

A PAINTER OF MOTHERHOOD.

VIRGINIE DEMONT-BRETON.

CHEVALIÈRE DE LA LÉGION D'HONNEUR.

THE maternal instinct is the predominant quality, the motive force, in the character and work of the strongest woman figure-painter in France, Virginie Demont-Breton. No woman combines so high a grade of subject with such force and knowledge of technical rendering; not only are her subjects poetical and full of pathos and reality, but they are put upon the canvas with a master's hand.

Virginie Demont-Breton, Presidente de l'Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, chevalière de la Légion d'Honneur, membre de l'Académie Royale d'Anvers, membre de l'Ordre de Nichan Iftichan, all of which honors have been bestowed upon her in the last two or three years, is the daughter of the well-known painter Jules Breton.

She is the only woman painter since Rosa Bonheur to receive the cross of the Legion of Honor, so rarely given to women. She chooses greater subjects than her illustrious senior, in that these subjects are human; and her talent is more versatile and tender. Her color and harmony of tones please the most critical; her mothers speak to all and her children to those who have had children of their own. They are not impossible, idealized dream-children and dream-mothers, but real ones such as one knows. Though the beautiful Joan of Arc child, on her knees in the field, has an inspired look in her face, she is nevertheless like many French peasant children to be met along any roadside in summer; the mother aiding the tottering steps of her twins is doing only what all nurses and mothers do; in «Dipped in the Sea» the child is but struggling as all others do when plunged into the waves.

Virginie Demont-Breton has deep-set blue eyes, a strong, well-cut nose, soft curly hair, and a broad brow not out of proportion to the rest of her face. She is short and slight; every movement shows energy. The portrait of her exhibited in the Salon of 1895 is excellent in every way.

Mme. Demont-Breton comes of a family of artists; her mother's father, Félix de Vigne, was an artist of considerable reputation. When Jules Breton first went to Félix de Vigne for advice, the latter had, among other children, a little girl of seven, Élodie, who in after years became Mme. Jules Breton.

Her story has been written by her husband. He has told how he asked her to be his wife while she was sitting to him for her portrait, and of her calmness: she showed no emotion, and seemed almost to have expected it. The surprise could not have been less had he asked her to change her position or move her hand to right or left.

The child born to them in 1859 was Virginie, who grew up in a happy home in Courrières, a hamlet in the north of France, near the Belgian frontier. Virginie, in turn, married Adrien Demont, a young painter who came to her uncle Émile Breton from time to time for lessons and criticism. But her romance should be told in her own words, as she told it to me.

«I was only fourteen years old when I first saw my uncle's pupil Adrien; I saw him only once, but for a year after I thought often of the handsome fellow of nineteen, with his sketches under his arm. I had thought so often of him that when at the end of a year I saw him again I was enraptured. In a few hours he was gone, and the next time we met I was sixteen. He appeared at intervals to consult my uncle about his work, but my feelings were such that I wondered with fear whether he had even given me a thought. I realized what it would be to me if, as was just possible, he was almost ignorant of my existence.

«Again the third time he came and went. Soon after my father was questioning me about many things, and about my feelings for my young playmates. He named first one, then another. I was surprised when he asked, as if by chance, what I thought of my uncle's pupil Adrien Demont. He had only to look to realize what the mere mention of this name was to me.

«It soon transpired that he had asked my father for me, and we became engaged—an engagement which was to last for three years and more. But they were not long; we saw each other every two weeks, and wrote between times, just as, I am told, young people who love each other do in America.»

Adrien Demont is stalwart and tall, with the head of a poet and the energy of a man of action.

As a child Virginie Breton had always a pencil in hand, and at fourteen years of age



PAINTED BY VIRGINIE DEMONT-BRETON.

«DIPPED IN THE SEA.»

began studying under her father, with whom she drew and painted until, at nineteen, she came to Paris with her mother. Here, in the Luxembourg quarter, they took a small apartment, and in three months' time she finished the first three pictures she ever exhibited. They were exhibited that year, and received honorable mention. Several of the jury were

for giving her a medal, but her father begged that it should be only an honorable mention the first year, as a medal might turn her head and prevent her from working seriously.

Success followed immediately upon her first exhibition, and an American bought her first Salon picture.

About this time her marriage with Adrien

Demont was celebrated, and the crowning happiness of her life came when, five years later, her first child was born. In connection with this there is an interesting incident.

On a May day in 1886, in the little cemetery of Écouen, eight miles from Paris, Jules Breton and a number of artists gathered together about the grave of their confrère Édouard Frère. After the ceremony the artists who lived in the village divided among themselves their brothers who had come from a distance, and carried them off to luncheon. Jules Breton and a number of others fell to the lot of the English painter Todd, who entertained them at a table spread under an arbor in his garden. A large company sat down; they spoke in low tones of the departed, of the loss to them, and their sympathy for the family. When they had satisfied their hunger, conversation became general, and for the moment all forgot that they were eating funeral meats.

