

The Storyteller

LEON MATURIN'S CHRISTMAS EVE.

The snow was falling thickly and steadily, and the evening shadows were gathering so closely around the house that Leon and Annette were glad to turn from the window where they had been for the last half-hour and nestle down together in one corner of the big fireplace. There was no lamp or candle in the room, but the large fire of peat and brushwood sent forth a ruddy glow, which brightened everything around it, while an occasional leaping flame would suddenly bring into view some more distant object, and send the shadows chasing each other into the farthest corner of the low kitchen.

The pot was boiling over the fire, and Mere Maturin was walking backward and forward preparing supper.

'See, Leon,' whispered Annette, 'how funny grandma's cap looks on the wall. When she goes over to the cupboard it is quite small, and when she comes nearer here it grows up, up, half way over the ceiling. Look, there it is now, just like one of Maitre Caussin's hay-mowers in July!'

'Yes, and see the spinning-wheel change and turn as if the fairies were spinning on it!'

'Do they ever, Leon? Perhaps they are doing it now Oh, if you could see them!'

'You little silly,' replied her brother. 'Who ever saw fairies Christmas Eve? If it were midsummer now! St. John's Eve is the time for them. See here, Annette, if you are good from now till St. John's Eve—if you do everything I want you to—if, if,' said Leon, wishing to make as good a bargain as possible, 'if you always drive Blanchette home from pasture when I want to play with George, if you will always get grandmother the crosses when I don't want to go to the brook for them, I will show you the fairies that night; that is,' added the boy, thinking, perhaps, he had better not promise too much, 'I will let you go with me to the big stones in the middle of the wood vander, just at midnight, and there—Maitre Caussin's Joseph told me so—you will be sure to see them.'

'Oh, Leon, I will do anything for you if you will but let me see them! But it is so long to wait; perhaps grandmamma knows if one can see them any other time.' Grandmother (raising her voice) do the fairies ever come at Christmas Eve, and do they ever turn spinning wheels to help people?'

'Nay, child, who ever heard of fairies, then?' said Mere Maturin 'and if they did take the trouble to turn spinning-wheels, it would not be for idle folk like you! Come and put the dishes on the table, for the pot is boiling, and it is time we had supper.'

Annette speedily obeyed, and there was no more talk of fairies for an hour. After that, the dishes being all washed and put away, and grandmother seated in the chimney-corner with her knitting, the children took their places, side by side, on the hearth opposite her, and began to plead with her for some legends and stories, such as they loved to hear.

Leon and Annette lived in Brittany, in a little old cottage not far from the sea, and a few miles from the town of St. Malo. Their eldest and only brother, Louis, had gone as a soldier, two years before, and was at Toulon with his regiment. Once in a great while they heard from him, and his last letter but one had told them he was married. They were looking for a letter from him now, for it was six months since the last one came, and they said:

'Louis will surely send us a message for Christmas! This Christmas Eve the father and mother had gone into St. Malo, to be present at the Midnight Mass and Christmas morning service, after which they were to come home, and the children had been left with their grandmother. Since sunset, the snow, which had been gathering overhead all day, had begun to fall, and was rapidly covering up the well beaten road, on which for many weeks no fresh snow had fallen.

'Tales, tales,' said the old woman: 'you have heard them all many times, my children. I have no new stories for you.'

'Then tell us old ones, dear grandmamma!'

'They say, then, little ones, and I have heard it ever since I was but half your size, that on the holy Christmas Eve, when the hour of midnight strikes, all the oxen, cows, and asses can speak like us human creatures, because they stood by when the Blessed Mary laid the Holy Babe in the manger,' and the old woman made the sign of the cross devoutly.

'But is it true, grandmamma?' said little Annette eagerly.

'I cannot say for myself, as I never heard them speak, child; but why should not poor brutes have a voice given them for once, for sake of that blessed night, that they may praise God? There was Antoine,' the old woman went on, murmuring to herself, 'sat up on purpose to hear them one night, and at twelve he went out to the stable, but the poor fool made such a clattering in undoing the door, that the beasts in St. Malo might have heard him through their sleep, so the ass and the cow were warned, and never a word would they speak before him; and they were wiser than some folk if they had secrets to talk about, for everything Antoine heard he went straight and told it, and, indeed, I believe he could not have helped it, if he knew he was to swing for it the next minute, but he is dead now, like many a one I once knew. May he rest in peace!'

'But did you ever know anyone else who tried it?' cried both the children at once.

