



AMEL AND PENHOR¹

IT is the common rumour, along this Breton coast, that when a north-east wind blows strongly across the bay of Saint-Malo, a sailor's eye may at times discern strange things between Mont Saint-Michel and the Isles of Chausey. Whole villages there have been covered by the waves, villages with their cottages and church-spire. These villages are Bougneuf, Tommen, Saint-Etienne-en-Paluel, Saint-Louis, Mauny, Epiniac, la Feillette, and many others. The gaunt ruins of these submerged hamlets lie in the sand, with fragments of wrecks, and great trunks of the forest of Scissy.

A pitiless strife has raged for centuries between the ocean and the poor land of Brittany. The conquering ocean sleeps peacefully now on the field of battle.

It is not tradition only which has preserved the memory of those deadly combats. Family and monastic records, town archives, dusty papers of notaries, all contain a number of authentic titles to those lost estates, those submerged corn-fields. The homeless man, who to-day wanders over the Breton roads with stick and wallet, may be heir to princely domains beneath these silent waters. These lost castles may be his, these meadows and forests, these mills which hummed on the

¹ After the Breton legend as narrated by Paul Féval.

river banks; his, too, the peaceful huts whose rising smoke was wont to cheer from afar the weary traveller. Ships, with sails unfurled, now pass a hundred feet above the once hospitable dwellings. The sea, as that other dread leveller, Death, has spread itself over manor and cottage, over oak and reed.

This ever-present, this sad and prophetic Menace of the Past is apt to daunt even the strongest and most indefatigable man with the futility of his labour. Great jest of the jests of centuries, that discloses the shroud as the first and last expression of a dreamed-of equality!

All along the coast from Granville to Cape Frehel, near Saint-Malo, this conquering sea has covered the once fertile fields with barren sand. Here and there, a rock raises its black head above the waves. This may preserve its ancient name of fief, of castle, or of village; for the earth has bones, and even a mountain leaves behind it a skeleton of stone. The fishers of Dinard cast their nets over the fair meadows of Césambre: and the Grand-Bé, that sombre spot where Chateaubriand wished to have his tomb, was once the centre of a glorious garden.

How long the sea took to conquer this land none can tell. The strife began before the Christian era. It is known that druidical woods stretched for eight or ten miles beyond the present coast line. Later, the forest of Scissy planted its vanguard oaks on the rocks of Chausey.

At that time Couesnon was a big river which Ptolemy and Ammianus Marcellinus confounded with the Seine. A proud river it was, sovereign of the Selune, and lord of the See, which brought to it the tribute of their waters. It flowed oceanward beyond the hills of Chausey, which now form an archipelago; and, at that remote date, its course was by the right of Mont Saint-Michel, along the coast of La Manche. It was long after this that the Couesnon doubled upon itself. Thereafter it flowed to the left of the Mount, thus taking it from Brittany to give it to Normandy.

Li Couesnon à fait folie ;
Si est le Mont en Normandie. . . .

The Breton legend of the Great Flood which brought about that severance, the Deluge as it is called in Armoricq, runs thus:—

Penhor, the daughter of Bud, was the wife of Amel, who tended the flocks of Annan. This great seigneur was lord and count of Chezé, beyond Mont Trombelène. His castle stood in the midst of seven villages, which paid tribute when he sent out his men to war. One of these villages was called Saint-Vinol: and it was here Amel and Penhor dwelt.

Penhor was eighteen years old, Amel was almost twenty-five. Their parents were dead, and they loved one another with the great love of orphans. Amel's wife was beautiful as a sun-beam in spring. Her hair fell as a mantle around her. Her eyes pierced to the depths of the heart. He himself was tall and strong, and his limbs were supple.

In these days there were striped wolves which were bigger than foals six months old. They killed horses, and drank the blood of sleeping cattle; and they disdained to flee at the approach of man. It was said of them that an arrow could not pierce their skin: that, if struck by a spear, it snapped in the hand. Nevertheless, Amel set himself to cope with this terror. Thus it was that, one winter night, when the striped wolf of Chezé left the forest in search of food, Penhor's husband crouched on the plain to intercept him.

And the end was this: Amel seized the striped wolf in his strong arms, and strangled it. And that is a true thing of Amel that was so strong and supple, and was, indeed, a youth both of might and valour.

But before he had set out to await the wolf, Amel had hung in the village church of Saint-Vinol, under the niche from which the good Virgin smiled, a distaff of fine linen, prepared by the fair hands of Penhor.

The Virgin of Saint-Vinol was rich. Year after year offerings were placed at her feet; for the country people thought to expiate their sins with gifts of linen, or of sheaves of corn, or of fair ripe fruits. God knows if these simple people had sins for which to atone!

