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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

Ririro

The Stones Of Plouhinec

Perhaps some of you may have read a book called 'Kenneth; or the Rear-Guard of the Grand Army of Napoleon.' If so, you will remember how the two Scotch children found in Russia were taken care of by the French soldiers and prevented as far as possible from suffering from the horrors of the terrible Retreat. One of the soldiers, a Breton, often tried to make them forget how cold and hungry they were by telling them tales of his native country, Brittany, which is full of wonderful things. The best and warmest place round the camp fire was always given to the children, but even so the bitter frost would cause them to shiver. It was then that the Breton would begin: 'Plouhinec is a small town near Hennebonne by the sea,' and would continue until Kenneth or Effie would interrupt him with an eager question. Then he forgot how his mother had told him the tale, and was obliged to begin all over again, so the story lasted a long while, and by the time it was ended the children were ready to be rolled up in whatever coverings could be found, and go to sleep.

It is this story that I am going to tell to you.

Plouhinec is a small town near Hennebonne by the sea. Around it stretches a desolate moor, where no corn can be grown, and the grass is so coarse that no beast grows fat on it. Here and there are scattered groves of

fir trees, and small pebbles are so thick on the ground that you might almost take it for a beach. On the further side, the fairies, or korigans, as the people called them, had set up long long ago two rows of huge stones; indeed, so tall and heavy were they, that it seemed as if all the fairies in the world could not have placed them upright.

Not far off from this great stone avenue, and on the banks of the little river Intel, there lived a man named Marzinne and his sister Rozennik. They always had enough black bread to eat, and wooden shoes or sabots to wear, and a pig to fatten, so the neighbours thought them quite rich; and what was still better, they thought themselves rich also.

Rozennik was a pretty girl, who knew how to make the best of everything, and she could, if she wished, have chosen a husband from the young men of Plouhinec, but she cared for none of them except Bernèz, whom she had played with all her life, and Bernèz, though he worked hard, was so very very poor that Marzinne told him roughly he must look elsewhere for a wife. But whatever Marzinne might say Rozennik smiled and nodded to him as before, and would often turn her head as she passed, and sing snatches of old songs over her shoulder.

Christmas Eve had come, and all the men who worked under Marzinne or on the farms round about were gathered in the large kitchen to eat the soup flavoured with honey followed by rich puddings, to which they were always invited on this particular night. In the

middle of the table was a large wooden bowl, with wooden spoons placed in a circle round it, so that each might dip in his turn. The benches were filled, and Marzinne was about to give the signal, when the door was suddenly thrown open, and an old man came in, wishing the guests a good appetite for their supper. There was a pause, and some of the faces looked a little frightened; for the new comer was well known to them as a beggar, who was also said to be a wizard who cast spells over the cattle, and caused the corn to grow black, and old people to die, of what, nobody knew. Still, it was Christmas Eve, and besides it was as well not to offend him, so the farmer invited him in, and gave him a seat at the table and a wooden spoon like the rest.

There was not much talk after the beggar's entrance, and everyone was glad when the meal came to an end, and the beggar asked if he might sleep in the stable, as he should die of cold if he were left outside. Rather unwillingly Marzinne gave him leave, and bade Bernèz take the key and unlock the door. There was certainly plenty of room for a dozen beggars, for the only occupants of the stable were an old donkey and a thin ox; and as the night was bitter, the wizard lay down between them for warmth, with a sack of reeds for a pillow.

He had walked far that day, and even wizards get tired sometimes, so in spite of the hard floor he was just dropping off to sleep, when midnight struck from the church tower of Plouhinec. At this sound the donkey

raised her head and shook her ears, and turned towards the ox.

'Well, my dear cousin,' said she, 'and how have you fared since last Christmas Eve, when we had a conversation together?'

Instead of answering at once, the ox eyed the beggar with a long look of disgust.

'What is the use of talking,' he replied roughly, 'when a good-for-nothing creature like that can hear all we say?'

'Oh, you mustn't lose time in grumbling,' rejoined the donkey gaily, 'and don't you see that the wizard is asleep?'

'His wicked pranks do not make him rich, certainly,' said the ox, 'and he isn't even clever enough to have found out what a piece of luck might befall him a week hence.'

'What piece of luck?' asked the donkey.

'Why, don't you know,' inquired the ox, 'that once every hundred years the stones on Plouhinec heath go down to drink at the river, and that while they are away the treasures underneath them are uncovered?'

'Ah, I remember now,' replied the donkey, 'but the stones return so quickly to their places, that you certainly would be crushed to death unless you have in your hands a bunch of crowsfoot and of five-leaved trefoil.'

'Yes, but that is not enough,' said the ox; 'even supposing you get safely by, the treasures you have brought with you will crumble into dust if you do not

give in exchange a baptized soul. It is needful that a Christian should die before you can enjoy the wealth of Plouhinec.'

The donkey was about to ask some further questions, when she suddenly found herself unable to speak: the time allowed them for conversation was over.

'Ah, my dear creatures,' thought the beggar, who had of course heard everything, 'you are going to make me richer than the richest men of Vannes or Lorient. But I have no time to lose; to-morrow I must begin to hunt for the precious plants.'

He did not dare to seek too near Plouhinec, lest somebody who knew the story might guess what he was doing, so he went away further towards the south, where the air was softer and the plants are always green. From the instant it was light, till the last rays had faded out of the sky, he searched every inch of ground where the magic plants might grow; he scarcely gave himself a minute to eat and drink, but at length he found the crowsfoot in a little hollow! Well, that was certainly a great deal, but after all, the crowsfoot was of no use without the trefoil, and there was so little time left.

