with the upper servant. We shared the same bed. When we were both between the sheets, I said to my bedfellow: “There is trouble hanging over this house,” and I related my adventure to her. She treated it as folly, but I saw that deep down she was no less anxious than I was.

As the day was dawning, before cock-crow, I heard the upper servant called from the other end of the kitchen, where stood the bed of the master and mistress. I touched her elbow, and she got up. A few minutes afterwards she came and told me that Jean Derrieu had just died of a stroke.

(Related by Naïc, a fruit-seller. Quimper, 1888.)

