

FROM THE FRENCH OF DANIEL RICHE.

SOLITARY, by the sea-shore, in a cottage which the rough winds from across the ocean shook like a worn-out and abandoned ship, lived the aunt of Belle Yvonne; who was beautiful as a spring day, with the gold-glint of her hair, her eyes as blue as the cloudless sky, and her skin as fair as the hue of the lilies growing by the margin of the well.

But though she was beautiful enough to surprise a King, Yvonne was very unhappy. Her old witch of an aunt, who lived by theft and the spoils of wrecked mariners gathered from the shore, beat her much more often than complimented her on her good looks.

The little one never complained, however. Merely to live was a delight to her, and while listening to the songs of the birds on the heath, and breathing the sweet scent of the furze-flower, she forgot all the ill-treatment of which she was the daily victim.

Now, one afternoon, when the old woman had sent Yvonne to gather mussels on the shore, a handsome carriage, drawn by six white horses, stopped at the cottage door.

All the people of the village followed it, wonderingly, expecting that some charming Prince would alight from it. But to their great astonishment the person who descended was only a little man—not taller than a distaff—with a head as big as a lion's, and a great black beard, which he wore plaited down to his waist, round which it was coiled like a belt.

The dwarf was dressed in silk, satin, and gold; rings and jewels sparkled on all his fingers, and the knob of his cane was composed of a single diamond.

He entered the miserable cottage, and the old woman was so overcome by the sight of him that she threw herself upon her knees before him in sign of humility and deference.

"Rise, woman," said the dwarf, in a thin little voice, like the tone of a flageolet; "I have to speak with you on a matter of importance."

As she was rising, in obedience to his command, she received full in the nose a purse filled with gold pieces; but, far from complaining, her face brightened into a hideous smile, and she asked, humbly:—

"What can I do to satisfy you, my lord?"

"I have noticed," he replied, "your niece, Yvonne, agile as a young goat, flitting about the rocks: she is so beautiful that I have come to ask for her hand."

The old woman clapped her legs three times with her hands, which with her was a sign of utter stupefaction.

"You, a rich lord, who have a carriage drawn by six white horses, and so many purses full of gold pieces that you throw them to old women—you wish to marry my niece?"

"It is my dearest wish, supposing she will consent."

"She refuse such an honour?" squeaked the old woman; "I would eat her liver if she dare!"

From a distance Yvonne perceived the assembled village, and though she could not imagine what it meant, the concourse of people about her aunt's door alarmed her so much that her rosy cheek became pale.

She was obliged to go home, however. Slowly, and bending under the weight of the load of mussels she had gathered, she made her way towards the cottage. On seeing her approach the curious crowd opened to let her pass, crying:—

"Here she is—here she is!"

The poor child felt her heart contract more and more.

When she learned that her hand was sought by the dwarf, Belle Yvonne burst into tears. She would have preferred to remain unmarried all her life than to wed such a frightful creature!

Seeing this, the old witch of an aunt begged his lordship to come again the next day, assuring him that her niece would then be ready to accept him; and when next day the dwarf returned, Yvonne received him with smiles.

What had the old woman said to bring about this change? Had she dazzled her with the prospect of riches, or terrorized her by force or threats?

No; the old witch had caused her unsuspectingly to eat the brain of a mole strangled with three fern-stalks on a moonless night under a tree in which an owl was hooting. This charm, the power of which lasted two days, made all men who met her sight appear beautiful as the heroes of a dream.

She, therefore, received the dwarf with joy, and, on the second day, they were married, and he conducted her across wide lands and through dark forests to her new home.

Once arrived in the great hall of her magnificent castle, lit by four torches held

in golden sockets, the charm came to an end, and poor Yvonne trembled with fear on hearing her dwarf-husband say to her:—

"Madam, I know that I am neither big nor beautiful, in spite of my long beard; and, as I am very jealous, I warn you that you will never be allowed to go beyond the limits of my domain. You will see no other man besides myself. With those exceptions, pray understand me, gentle wife, your every desire, every dream, shall be accomplished."

