

Clochette



FROM THE FRENCH OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

BY ALYS HALLARD.

HOW strange they are, those memories of the past, which haunt one's brains so persistently that one cannot get rid of them. This all happened so long ago, so far back in the past, that I cannot understand how it is that it should remain so clearly fixed in my mind.

I have seen so many terrible things since then, and had so many sad experiences, that it seems strange indeed that not a single day should pass without my seeing poor Mère Clochette's face just as she was when I was a mere child of ten or twelve years old.

She was a sewing-woman who used to come to us every Tuesday, for the whole day, to mend the linen. Our home was one of those old country places which people call a château, but which was in reality just an old-fashioned house with a pointed roof, and with four or five little cottages grouped round it.

The village was just a few hundred yards

away from our house, a number of little houses built around the red-brick church, which was nearly black with age. Every Tuesday morning Mère Clochette arrived at our house between half-past six and seven. She always went straight upstairs into the sewing-room and commenced work at once. She was a tall, spare woman, whilst her eyebrows were so long and bushy that they looked like moustaches over her eyes.

She limped in walking, but not in the same way as an ordinary cripple. She was more like a boat at anchor, for when her long, bony body was resting on her sound leg she looked as though she were just about to make a plunge, in order to reach the top of some huge wave, and then suddenly she would descend as though an abyss had opened under her feet. She always reminded me of a storm at sea when she walked, as she seemed to rock about, and the strings of her big white cap would float about with every movement she made.

I simply adored Mère Clochette, and as soon as I was dressed in the morning I always went straight up to the sewing-room, where I found her busy at work, comfortably installed with a foot-warmer. She would make me sit down on the foot-warmer, so that I should not take cold in the large room, as it was just under the roof and very chilly in winter.

She used to tell me stories whilst she darned the linen with her long, bent fingers, which moved so quickly backwards and forwards. Her eyes, which I only saw through her big spectacles, seemed to me to be enormous, and they always looked so deep and full of expression. From what I can remember of the things she used to tell me, and which interested me so much at the time, she must have been a simple-minded, kind-hearted woman. She would tell me all the events of the village: the story of a cow which had got out of its shed and which had been found the next morning, standing in front of Prosper

Malet's windmill watching the sails going round. Then I remember a story she told me about a hen's egg which had been found in the church steeple, and no one had ever discovered what hen could have got up there. Then there was the history of the faithful dog owned by Jean Pilas. His master's trousers had been stolen, and the dog had traced the thief and brought back the trousers, which the guilty man had hung on to the handle of his door to dry

during the night, after having been caught in a thunder-storm.

She told me these absurd stories in such an impressive way that they fixed themselves on my memory like veritable dramas and mysterious poems. The clever stories invented by celebrated authors which my mother used to tell me in the evenings did not seem to me anything like so thrilling and wonderful as those related by the poor peasant woman.



"SHE USED TO TELL ME STORIES WHILST SHE DARNED THE LINEN."

One Tuesday, after spending all the morning listening to Mère Clochette's tales, I had been with one of the servants to the woods just near the Noirpré farm. We had been gathering nuts, and I can remember everything as clearly as though it had all happened yesterday.

As soon as I reached home, I ran upstairs to the sewing-room, and, to my horror, on opening the door, I saw poor old Mère Clochette lying full length on the floor, her face downwards, her arms stretched out, holding her needle clenched

between the fingers of one hand, and a little garment of mine in the other. I can remember now noticing her blue stockings, and her spectacles, which had rolled against the wall as she fell.

I rushed downstairs, shrieking as I went, and my mother and the servants were soon with my poor old friend. Presently I heard them saying that she was dead, and I shall never forget the terrible, heartrending grief I felt, child though I was. I ran away, quietly,



"I SAW POOR OLD MÈRE CLOCHETTE LYING FULL LENGTH ON THE FLOOR."

into the big drawing-room, and hiding in a dark corner I knelt down by a low arm-chair, and, burying my head in a cushion, cried bitterly, until I was tired out with my emotion. I must have been there a long time, for it began to get quite dark.

Presently the door opened and someone came in with a lamp, and just after my father and mother entered the room with the doctor. They did not see me, and so continued their conversation. He was explaining to my parents what had caused the poor old woman's death. I did not understand anything about it, but I listened to his words, all the same. Some refreshments were brought in, and the doctor took a glass of wine and a biscuit. He went on talking all the time, and what he said I have never forgotten, and never shall forget to my dying day. I believe I can remember the very words he used.

"Poor old woman," he said, "she was the

first patient I had here. She broke her leg the very day of my arrival, and I had only just had time to wash my hands after my journey in the coach, when I was fetched to her, as it was a serious case, most serious in fact. She was just seventeen then, and a very pretty girl, very pretty indeed she was. You would scarcely have thought it possible, would you? As to her story, why, I have never told anyone about it, and with the exception of one other person who is no longer living here, no one has ever known it. Now that she is dead, it does not matter if I tell you. Just before my arrival here, a young man had come to this parish as assistant schoolmaster. He was very handsome, and had quite a military look about him—so that all the girls were soon in love with him. He pretended to be perfectly indifferent—but the fact was he stood in great awe of his principal, Père Grabu, who was rather given to getting out of bed the wrong side, and making things uncomfortable

for everyone on the slightest pretext. The young assistant lived at the schoolmaster's house, and it was there that he saw Hortense, the pretty seamstress, whom the villagers always called Clochette after her accident. He made love to her, and the poor girl was no doubt flattered to think that she should thus be sought out by the handsome young schoolmaster who had turned the heads of all the village girls.