'Only Pierre. Pretty Madeline, old Jacques the miller's daughter, waited up one Christmas Eve, and, when midnight drew near, she was too afraid all at once to stir out in the dark alone for anything so strange and wonderful, so she sent Pierre, her cousin. He had heard nothing, he said, when he came back; but nobody thought that counted for much, for though Pierre was a clever fellow enough, and could even read in the newspapers all by himself, without the priest to help him, everybody knew he wouldn't have heard the church bells, if they had all rung at once and he in the same tower, if he were thinking of Madeline, and that same evening didn't the miller—Jacques was lame then—ask him to give him his crutch, and put a stick on the fire, and didn't Pierre put the crutch on the fire and give Jacques the stick, and Madeline was but just in time to pull the crutch out of the flames, and it was scorched ever after. So you see he was not much to be depended on, till he married Madeline and settled down.

'Madeline was only a goose-girl; but she was a stout, comely maid, with cheeks like roses, and Pierre from a boy had always been fond of her. He taught her to read while she was minding the geese, and there never was a storm so bitter that Pierre wasn't glad to face it, if he could only help Madeline home with her geese. Ah, they've risen a bit since that day, for Pierre turned out a thrifty fellow, and—the saints shield us! Leon, what was that?'

'I heard nothing but the night wind blowing,' said Leon gravely. But Annette clung to her grandmother, and the grandmother laughed lightly to think how slight a thing startled her in her old days.

The little girl listened for some time longer, while Mere Maturin wandered on, telling old stories of the people she had known in her youth, but Leon was strangely silent. A thought was working in his brain. Why should not he, that very night, find out with his own ears if this were true. He would not tell Annette, for she might be afraid and cry or make a noise, and spoil all, and he would succeed no better than did Antoine, whom his grandmother knew. So when Mere Maturin said it was time to go to bed, he undressed and said his prayers and climbed up to his little mattress in the loft. He had grown too big for it, but it was the best he had, and his sleep was always sound. Grandmother and Annette would soon be asleep in the room off the kitchen, and Leon lay in bed watching the faint glimmers and shadows that fell on the loft stairs from the remains of the fire that burned low in the wide chimney. They had had a larger fire than usual, for it was very cold weather and Christmas Eve, and Mere Maturin had said: 'We must be warm to-night, if we are cold all the rest of the winter.' He kept his eyes open for some time, but fell asleep at last, and started awake again in a sudden fright lest the magic hour had slipped away from him in his sleep, and he would have a whole year to wait before he could try his chance again. The clouds had all cleared away, and the moon was shining brightly in through the diamond-shaped panes in the little window. Leon slipped out of bed and into his clothes, and then softly crept down the stairs. He could just see the face of the old clock in the corner, and he was in time. It wanted five minutes of twelve. He crossed the kitchen so softly that he did not disturb his grandmother and sister, and, unfastening the door, stood alone out in the night. Leon was a brave boy, so no thought of fear came to him, but he shivered in the nipping winter air, and pulled his cap further down over his ears. He could easily see by the moonlight where the path to the stable ought to be, although it was covered by several inches of snow, and in a few minutes he was at the door.

Very softly now, Leon, or Blanchette will lift her head and look at you out of her large, gentle, brown eyes, and old Jeanette will move her long ears and snuff danger near, and you will spoil it all.

So gently he undid the door, so quietly he stole in and stood in the shadow, that neither cow nor ass could be disturbed, yet surely something has aroused and affrighted them both. Leon listened breathlessly. Suddenly both the animals beside him moved uneasily. Presently, from outside the stable, came, clearly and distinctly on the night air, the bray of an ass. It made Leon start more than when Jeanette answered it from within the stable with another bray.

He was only frightened for a moment, however, and then he turned and went out of the door to see who this midnight visitor could be. There was nothing in the yard, but he crept along by the fence, and when he reached the gate, there, standing in the moonlight, was an ass, her head pushed far over the gate, and her long ears bent forward, listening for some answer to her summons. There was a saddle on her back, but no one on it.

For a moment Leon paused. He knew she had not come there all alone, but that probably somewhere along that lonely country road she had parted from her burden. The nearest house was four miles off, and in a different direction from that by which the ass had come, for Leon saw her footprints in the snow. He might have to walk far ere he should find those whom she had carried, but if he did not go—if he waited till daylight—it might be too late for help to reach those whom cold and snow had, perhaps, overcome. He opened the gate, then fastened it securely behind him, and gently turned the ass round. To his surprise she made no objection, but somewhat wearily retraced her footsteps in the snow.

They had not to go very far, however. A few yards from the house the road turned and crossed a little