Yvonne was at first greatly distressed by her complete solitude. Youth needs noise and movement for the expenditure of its excess of strength; it needs, also, in provision for the days of its old age, to store up pictures, thoughts, and facts, to be revived when the time comes when activity is replaced by a quiet seat in an old arm-chair by the fireside.

A sense of deadly weariness weighed upon her. But as the years made no change in her situation, she determined to make the best of it, by diverting herself by all means possible, in company with her servant, Marie-Jeanne, a good, rough girl, fond of laughing and chattering.

At the close of an autumn day the two women were sitting at a window watching the setting sun, when some portions of a ballad, sung by two delicate and fluent voices, reached their ears.

This song, thrilling the dusky calm, touched and delighted the two recluses, and, when the voices ceased, both leaned out of the window to get sight of the troubadours, but saw, under their balcony, only two dwarfs, so exactly like Yvonne's husband that they could not repress an exclamation of bewildered astonishment. Like him, they were not taller than a distaff; like him, they had each a head as big as a lion's; and, like him, each had a long plaited beard coiled round his waist.

Recovered from their astonishment, the two young women were moved to laughter by this curious resemblance. Then Marie-Jeanne, who was always on the look-out for distraction for her mistress, proposed:—

"Suppose we asked these two musicians to come and amuse us a little?"

"How can you think of such a thing? What if my lord should return?"

"Oh, never fear, madam! He will not return till late in the evening; you will have plenty of time to amuse yourself with their songs."

It did not need much pressing to induce the poor recluse to accept this tempting

offer, and, clapping her hands with pleasure, she permitted Marie-Jeanne to make a sign to them to come up.

In the course of a few moments the two dwarfs sang, accompanying themselves on the viol; and the lady and the servant, who for so long had not had any amusement of any kind, danced till they were out of breath.



"THEY DANCED TILL THEY WERE OUT OF BREATH."

Suddenly, while they were in the full enjoyment of their new-found pleasure, the sound of footsteps gritting on the gravel-walk in the court of honour fell upon their ears.

"Heavens! My husband!"

"Your husband?"

"We are lost!"

"Don't give way to despair so quickly," said Marie-Jeanne, who was not readily alarmed. "Chickens don't allow their necks to be wrung without screeching loud enough to make themselves heard. We'll find some way."

"Do you think it possible?"

Marie-Jeanne did not answer this question, but hurried across the room to a large coffer, the lid of which she raised.

"Quick! hide yourselves in this chest," she said to the musicians. "The master is very spiteful, and if he discovers you in this house, he will be sure to cut you into little pieces and feed his dogs with them."

Terrified out of their wits, they instantly obeyed, and Marie-Jeanne shut down the lid, seated herself upon it, and coolly set to work knitting.

Not a moment too soon; for she had hardly made a dozen loops when the little lord entered the room. The discomposure of his wife was at once observed by him.

"What is the matter with you, Belle Yvonne? You are as pale as a corpse."

"I, my lord!" she stammered; "I am feeling a little weak this evening, that is all."

"That comes of your not being allowed to go abroad, perhaps," said Marie-Jeanne, boldly.

"The park is large, my beloved, it must suffice for your walks." Then, changing the subject to avoid a discussion which had many times been re-opened, he added: "I have mislaid here the little box of pistoles, of which I have need, and have returned in search of it."

"Search, search, my lord," said Belle Yvonne; adding, in a tone scarcely louder than the breath of the summer air, "The company of my lord is always agreeable."

Leisurely he examined all the furniture, felt in all the drawers, hoping by chance to discover what it was his wife was hiding from him—for that she was hiding something from him he felt certain; but neither seeing nor hearing anything unusual, he kissed her hand, and with his coffret under his arm quitted the room.

When they had seen him cross the draw-bridge Marie-Jeanne hurried to the great chest and raised the lid. Alas! the little lord had stayed too long, and the two musicians, deprived of air, had both been suffocated.

Belle Yvonne and the well-meaning servant wept. It was abominable that two such gay and well-bred little singers, who had made them dance so delightfully, should lose their lives in so miserable a manner.

When they became somewhat calmer, Yvonne wondered what would come of this pitiful adventure. Had they done wrong in indulging in a little recreation, in disobedience to the will of the lord and master, and had this accident occurred to punish them?

