



THE STORY OF MILLET'S EARLY LIFE.

TOLD BY HIS YOUNGER BROTHER.



ALTHOUGH my eldest brother's youth was past before I was born, nevertheless, I have a correct knowledge of this part of his life from incidents related by my mother, my grandmother, and my sisters and brothers, all of whom were older than I; and especially by my sister Emélie, who, being but eighteen months his senior, was the best authority concerning his childhood.

An almost romantic affection grew up in my little heart for this brother, whom the household knew to be remarkable, and whose future promised distinction, even in his childhood. François, while studying in Paris, had a serious illness, from which he suffered much. This caused great anxiety at home, and the people who took care of him sent us frequent news of his condition. I was very young, and whenever I heard these reports I wept.

Among these early recollections, stories come to me with distinctness, which were related by the family concerning our father, who had died a few years before.

He was a man of fine figure and graceful carriage, about five feet ten inches in height, with regular features, black hair, a clear complexion, and an expression which commanded respect. Consequently, he was the worthy son of his mother, who, although not beautiful, bore on her aged face a striking expression of Christian goodness, such as one rarely sees, and which corresponded perfectly with her character. She was profoundly imbued with religious principles, and at all times in her daily life her acts were in accordance with these principles. This fine religious feeling was hereditary in her family. Her parents, brothers, and sisters were all known far and near for their piety, honesty, and charity. Our grandmother, Louise Jumelin, on entering the Mil-

let family, had brought into it, in perfection, the great hospitality which has never quitted it.

The Millet house, like the house of the Jumelins, was known as one at the door of which one never knocked in vain, and it was a notable fact that all the needy of the neighborhood, and even those from distant communes, went from one to the other of these two houses, as if they were two stations where all could come with certainty of never being refused.

What these poor people most needed was always given them, whether it was a repast (and bread besides with which to fill the sacks they always carried), a shelter, or clothes.

At that time, in a commune near ours, there was a great number of these poor families who had recourse to beggary as a means of subsistence. The parents sent their children through the villages to collect food. These children would come in bands of four, five, six, sometimes even ten, knock at our door, and utter the customary appeal: "*Charité, s'il vous plaît, pour l'amour du bon Dieu!*" Then my grandmother would fill a large wicker basket with pieces of bread, and send me to carry it to them, to teach me, she said, "to be charitable."

When night came, some old person, perhaps two or more, would arrive, and ask for a night's shelter. They were never refused. Sometimes they would come when it was raining, and their clothes would be badly wet. My grandmother would have them sit down by the wood fire,—such as they have in those large fireplaces of Normandy,—telling them to warm themselves, and to dry their wet clothes while waiting for supper. As these beggars occupied the best places by the fire, it often happened that we children grumbled, because, although we were cold, we could not get to the fire. Complaining to our grandmother, she would say: "Have patience! These poor people are cold and wet. Let them get dry, and after supper they will go to bed. You have nothing to complain of, for you have

good clothes, and can wait without suffering till they go to rest. Then you will have the fire for yourselves."

When supper was ready, these guests were served first, seated as they were by the fire, and we went to the table. Our grandmother waited on herself last, and then went to sit with the unfortunates. She knew they often went among her relatives, who lived in the Vallée Hochet, a little village about six leagues from our place, and she would converse pleasantly with her guests about her family, asking them when they had last seen the Jumelins, and how they all were, and whether they knew anything about them which would interest her. Thus these people served as a means of communication in a country where there was scarcely any travel, and where news from a place five or six leagues distant seemed to have come very far.

While eating and talking with them, she would try to sound their moral character, always managing to bring in some good advice, and exhorting them to work for the salvation of their souls. She would tell them not to murmur at the decrees of Providence: "Those whom he loves he chastises; and if you are chastised in this world, and profit by it, that will be for your advantage when you appear before your God, who does not forget those who have faith in him."

If I dwell upon the religious principles of this dear soul, it is that the reader may understand how well such a woman must have brought up her son, who was our father.

Although brought up in a simple, rural community, he had received a thorough education, having for his instructor an uncle who was a priest, who lived with the family, and had a library of ancient and modern authors. Our father developed a taste for reading works of the best writers. He also studied church music, and was so skilful in writing music that one would have said that the scores written by him were printed. He sang well, and instructed in music a certain number of boys of his age, who formed, with himself at their head, the choir which sang every Sunday in the church of the parish.

He had one brother, who studied medicine, but who died when young. Jean Louis (this was our father's name) then remained the only child of the family. They had great fear of losing him, for at this time the wars of the empire tore from their hearths all the young men able to carry arms, and brought mourning to many families. There was a law which exempted from the service all newly married men, and as the young man was already attached to a young person of very good family, whose parents lived in the neighboring parish of St. Croix, the two families hastened

this union, and the cherished only son was kept at home, and saved from an almost certain death. The young wife was adopted into the family, as is the custom in Normandy, and when children were born of this marriage, the grandparents took care of them as if they had been their own.