He had almost given up hope, when on the very last day before it was necessary that he should start for Plouhinec, he came upon a little clump of trefoil, half hidden under a rock. Hardly able to breathe from excitement, he sat down and hunted eagerly through the plant which he had torn up. Leaf after leaf he threw aside in disgust, and he had nearly reached the

end when he gave a cry of joy—the five-leaved trefoil was in his hand.

The beggar scrambled to his feet, and without a pause walked quickly down the road that led northwards. The moon was bright, and for some hours he kept steadily on, not knowing how many miles he had gone, nor even feeling tired. By and bye the sun rose, and the world began to stir, and stopping at a farmhouse door, he asked for a cup of milk and slice of bread and permission to rest for a while in the porch. Then he continued his journey, and so, towards sunset on New Year's Eve, he came back to Plouhinec.

As he was passing the long line of stones, he saw Bernèz working with a chisel on the tallest of them all.

'What are you doing there?' called the wizard, 'do you mean to hollow out for yourself a bed in that huge column?'

'No,' replied Bernèz quietly, 'but as I happened to have no work to do to-day, I thought I would just carve a cross on this stone. The holy sign can never come amiss.' 'I believe you think it will help you to win Rozennik,' laughed the old man.

Bernèz ceased his task for a moment to look at him.



'Ah, so you know about that,' replied he; 'unluckily Marzinne wants a brother-in-law who has more pounds than I have pence.'

'And suppose I were to give you more pounds than Marzinne ever dreamed of?' whispered the sorcerer, glancing round to make sure that no one overheard him. 'You?'

'Yes, I.'

'And what am I to do to gain the money,' inquired Bernèz, who knew quite well that the Breton peasant gives nothing for nothing.

'What I want of you only needs a little courage,' answered the old man.

'If that is all, tell me what I have got to do, and I will do it,' cried Bernèz, letting fall his chisel. 'If I have to risk thirty deaths, I am ready.'

When the beggar knew that Bernèz would give him no trouble, he told him how, during that very night, the treasures under the stones would be uncovered, and how in a very few minutes they could take enough to make them both rich for life. But he kept silence as to the fate that awaited the man who was without the crow'sfoot and the trefoil, and Bernèz thought that nothing but boldness and quickness were necessary. So he said:

'Old man, I am grateful, indeed, for the chance you have given me, and there will always be a pint of my blood at your service. Just let me finish carving this cross. It is nearly done, and I will join you in the fir wood at whatever hour you please.'

'You must be there without fail an hour before midnight,' answered the wizard, and went on his way. As the hour struck from the great church at Plouhinec, Bernèz entered the wood. He found the beggar already there with a bag in each hand, and a third slung round his neck.

'You are punctual,' said the old man, 'but we need not start just yet. You had better sit down and think what you will do when your pockets are filled with gold and silver and jewels.'

'Oh, it won't take me long to plan out that,' returned Bernèz with a laugh. 'I shall give Rozennik everything she can desire, dresses of all sorts, from cotton to silk, and good things of all kinds to eat, from white bread to oranges.'

'The silver you find will pay for all that, and what about the gold?'

'With the gold I shall make rich Rozennik's relations and every friend of hers in the parish,' replied he.

'So much for the gold; and the jewels?'

'Then,' cried Bernèz, 'I will divide the jewels amongst everybody in the world, so that they may be wealthy and happy; and I will tell them that it is Rozennik who would have it so.'

'Hush! it is close on midnight—we must go,' whispered the wizard, and together they crept to the edge of the wood.

With the first stroke of twelve a great noise arose over the silent heath, and the earth seemed to rock under the feet of the two watchers. The next moment by the

light of the moon they beheld the huge stones near them leave their places and go down the slope leading to the river, knocking against each other in their haste. Passing the spot where stood Bernèz and the beggar, they were lost in the darkness. It seemed as if a procession of giants had gone by.

'Quick,' said the wizard, in a low voice, and he rushed towards the empty holes, which even in the night shone brightly from the treasures within them. Flinging himself on his knees, the old man began filling the wallets he had brought, listening intently all the time for the return of the stones up the hill, while Bernèz more slowly put handfuls of all he could see into his pockets.

The sorcerer had just closed his third wallet, and was beginning to wonder if he could carry away any more treasures when a low murmur as of a distant storm broke upon his ears.

The stones had finished drinking, and were hastening back to their places.

On they came, bent a little forward, the tallest of them all at their head, breaking everything that stood in their way. At the sight Bernèz stood transfixed with horror, and said,

'We are lost! They will crush us to death.'

'Not me!' answered the sorcerer, holding up the crowfoot and the five-leaved trefoil, 'for these will preserve me. But in order to keep my riches, I was obliged to sacrifice a Christian to the stones, and an evil fate threw you in my way.' And as he spoke he

stretched out the magic herbs to the stones, which were advancing rapidly. As if acknowledging a power greater than theirs, the monstrous things instantly parted to the right and left of the wizard, but closed their ranks again as they approached Bernèz.

The young man did not try to escape, he knew it was useless, and sank on his knees and closed his eyes. But suddenly the tall stone that was leading stopped straight in front of Bernèz, so that no other could get past.

It was the stone on which Bernèz had carved the cross, and it was now a baptized stone, and had power to save him.

So the stone remained before the young man till the rest had taken their places, and then, darting like a bird to its own hole, came upon the beggar, who, thinking himself quite safe, was staggering along under the weight of his treasures.

Seeing the stone approaching, he held out the magic herbs which he carried, but the baptized stone was no longer subject to the spells that bound the rest, and passed straight on its way, leaving the wizard crushed into powder in the heather.

Then Bernèz went home, and showed his wealth to Marzinne, who this time did not refuse him as a brother-in-law, and he and Rozennik were married, and lived happy for ever after.