Marie-Jeanne, with a shrug of her broad shoulders, cut short her mistress's lamentations.

"Don't be downcast, madam," she said; "this misfortune had only one cause—my weight—which made the lid of the chest air-tight; so that I alone am responsible for what has happened. It is for me, therefore, to find some way of getting rid of the proofs of our disobedience before your husband returns."

For a long time she cudgelled her brains. Night was closing in upon the castle and filling its halls with sinister gloom, when she suddenly cried, in tones of triumph:—

"I have it!"

"Speak quickly!" exclaimed Yvonne, glad exceedingly to have a servant so resourceful.

"This is my plan," replied Marie-Jeanne, unhesitatingly: "In the wildest depths of the forest there lives by himself an honest woodman. He knows nobody, and does not even suspect that he is the vassal of your noble husband. I will go and ask him to relieve me of these two poor little musicians, and for a trifle he will be sure to do us this piece of service."

"Do you think he will not be astonished?"

"Don't worry yourself on that account, my dear mistress, but leave all to me," replied Marie-Jeanne, hurrying off, for time pressed.

In his hut Marie-Jeanne found old Guido, whose hair and beard had so long been left

untrimmed as to cover his entire face. Squatting before a fireless hearth, the woodman was seeking the solution of the difficult problem—how to live on nothing.

Astonished at receiving a visitor, he hastily rose and offered a plump fagot as the only substitute for an arm-chair he was able to command.

"To what do I owe the honour of your presence, demoiselle?" he asked.

"The lady châtelaine, of whom I am the servant," replied Marie-Jeanne, boldly, "this morning admitted to the castle a frightful little starveling, and, moved by compassion—for she has a tender soul—she had a meal set before him, of which he ate so gluttonously as to choke himself and die of it."

"The clumsy fool!" said Guido, wishing that such a chance might fall in his way. "He would have done better to fill his pockets instead of choking himself, so that he might have doubled his pleasure next day."

"That is what he ought to have done, wasn't it?" said Marie-Jeanne. "Well, my mistress having invited this poor wretch in the absence of her lord, and fearing his

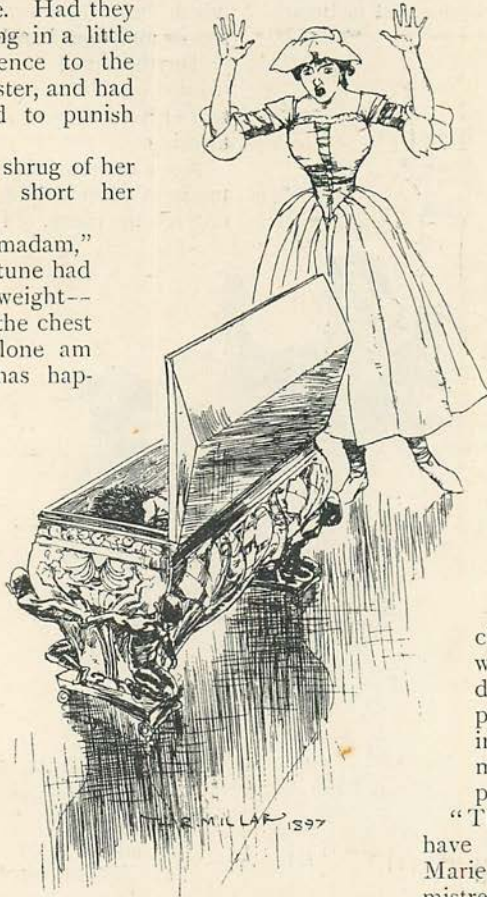
anger, has sent me to beg you to come and take away the body, for which service she will give you three pistoles."

Guido closed his eyes, and under the close-pressed lids saw a river of gold. Three pistoles! Never had he possessed such a fortune! He replied:—

"What the lady châtelaine desires is an order. I will immediately come for your gormandizer and throw him into the sea."

"That's it," cried Marie-Jeanne.

Running back to the castle, she drew one of the dwarfs from the chest and descended with it to the grand vestibule, and waited against one of the thousand marble columns



"THE TWO MUSICIANS HAD BOTH BEEN SUFFOCATED."

which supported the antique dwelling till she was joined by the old woodman, to whom she simply said :—

“Here is your load.”