The young people had nine children. The first was a girl, whom they named *Emélie*, the second a boy, *Jean François*. In the family they always called him *François*. My grandmother took the greatest care of her grandchildren. When *François* was old enough, he studied Latin with the curé of the parish, which enabled him to cultivate his taste by reading good works either in Latin or French — among them the Bible, lives of the saints, *Virgil*, *Horace*, *Boileau*, *Racine*, etc. He especially enjoyed *Virgil*, and I remember hearing him say later, when I was living with him, that *Virgil* kindled the imagination by his beautiful, simple, and clear style of presenting an image.

He read the Bible a great deal, also the lives of the saints, and the impressions he received from these books were never effaced. I have heard him say that he looked upon some of the sentences of the Bible as gigantic monuments.

On his way to school, if he met any one having some peculiarity of appearance, he would be struck by it, and reproduce his impression on the first object having an available surface. These drawings were made in a strikingly life-like style, and were unmistakably the portraits of those whom he thus represented.

About this time a man named *Bénéville*, of the neighboring county, in company with his two sons, passed through *Gréville* every Saturday, on his way to the market of *Beaumont*, which was about a league farther, in order to show some donkeys. These three men had large figures, and to see them mounted on their donkeys, which they had ornamented with false ears, appealed to the imagination of *François*. He began one day to represent this grotesque little cavalcade, and did it successfully. A short time after he had finished it, the blacksmith of the neighboring village, who had seen the drawing, asked, and was allowed, to take it for a few days, and he put it in a conspicuous place in his shop, that the men with the donkeys, who came often to his place, might see it. At their next visit the first object they spied was this picture, and they at once recognized the party. The father immediately asked who in this place had enough talent to make such things. He was told it was the little *Millet*.

After this, *François* made some drawings in crayon, taking his subjects from the Bible. Among these pictures there was one of "The Foolish Virgins." These drawings were always taken by some one in the place, and no

one knows what became of them. Probably most of them have been destroyed.

He once showed me, in his studio at Barbizon, one that he himself had preserved. This was a night scene: a man half opening a door, and holding in his arms loaves of bread, which he was giving to some one who held out his hands to receive them, the whole subject being lighted by a lamp.

On seeing this picture, I was struck by the truth of the effect of the light, and also by the drawing of a leg of one of the men. François had already acquired anatomical knowledge.

"Had you not taken drawing-lessons when you did that?" I asked him.

"No," said he; "I was at home with my parents, and had never spoken to an artist."

"What do you think now of this drawing?" I asked.

His answer was, "I do not know that I could do better to-day, so far as the expression goes."

These drawings were made between the hours of work, or at the siesta, or on rainy days, and during leisure time on Sunday. After vesper he would shut himself into his room, and draw or study.

My sister Emélie has told me that when François had grown to be large, he was not like other boys of his age, who like fine clothes. She was unable to influence him in this matter, although she told him that the other young girls, her friends, said that her brother did wrong not to make himself more fine; but although he was not indifferent to the impression he made on the fair sex, he made no change in his dress.

He became especially attached to one boy named Antoine, who lived in a neighboring village, and for several years they were inseparable friends. When he went with other boys, they enjoyed his keen sense of the ludicrous, and his cleverness in depicting comical traits of character.

He worked at field work with skill and zest. Sometimes he did a little mason work on our place. Later, at Barbizon, he had, at one time, some masons come to build a room to be used as a kitchen; and one day, while they mixed the plaster, he stopped to look at them. Taking in his hand some of this plaster, yet liquid, he began to throw it at the wall, saying to me, "I have always liked to touch with my hands either mortar, plaster, or clay, and I think that if I had not become an artist, I should have been a mason."

On winter nights, during or after a tempest, the men of the village all went together in a body, François with them, armed with long rakes, to tear from the furious sea the seaweed which rolled in on the waves, and which

was valuable for fertilizing the fields. He had become very useful to our father when the question presented itself, whether this young man, who had an undoubted talent for painting, should be kept at home and remain only a peasant, or whether he should be permitted to study art.

Our father consulted his friends on this point. Among them was one named Paris Lesfontaines, who lived in a neighboring parish, and who had acquaintance among the authorities of the city of Cherbourg. He made possible an arrangement that would allow the young man to study for a time, in order to decide whether it would be worth while for him to continue his art studies. They placed him with M. Mouchel, a painter of Cherbourg, who assured our father that François had sufficient talent to warrant him in devoting himself entirely to art.

