

THE VIRGIN WITHOUT A FACE

I

THIS is the story that I have been told of the ruined chapel in the Bois-Marie.

When the sun sets peacefully behind clouds, there comes an hour of hushed stillness. And on the edge of the Bois-Marie, where there were no trees, but only broken ground, tangled with bramble and bracken and dappled with hollows where the rain lay, the quietness of all the world seemed to gather and brood.

It was a high place, lifted up on the cliffs that stood with their feet in the water, and little was visible that was not sky or sea of the nearer land rising and falling as it travelled into the distance. There were no houses, no ploughed fields, no trimness of man's work. There was only the high breast of the earth, pale and clear and quiet; the grey sea, the luminous grey sky, and the grey hush that followed the sunset.

II

Presently there came into the silence a small sound, clear and persistent, the tinkling of a little bell. There was also the nearing tread of feet; and along the rough path between the brambles and the thorns, between the tiny scud of lizards and sheltering birds and the plash of frogs leaping back into the water-holes, there came walking fast with a busy accustomed speed a priest and a child. Black and white against the grey, with the tinkle of the bell and the flicker of the taper in the silver lanthorn, breaking the silence and yet making part of it, they passed quickly but with something of the soft hush that lay on the hour, as if they, too, were heralds of night.

The boy looked from side to side, remembering summer afternoons when the sun shone and autumn

The Virgin Without a Face

mornings when the nuts were ripe; he swung the lanthorn cheerfully and jangled the bell with a young satisfaction in the noise. His pink stockings and black sabots clumped along busily under the cassock that flapped about his ankles; there was no thought in the face, only a rosy unintelligent good-nature. Soon they would be there, and he could take off his cassock and cotta and put out the light in the lanthorn and run home; or no, on second thoughts, seeing that, as everyone knew, the Virgin Without a Face came out of her chapel and walked in the Bois-Marie when it grew dark, he would wait for M. le Curé. And M. le Curé wouldn't be kept long, for probably old *Mère Gauvec* would be dead by the time they reached her; and he jangled the bell cheerfully and looked about him—though with decorum, since M. le Curé was close behind.

And M. le Curé, with bent head and hands folded over his breast, his face as immobile as if carved in wood, followed him without pause and yet without hurry.

III

The path led to the western edge of the Bois-Marie where the trees, at first scattered, soon gathered thickly and spread a deep shadow; overhead the sky was still light, but underfoot the darkness lay heavily on the withered leaves. Here the silence drew closer. There were whispering sighs in it and small furtive rustlings; birds moved among the branches, unseen small creatures stirred softly, yet the wood seemed already to be filled with sleep.

And athwart it, through it, with the tinkle of the bell and the flicker of the taper in the lanthorn, the priest and the boy went always deeper into the shadow, M. le Curé with his hands folded over his breast and the child trotting ahead—graver now that the dusk

Blackfriars

grew deeper, but with a delicious excitement in his eyes, the enjoyment of fear.

He glanced nervously into the darkness that gathered about him. They were almost there, and soon they would be going home again and he would run so as to keep up with M. le Curé—for he wouldn't let himself fall behind, oh *nenni!* If it had only been *le petit abbé*, one could have held on to his *soutane*; but M. le Curé that was different. Surely that was a rabbit that ran by, though it looked so dark? So long as it wasn't a black hare—anyway, old *Mère Gauvec* couldn't be long in dying, even if she wasn't dead already; and that was a good thing, for everyone knew that the Bois-Marie wasn't a place to be in, once it was dark. Why was that bush waving, waving, like that? And what was that tap, tap, tap, like a lot of little feet following? And there was still the chapel to pass, the chapel of the Virgin Without a Face what was it *Grand' mère* said of her? He would be glad when they had passed the chapel He would try and remember what *Grand' mère* had said

IV

' Listen then and I'll tell you of the stone Virgin, the Virgin Without a Face, in the Bois-Marie. But you had best keep away from that chapel, d'you hear?—for 't isn't a good place. It is old, old, older than anything else in the world, and I've heard from my grandmother and she from hers that it was there when the world began, and before ever *l'Enfant Jésus* came to Brittany. There's some say the Virgin was put into it when the Bad Ones were driven out; and there's others say she was there before that and that's why she has no face; and that she's not good at all, but bad, bad, of the ancient badness, of the time before time was. One doesn't know But anyway it's

The Virgin Without a Face

better to be on the safe side, and a bunch of flowers and a penny or so, to keep her in a good temper, and no need to tell M. le Curé But all the same at night when she walks, well—it's better not to be in the Bois-Marie then, take my word for it!