“Good, good,” he said, taking it upon his shoulder ; “in five minutes I shall be back, and, by that time, your glutton will be in the stomach of a shark.”

So Guido went off, and Belle Yvonne’s cunning maid returned upstairs to her mistress, who waited in a corner of the room farthest from the fatal chest.

“There’s one got rid of.”

“Yes, but there is the other,” tremulously said her mistress.

“Don’t distress yourself as to that ; we’ll get rid of it quite as easily.” And drawing the body from the chest, she descended with it to the vestibule as before. The sea was only a short distance from the castle, and Marie-Jeanne soon saw the woodman coming back for his reward. Then, with her two hands planted on her hips, and putting on an air of indignation, she cried :—

“Upon my word !—you’ve a pretty way of executing the commissions intrusted to you !”

“What do you mean ?” stammered the woodman.

“Why, that five minutes ago, our glutton returned here and fell dead at my feet !”

“Impossible ! I saw him sink.”

“How could he be here at this minute, then ?” demanded Marie-Jeanne, pointing to the second little musician.

“If I did not see it with my own eyes, I would not believe it, for I swear to you I threw it into the sea from the top of the rock.”

“The proof !”

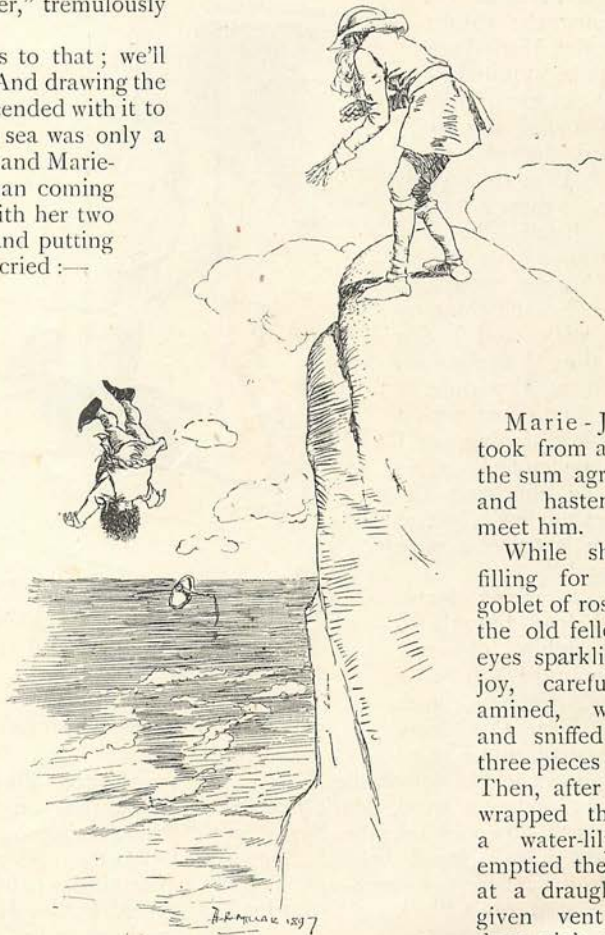
Greatly irritated at being taken for an incompetent, Guido threatened the lifeless body of the poor little musician :—

“Son of a sorcerer, this time I will weight your carcass with stones, and I promise you shall never come to the surface again !”

And shouldering his burden, he once more set off without having the least suspicion of the trick which was being played upon him.

Marie-Jeanne, delighted by the success of her stratagem, went back to her mistress, who could not help smiling at the relation of the old woodman’s indignation on finding the second dwarf at the place whence he had taken the first.

But time passed and Guido did not return. At last, in their uneasiness concerning him, they were wondering whether he might have fallen into the sea with his load, when they saw him approaching, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.



“I THREW IT INTO THE SEA FROM THE TOP OF THE ROCK.”

Marie-Jeanne took from a casket the sum agreed on, and hastened to meet him.

While she was filling for him a goblet of rosy wine, the old fellow, his eyes sparkling with joy, carefully examined, weighed, and sniffed at the three pieces of gold. Then, after having wrapped them in a water-lily leaf, emptied the goblet at a draught, and given vent to a deep sigh of satisfaction, he said :—

“Take my word for it, demoiselle, that devil’s cub gave me some trouble !”