Not long afterward our father was seized with brain fever, which carried him off in a few days. When he knew that his end was approaching, he thought much of François. He said, "I had formed great hopes of seeing François succeed, and I had even formed the project of going with him to enjoy seeing the wonders of Paris." They sent for François, who was at Cherbourg. He came immediately, but only to see his father die.

It was a terrible event for the family. Two poor women were thus left without assistance, with the care of nine children, and with very limited means.

This was a critical moment for François. However, he soon resumed his studies with another painter of Cherbourg named Langlois, with whom he remained some time. Later, influential friends arranged that the municipal council of the city of Cherbourg should vote an appropriation of six hundred francs, to send him to Paris to continue his studies. With this little fortune he departed.

As one can easily imagine, he had a very hard time, having only this small sum as his resource. The second year he was allowed three hundred francs, and there it ended. He was thus forced to provide for himself. Then began the struggle against misery.

He occasionally returned to Cherbourg, and there, as elsewhere, had to find something to do in order to gain his subsistence. When he could find any one to sit, he took portraits. Then he painted pictures to be hung as signs for stores. A milkmaid, painted on a sign, remained hanging over the door of a dry-goods store for a long time. A horse served as a veterinary surgeon's sign. The authorities of the city, instead of helping him, blamed him severely because he made pictures which were used as signs.

During the intervals thus spent at Cherbourg, he came frequently to our home at Gréville, to pass a week or two, according to opportunity.

It once happened that our mother said to him, "You ought to make the portraits of your brothers and sisters while you are here." To please her, he began the work, and in a very short time finished seven portraits of members of the family, painted on oiled paper. Nearly all these portraits have been destroyed by time and careless treatment, but I believe some are yet in existence. He also painted the portrait of our grandmother, but with much more care than he did ours. He never painted a picture of our mother, which I regret, for she was a fine subject. She was of the true mother-type, and, although she had suffered much, had nevertheless preserved a youthful appearance and a graceful, refined air. In her own simple style, she was always carefully and neatly dressed. Her taste did not tend toward the arts, and she would have preferred for her children lucrative professions, which might insure them easy circumstances. But she possessed a decided and instinctive taste for color. If she bought chinaware for the use of the house, she always chose that which was painted in rich colors, and liked ware ornamented with flowers. When she saw a person with a fine, rich complexion and rosy cheeks, she was enthusiastic in her admiration.

About the year 1840, François made the acquaintance, at Cherbourg, of the family Biot, with whom he boarded. They had two daughters, the younger of whom he married in 1841. She was a charming little woman, gentle and affectionate, but her health was very delicate. He took her to Paris, where she fell ill, and died, after they had been married a little more than two years.

Shortly after her death he returned to Cherbourg, remaining some months, during which he came several times to Gréville, where he sketched different subjects; among others a head of Christ with the crown of thorns, done in crayon, tipped or touched with white. It was entitled "*Sainte Face*" (Holy Face).

Finally he quitted Cherbourg once more, and went to Havre, where he also remained several months, doing whatever presented itself. He has since told me that sometimes sailors came to ask him to take their portraits immediately, that they might carry them away the same day. It was of course necessary to be expeditious, and he would finish a portrait in two or three hours. The sailors paid him twenty francs for each picture, and went away delighted.

He soon tired of life at Havre, and returned to Paris. This was toward the end of the year

1845. During the next two years we knew little concerning his movements, as we rarely had news of him until 1847.

The blacksmith who formerly wished to show at his shop the picture representing the donkeys, brought us papers which he had received from Paris, containing articles in which it was mentioned that François Millet had painted a picture, "*Œdipus Detached from a Tree by the Shepherd*," which had been placed in the Salon, and had begun to awaken the attention of the critics. As may be imagined, this news gave us great pleasure. Again for a long time, save at intervals, we knew nothing of him. But at last came the news of his success at the Salon of the year 1850, when he exhibited his "*Sower*." This was his first true success.

Several years passed, during which we rarely heard from him, and we had to depend upon the newspapers for our knowledge of him. In 1849 he left Paris to settle at Barbizon, a little village on the border of the forest of Fontainebleau.

In 1853, at last, he came to see us. We had the misfortune to lose our grandmother in 1851, then aged eighty years. Two years later our mother died, and the last link which held our family together was gone.

After this event François was obliged to take part in the division of the little property bequeathed by our parents. This kept him with us several months; and when leisure permitted him to sketch, he profited by it as much as possible. By this time I had become old enough to enjoy his work, and went with him into the fields or upon the hills by the sea. It gave me great pleasure to carry his canvas or easel, for I was thus able not only to enjoy his companionship, but also to see him at work, drawing or painting.