Amel and Penhor lived in joy, for they were young and they loved. One shadow, however, dusked their sunshine at times. That they had no children: this was their one regret. Thus it was that Penhor was sad when she remained alone in her hut, while Amel guarded his flocks.

She said to herself, one day when the weariness was upon her, as the shadow of autumn upon the sunlit woods of July: 'Ah, Madone, if only I had a beautiful child on my knee, the living image of his father, then, true, it is with a singing at my heart I would await each day the home-coming of Amel.'

As for Amel, this is what he said to himself: 'Ah, Madone, if Penhor gave me a beautiful child, the living image of herself, what joy, what happiness!'

Ah, they were good Christians, these: and as for their innocent sins, for sure they did not add greatly to those of the people of Saint-Vinol!

'Penhor, my wife,' said Amel one day, 'weave a veil for the holy Mary, Mother of God, and perhaps a child will be given to us.'

So, in due time, Penhor wove a veil for the holy Mary, Mother of God; a beautiful veil, white as snow, and more delicate than the tender mist of an August evening.

The Mother of God was well pleased. Amel and Penhor had a child. They loved one another all the more tenderly as they bent over its little cradle.

The child was nine days old, when Amel took the cradle in his arms, and so carried the infant to baptism. After the baptism, Penhor lifted the cradle and carried it round the church to the altar of the Virgin.

'Mary, oh, holy Mary!' said she, kneeling before the Mother of God, 'to you I consecrate the child which you have given to

us. He shall be yours, and grow up dedicated to your divine colour. Look at him, holy Mary; he is called Raoul as was his father's father. See him, that you may know him in the day of peril.'

Thereat Amel, assenting, cried, 'So be it.'

Mary's colour is the blue of the sky. Therefore it was that the child, Raoul, was thenceforth robed in the holy blue. He was beautiful, with the fair hair of his mother and the dark eyes of Amel, the brave herdsman.

Then the sorrow of the sorrows came.

No man can tell if it was because of some great sin among the people of Saint-Vinol, or but the wise wisdom of God, that one night—O Mary! a night of terror!—the waters of the Couesnon rose rapidly.

The wind blew from the north-east, the rain fell in torrents, the earth shook. In a brief while the plain was covered with water. When morning broke, the people saw that it was not the Couesnon only which had overflowed; it was the sea, which had destroyed all the barriers, even those raised by the hand of God Himself.

The flood came on, dark, raging, a creature of the night, full of awe and terror, bearing on its surface uprooted trees and the bodies of dead animals.

To the church of Saint-Vinol, which stood on a height, the bewildered villagers fled affrighted. All save two: for when Amel and Penhor hastened thither with their child the church was full, and they were forced to remain at the door, with the roaring rush of the deluge in their ears, like the baying of a bloodhound.

The waters rose and rose. When the lips of the flood licked their feet, Amel took his wife in his arms. Soon the waters reached his waist. Then he said: 'Farewell, my beloved wife. I will uphold you. Perhaps the deluge will be stayed. If I die, and you are saved, it is well.'

Penhor obeyed. Still the dark flood of the waters rose. When it reached her breast, she lifted the little Raoul, and said:

'Farewell, my darling child. I will uphold you. Perhaps the waters will be stayed. If I die, and you are saved, it is well.' With the child it was in turn as with his mother when Amel had whispered to her.

Still the waters rose.

Soon nothing was visible above the angry waves, save the fair head of little Raoul, and a fold of his blue frock which fluttered in the wind.

It was at this moment that the Virgin left her niche in the church of Saint-Vinol to fly heavenward. In her hands she carried all her offerings.

As she passed above the churchyard she saw the fair head of little Raoul and the fluttering fold of pale blue.

Hereat the Virgin paused in her flight, and said: 'This child is mine. I will carry him to God.' With that she put the softness of her hand about his fair hair. But the child was heavy, very heavy for such a little fellow. One by one the holy Virgin had to relinquish her cherished offerings.

When she had thrown them all aside—the linen, the flowers, and the ripe fruits—she was able to raise him. Then it was she saw why little Raoul was so heavy.

His mother held him in her stiffened arms.

In his stiffened arms, in turn, the father upheld the mother.

How blessed is love washed in the blood of kindred! The Virgin smiled. She said: 'They loved one another well.' But when she smiled, the darkness of death went from them, and they awoke.

Thus it was that Mary carried three happy souls up to heaven; the father with the mother, the mother with the child.

This story is told in the evening watches between Saint-Georges and Cherrueix.

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