Jules Breton sat at the head of the long table; he was silent most of the time, but there was a happy look in his odd blue eyes and a bright expression on his face, which were explained when at dessert he told that his only daughter had honored him by making him a grandfather that day. The guests exclaimed, «The king is dead—long live the king!» as they raised their glasses and drank to future painters.

Mme. Virginie Demont looks back to her earliest childhood to find the first traces of the maternal instinct, the power in almost all of her important pictures. She cannot remember a time when she did not think of children—of her own children that were to be. The children who now exist influenced her life long before they were born. When she became a mother the little ones resembled strongly the children she had depicted in her paintings years before. She has lately written: «Maternity is the most beautiful, the healthiest glory of woman; it is a love dream in palpable form, and comes smilingly to demand our tenderness and our kisses; it is the inexhaustible source whence feminine art draws its purest inspirations.»¹

Love is the inspiring motive of almost every one of her pictures. When it is not a mother's love which inspires her, it is love of country, as in her picture of «Jean Bart,» where the officer of marines so inspires the fishermen of Dunkirk with a love for their country that one and all enlist for the coming struggle with Holland.

Virginie Demont-Breton has a lovely home

¹ «Woman in Art,» by Virginie Demont-Breton, in «La Revue des Revues,» March 1, 1896.

at Montgeron, a village of a thousand inhabitants ten or more miles from Paris. Pretty little roads and lanes separate simple villas, each with more or less ground about it, surrounded by railing or stone wall. The Seine winds back and forth not very far away; the swamp willows along the border of the river, whether in early spring with their crimson tops or in their fresh green summer dress, are always pretty; the poplars are trimmed to within a few feet of their tops, and stand in long rows, wind-beaten, and full of character with their peculiar lightness and grace.

To this pretty but simple country house in Montgeron the Demonts have added fine twin studios. The house stands surrounded by trees, with alleys and pretty vistas in several directions. The watch-dog is jealous of all who enter, and the little girls, when not in the house with their mother, are driving their donkey, or fishing in the pond not far off, or playing under their own apple-trees. The Bohemian spirit, the spirit of shiftlessness, of letting well enough alone, of forgetfulness of the morrow, is lost in the mother and wife.

The walls of the twin ateliers, designed by an uncle of Adrien Demont, attest to the industry of both husband and wife. The gray walls are covered with narrow shelves, which rise tier upon tier to the top of the studios; upon these shelves stand hundreds of studies for many of the pictures long since hung in public museums or private collections. Each studio is approached by a winding carved-wood stairway, which forms pretty balconies. It is on this stair that Salgado has posed Mme. Demont-Breton for his successful portrait. Each studio is supplied with its upper and side lights; husband and wife work side by side.

In Mme. Demont's studio the walls are covered with studies and pictures of children of all ages and conditions, from the infant in arms to older ones clinging about the mother's knee. Some are asleep, others taking first steps, others digging in the sand or dipping in the waves. Each figure of each picture is studied over and over, first in one attitude, then in another, in one drapery, then in another, first in one combination of colors, then in another, until the general harmony is gained. The love of childhood in all its phases is depicted everywhere. The Virgin and Child is a frequent theme with Virginie Demont, and her career can scarce close before she gives to the world a Holy Family worthy to hang side by side with the best examples of the masters of Italian, Flemish, or Spanish art.

Many of her important works have found places in different Continental museums,



PAINTED BY VIRGINIE DEMONT-BRETON.

«TWINS.»

while others are owned by Englishmen and Americans. But all this success has not turned the artist's head. She is fond of a good story, and is a charming hostess in her country home, where her little girls already show their colored drawings, and are likely to follow in the footsteps of their parents and forefathers for several generations. The village schoolmaster comes to give them lessons each week, but the great twin ateliers

are their school-room. Here they know each study and group of studies; they run to fetch certain ones on demand, just as if finding their dolls and playthings for inspection. When the mother's or the father's memory is at fault, the children are appealed to, to tell where and when a certain picture was exhibited, and where others are now.

In a fifteen years' residence in Montgeron the artists know none of their neighbors. They

are jealous of anything that can mar the home life or the seclusion of working hours. But they are well known and often seen elsewhere, for Mme. Demont-Breton is president of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, which has a large annual exhibition; and

out the wind and damp. The garden is on the roof, and the rocky hillside, where sheep are pastured and over which the sea-birds sweep, is left untouched up to the very door-sill.