The sight of our old cliffs, whence one has such a fine view of the sea, had a magic effect upon him, mingled, however, with bitter thoughts as he recalled the void in our hearts. He enjoyed putting himself at his ease in the peasant costume, and when at home always wore a blouse, sabots, and a cotton cap. Thus dressed, he felt contented.

Whenever he came to see us, during the lifetime of our mother, he always dressed himself thus, to her great dissatisfaction; for she would have enjoyed seeing him dressed like a Parisian. The women of the village, seeing him pass in this costume, were scandalized. They would come out, expecting to behold a fine gentleman, dressed in the latest Parisian style; but when they saw him, with his long, wavy hair falling over his shoulders, with a thick beard, and thus accoutred, it was a great disappointment to them.

It gave him intense pleasure to return to this rustic life, and he loved to sit by the great wood fire that flamed up in the immense chimney of our old home, around which a whole family could unite. He liked to see about him the large jugs of brass that were used when the girl went to the field to milk the cows; together with large basins and kettles of brass, all of which, placed on one side of the room, on shelves for the purpose, surmounted by a cupboard containing the dishes and plates decorated with flowers, formed a rich and harmonious whole most pleasant to behold.

At different times he made sketches of all these details, and even wished to carry away with him a large brass jug that had been used in the service of the house. He preserved this as a precious relic, giving it an honored place in his kitchen at Barbizon.

When the business connected with the division of the property was ended, François returned to Barbizon. About a year later, he came back on a visit, this time with his second wife. He remained all summer.

I then lived at Cherbourg, and on Saturday always went to the hamlet of Gruchy to pass Sunday with François, returning to Cherbourg Monday morning. He made many excursions through the environs of Gruchy, and sketched the country thereabouts, especially liking the rocky cliffs, from which, at intervals, one catches a glimpse of the sea.

When I was with him, François utilized the opportunity to have me pose, that he might make a correct estimate of the height of a figure in proportion to the altitude of the rocks. Although these oil-paintings were roughly and rapidly done, they well represented the character of the rocks and of the sea in that place. He also took for subjects some of the environs of our home; among others, the end of a house adjoining the one in which we lived. A certain biographer has published this sketch as the house where Millet was born. This is incorrect.

My brother also sketched a corner of the house which is situated directly in front of ours. This picture represents a well in the foreground, and a flight of stone steps leading to a room. This room was the one formerly occupied by our granduncle, the priest.

I also recall a sketch made by him which was extremely pretty. It showed a shady road leading to our home, in which is seen coming the figure of a woman carrying a jug of milk on her shoulder. It was always with a new and increasing pleasure that he found himself in the midst of this homely, rustic life. He never felt any desire to see city people.

In that country there is no idleness. If one

sees persons passing, it is easy to know by the hour of the day and the direction they take the task which they are going to perform. Therefore, everything is intelligible and suggestive. Nobody is seen wandering about, as in cities, having the air of being out of work and not knowing what to do with his time.

While the neighbors were harvesting, François went several times to participate in their work, meeting with some of the old comrades of his youth. He competed skillfully with them in cutting the wheat or in tying the sheaves; and when the time came for the collation, he would sit down with them on the sheaves, and eat their brown bread and drink their cider, as he had done years before. I have never seen him in such fine spirits anywhere else.

During this time the political news did not trouble him. He scarcely knew more of what was going on in the political world than if no newspapers had been published. The poetry of the fields filled him completely. Thus the summer slipped away. When the autumn came he prepared, though with great regret, to return to Barbizon. When François arrived at his house, he wrote us that he had found it a very fairy-land. During his absence the garden, which was between the studio and his house, had become adorned with all sorts of creeping and climbing plants. There were morning-glories, hop-vines, and nasturtiums, growing at pleasure, without control, and spreading all over the ground, or climbing along the walls of the studio and of the house. It was like a tangled thicket filled with flowers of all kinds. This wild beauty greatly delighted François.

For about a year after this we did not see him again. I resolved to go to Paris to continue my studies in sculpture, and I wrote to François of my intention. When he learned my decision, he wrote me as follows: "Since you have decided to go to Paris to study sculpture, I wish you would come and stay with me for some time, to learn to draw."

I accepted this offer, and in a short time was domiciled at his home at Barbizon. Some weeks after I was installed in his studio. A little later we went together to Paris to see the exhibition, where his "Grafter" was shown. He wanted to see how it stood its ground among so numerous a company.

When he went to look at his works in an exhibition, François was always in fear lest they should not produce the same effect there as in his studio.

From this time we were constant companions at home and in the studio, where I worked under his instruction during three consecutive years.

Pierre Millet.