"In a very short time she was quite devoted to him, and as it was impossible to exchange more than a few hasty words with her lover on the days when she was working at Père Grabu's house, she consented to meet him one evening in the loft over the schoolroom. When her day's work was over she watched her opportunity, and instead of leaving the house she just mounted the staircase leading to the loft and waited there, hiding behind some bundles of hay, for her lover. He soon joined her, but they had not been there many minutes when the door opened and Père Grabu himself entered the loft.

"What are you doing up here, Sigisbert?" asked the schoolmaster. The young man felt that there was no escape for him, and he answered in a dazed way:—

"I just came up to lie down and have a rest, Monsieur Grabu."

"The loft was a very large one, and it was absolutely dark. Sigisbert pushed the young girl along, whispering to her: 'Hide yourself; don't let him see you; get away somehow, or I shall lose my situation.'

"The schoolmaster thought he heard some whispering.

"Who is up here with you? You are not alone!" he called out.

"Yes, Monsieur Grabu, I am, quite alone," answered Sigisbert.

"No, you are not. I heard you talking to someone."

"I swear I am alone, Monsieur Grabu," answered the young man.

"I'll find that out for myself," said the old man. Whereupon he went out again, locked the door from the outside, and descended the staircase in search of a candle.

"The young man, who was a veritable coward, was perfectly furious now, and too excited to know what he was saying or doing.

"Hide yourself, I tell you," he said to the poor girl. "I shall lose my situation, and all through you. My whole life will be ruined by you. Hide yourself, can't you?"

"Just at that moment they heard the key being put into the lock again.

"Hortense ran to the little window which looked out on to the street. She opened it quickly, and then, in a low, resolute voice, she said:—

"When he goes away again you will come round and pick me up, won't you?"

"Without waiting for any reply, she sprang out of the

window. Père Grabu was very much surprised to find that Sigisbert was alone, and he soon went downstairs again. A quarter of an hour later the young man came and told me the whole story. The poor girl was lying by the wall and could not stir: she had fallen from the second story. It was raining in torrents. I went with M. Sigisbert, and we brought Hortense to my

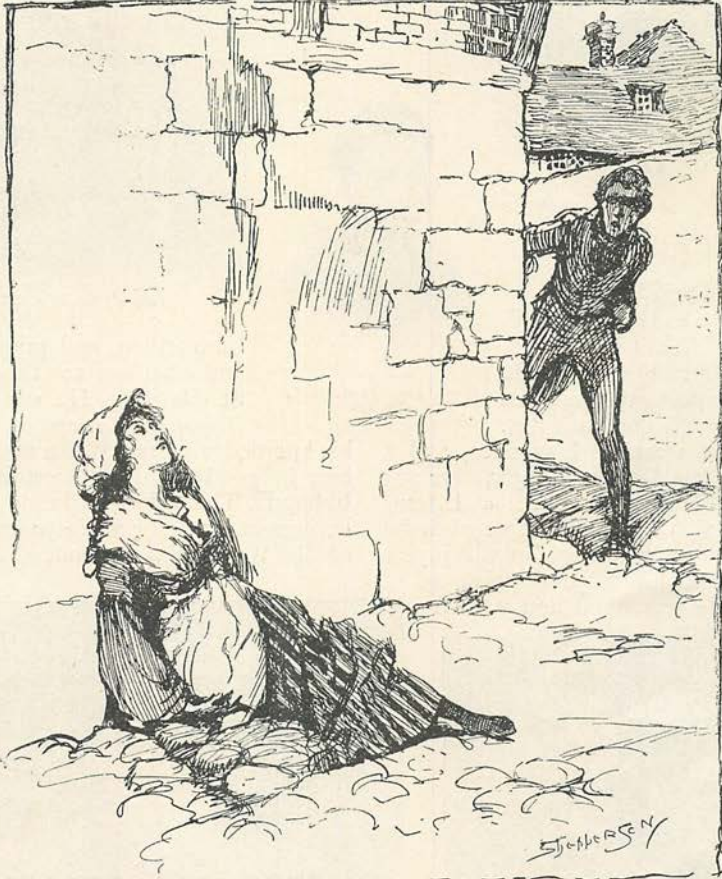


"HORTENSE RAN TO THE LITTLE WINDOW WHICH LOOKED OUT ON TO THE STREET."

house with her leg broken in three places, and the bone had come through the skin. She made no complaint, but just murmured, in a resigned tone: 'It was my own fault—it is just, my punishment.'

"I sent for a woman to come and nurse

but died an old maid. I mean to say that woman was sublime—she was just a martyr; and it is because of my great admiration for her that I have told you her story now. During her lifetime I would never have breathed it to anyone."



"THE POOR GIRL WAS LYING BY THE WALL AND COULD NOT STIR."

her, and then sent for her parents, to whom I made up a story about a horse that had taken fright and a carriage running over the poor girl just near my door. Everyone believed my story, and the police were engaged for about a month in trying to find out the owner of the runaway horse.

"That is the story, then," said the old doctor, "and I maintain that that woman was a heroine. She never had another love affair,

The old doctor said no more. My mother was crying, and my father said something which I did not catch. Presently they all went out of the room again, and I stayed there kneeling by the low arm-chair sobbing bitterly, until at last I heard a strange sound of heavy footsteps, and of something being carried downstairs.

They were taking poor Clochette away.