

The Courting of François Thebautier



IT WAS a dreary afternoon in early November. The trees stood bleak along the road, with a few withered leaves still clinging to their bare branches. The road was muddy. There were two yellow streaks of clay where wheels had gone, and between them a rough, trampled ridge where horses had put their hoofs. Pools of water glistened here and there in the gray light. A fine rain was falling.

Along this muddy road in the drizzle plodded François Thebautier. His shabby coat was buttoned close to his body, his collar was turned up, and his blue tasseled cap was pulled down over his ears. Now and then he stopped and balanced himself on one foot as he leaned over to pick up his wooden shoe, which had stuck fast in the mire. This act was repeated often, and François grew tired of it. Besides, it was getting late. So he walked over to the edge of the road, where the brown grass, covered with wet, black leaves, gave him a firmer footing. Here he walked briskly. In his hand he carried a pair of fat white geese, tied together by the legs, and once in a while uttering a disconsolate protest. In the heart of François was joy and trembling, for he was going to the Pierrot farm on an errand of the heart.

Fidèle Pierrot was not much of a beauty. She was big and strapping, her hands were large and red, and her face was fat. Besides, she was loud and raucous; but François did not know that, and if he had known it would not have cared; he was loud and raucous himself. What he did know was that Father Pierrot raised good crops of barley, and that Fidèle had sparkling eyes and a gay laugh. And he was carrying the geese to her for a gift.

As the young man neared the house his heart started a pit-a-pat that made him uncomfortable; but he was a brave youth, and he walked up to the cottage. When he knocked on the door he heard shouts of men's laughter within, and had to knock again. In response to the second rap came the voice of Pierrot bidding him enter. He pushed in through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Ah! It is Thebautier. Come in! Going to the market, I see. Rather late for that, I should think. You know Bartholdi, don't you? Fidèle, another glass for Thebautier!" And the little old man plunged into a wave of volubility as he poured out the wine for the guest and handed it to him. "We are making merry, you see. Drink!"

And François drank. He was too much taken aback with his reception to make his little offering; and now in the presence of Bartholdi he was afraid. He sat down and put his burden on the floor beside him. He thought he would wait till Bartholdi went away. Perhaps the old man would go away, too, to look at the cows and he could be alone with Fidèle. Then he could give her the fowl. Or perhaps, when the milking time came, he could feign that he had to go, and on this pretext could follow her to the cowshed. Yes, that was better. He would wait.