Wissart has in summer about a hundred visitors, some of whom go to be within reach



DRAWN BY VIRGINIE DEMONT-BRETON.

(THE FIRST CHRISTMAS.)

since accepting this position she has worked intelligently to enlarge and remodel this growing society.

For six months in the year she is at her summer home at Wissart, a small fishing-village in the north of France, between Boulogne and Calais. Here the home is built on the top of a high hill, and is square on all sides and on top; the walls are of stone three feet thick, to keep

of Mme. Demont's instruction. The coast is rugged and dangerous, with here and there a brilliant white sand-heap in a little cove; the winds are fierce and the storms dangerous. It is at Wissart that she finds the sands and rocks for her backgrounds and settings; it is among the Wissart fisherfolk that she finds her models; it is their solitary, touching lives which oftentimes inspire her.

Here Virginie Demont's life is devoted to unremitting work, either at her art or in ameliorating the condition of some of the fisherfolk so dear to her heart. Many of the inhabitants she has known since their birth, and she is never more interesting than when recounting the romances of their fateful lives. Nothing shows more clearly their love for her and their sense that she belongs to them than their joy when she received the cross of the Legion of Honor. The morning that the news came they went in a spontaneous procession to her house, with the national flag floating at their head. They took whatever flowers their little gardens afforded, and culled wild ones as they went along. The summer visitors, following their lead, had also a meeting on the beach, to bear witness to their appreciation of the well-merited honors bestowed upon her. The following Sunday was declared a public holiday; the townspeople, with the village pastor at their head, with painters, school-children, fishermen, and fishwives, went in procession to the house on the hill. The children of the fishermen hitched themselves to a small triumphal car, and drew the two little girls in triumph before their mother, the new *chevalière*. From the house they went to the market-place. Here, before the town hall, under the national flag, the representative painters, lawyers, and others among the summer visitors, spoke for the fisherfolk and for themselves. Carrier-Belleuse spoke of her great heart and talent, her grandeur of subject and simplicity of character, her faultless touch and her tenderness; of her life divided equally between love of home and love of art; of her youth, and her people's love.

Mme. Demont has written a volume of stories the scenes of which are laid along this rugged coast. She is welcome in every cottage, and all woes are poured into her ear. When a boat goes ashore in a winter storm, and lives are lost, it is her friends who have perished. Some have posed for her pictures, and others have been at her beck and call for any work she gave them the pleasure of doing for her. Her motherly heart has led

her to found a society for their relief, for caring for the aged and infirm in the long winters, for forwarding a little money to furnish the young fellows with fishing-tackle or other means of earning their own livelihood.

It is to Mme. Demont-Breton that the Minister of Public Instruction has finally accorded the promise, so long a matter of discussion, that women shall be allowed to enter the classes of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the government school of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, etc. The state has recognized her merit, her fellow-artists in Belgium have signified their esteem, the women painters and women sculptors of France have chosen her to be their leader, and the government of Algiers has added its quota; honors are arriving from every direction; and all this recognition has come before she has reached the age of forty.

CHIEF PICTURES BY MME. DEMONT-BRETON,
EXHIBITED AT THE SALON OF THE CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES,
WITH THEIR PRESENT LOCATION.

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| 1881 | «Fisherwife bathing Child» | } Museum, Amsterdam |
| | Medal 3d class | |
| 1882 | «A Family» | Museum, Douai |
| 1883 | «The Beach» | } Museum, Luxembourg |
| | Medal 2d class | |
| 1884 | «The Calm» | |
| 1885 | «First Steps» | New York |
| | «Old Tars» | Museum Gand, Belgium |
| 1887 | «Making Bread» in Dauphiny | |
| | «Dance of an Infant» | |
| 1888 | «The Bath» | |
| | «Twins» | Museum, Sydney, N. S. W. |
| 1889 | «Father is Away» | Minneapolis |
| | «The Wave» (World's Exhibition) | Rochester, N.Y. |
| 1890 | «Child in a Garden» | |
| 1891 | «The Messiah» | Philadelphia |
| | «Giotto» | Paris |
| 1892 | «Dipped in the Sea» | New York |
| | «The Blue Country» | Chicago |
| 1893 | «The Fireside» | New York |
| | «Joan of Arc» | Museum, Lille |
| 1894 | «Jean Bart» | Museum, Dunkirk |
| | «The Fisherman's Son» | New York |
| 1895 | «Stella Maris» | New York |
| | «Mistletoe» | |
| 1896 | «Ishmael» | |

Many others—gold medals at world's fairs, etc.—are not in this list. Illustrations, portraits, and smaller pictures are not mentioned.

Lee Bacon.