“Yes, obliged you to make two journeys.”

“Three !—for in spite of my having filled the sack he was in with heavy stones, the little man escaped again !”

Marie-Jeanne’s eyes opened wider than

ever they had opened before in her life. She was bewildered.

"What do you mean?" she asked, as soon as she regained the use of her tongue.

"I was coming back here for the money you promised, fully convinced that I had finally got rid of your embarrassing visitor, when, close to the portcullis, what should I see but my little man walking in front of me, quietly, this time, with a small box under his arm."

Guessing the nature of the mistake, Marie-Jeanne, a little pale, inquired:—

"What happened then?"

"My blood was up!" exclaimed the old woodman. "A mere nothing like him—a thing not taller than a distaff—had no right to snap his fingers at an honest woodman like me. So snatching up a thick stick, and giving him no time to make even so much as a gesture, I brought him down with a single blow, saying, as I planted my cudgel on his head, 'To slip from the trap once might do, but to slip from it twice is once too many!'"

Without asking leave, Guido helped himself to another goblet of wine, then concluded:—

"Now, if he comes back, I hope this drink of wine may choke me! To your good health, demoiselle!"

Without saying a word, Marie-Jeanne let him depart; then, when the heavy iron-bound door had closed behind him, she rushed to her mistress, crying:—

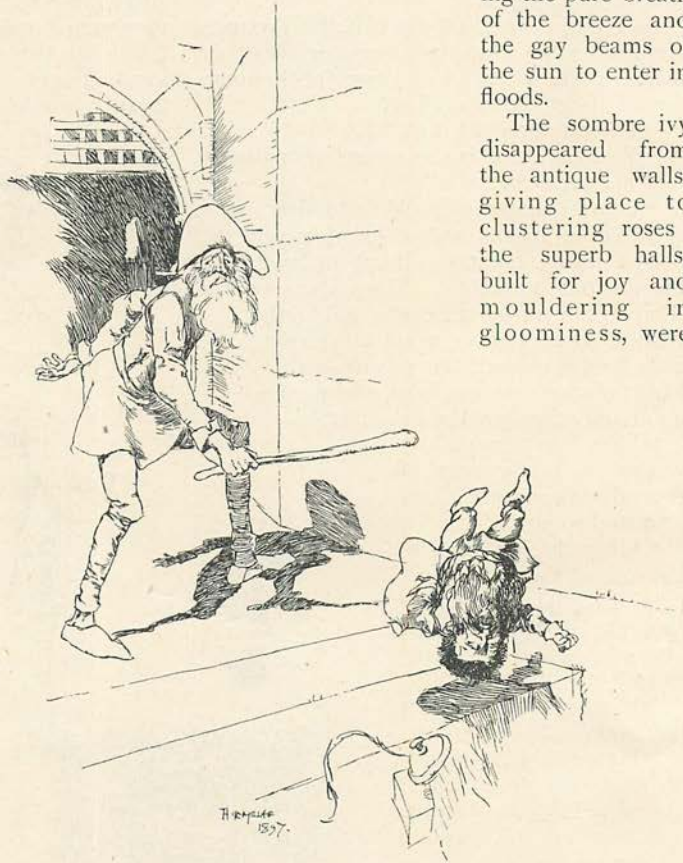
"Lady, put on a black veil; your lord is dead and buried!"

A low cry escaped from the lips of Belle

Yvonne, and she fainted—without Marie-Jeanne knowing whether her swoon was owing to grief or joy.

The charming widow did not take long to console herself. The windows of the ancient manor-house, closed for so many years, were opened wide, allowing the pure breath of the breeze and the gay beams of the sun to enter in floods.

The sombre ivy disappeared from the antique walls, giving place to clustering roses; the superb halls, built for joy and mouldering in gloominess, were



"I BROUGHT HIM DOWN WITH A SINGLE BLOW."

once more illuminated brightly, and Yvonne—omitting an invitation to her aunt—gave there sumptuous entertainments.

At the end of a year of widowhood, the beautiful châtelaine allowed herself to be loved by the King's son, who married her, and made her so happy—so happy that she never grew old.