'There was Marie-*la-tordue* came through the wood one night as straight and as pretty a girl as anyone could see; and when they found her in the morning in the quarry-hole she could say nothing but "The stones! the stones are after me—" and look at her now, twisted and mis-shapen as a changeling. Ah, the Virgin Without a Face knows how that came about, none better! And I've heard other stories too And since then, well, as I was saying, it's good to be on the safe side, and a penny or two, or perhaps a prayer—I'm not saying what sort of prayer, that's as may be—and keep out of the Bois-Marie by night and all's well. And she can grant one's prayer, too; that is, if she's pleased and one says the right thing. I know, because—but that's neither here nor there.

'And who gets the pennies? Ah, the Virgin Without a Face knows how to guard her own, and the money-box in the chapel is as safe as if it was behind iron bars. If anyone tried to steal it—well, I tell you she'd see to that.

'So keep you clear of the Bois-Marie at nightfall, for good as she is or bad as she is—*Grand'mère* isn't saying which—it's safer to be friend by day and stranger by night to the Virgin Without a Face!'

V

Yes, Jeannot remembered. And it was growing so dark! Perhaps M. le Curé and *le bon Dieu* being there would make it safe, one couldn't be sure

He looked with big eyes into the thick shadows on either side, he listened with straining ears to the small sounds about him as he trotted along; the cracking of

Blackfriars

twigs under his sabots, the rustle of dry leaves, and all the little whispers that were—he couldn't tell what, and the comforting tread of M. le Curé's feet behind him. M. le Curé and *le bon Dieu* Jeannot hoped that together they were as strong as the Old Bad Things.

And then the path turned the corner and they were in the open space where the chapel stood; and the bell jangled harshly as it fell to the ground and the boy, screaming, flung himself back on the priest that followed him.

'Oh, oh, oh! *Jésus, Marie, Joseph, priez p'nous nunc et in hora mortis délivrez-nous du mal*' Shrieking, sobbing, stammering and trying to pray, he clutched the cassock of M. le Curé, hiding his face in its folds; pressing up against him to feel the warmth of his body and the nearness of something alive, human, wholesome, after That.

The priest had moved one hand from his breast to catch the lanthorn as it fell from the child's hand; and now he stood looking down at what lay at his feet across the path, looking down upon it with a passive scrutiny that left his face unmoved in its still gravity, merely regardant. He did not stoop to that which lay at his feet; he only looked at it intently, carefully. He stood for a while with his hand on his breast and his head bent, looking.

Then he glanced down, as if suddenly aware, upon the child that clung to him; and putting the lanthorn back into his unwilling fingers, laid a hand upon his shoulder. All the *enfants de chœur* knew the feeling of M. le Curé's hand, and they knew that it had to be obeyed. Jeannot felt himself pressed forward by that authoritative touch, and he submitted to it, trembling, sobbing, stumbling, but obedient; under the influence of its pressure he picked up the bell, and faced towards the path and that which lay on it. He tried to

The Virgin Without a Face

look away, but took little glances out of half-shut eyes, horrified yet curious, with the first agony of fear passing into intense and quivering interest. His terror had become almost delightful, and he looked sideways again and again, greedily yet with his heart in his mouth. If M. le Curé's hand had not been so heavy on his shoulder he would have gone nearer.

'*Ora pro nobis, peccatoribus*—' murmured the priest in the monotone of habit; and without haste as without hesitation, with the same swift sureness of a man about his accustomed business, he guided the boy round—on to the path again beyond—and released him with a little authoritative push. As if there had been no pause on the way the priest and the child, the flicker of the lanthorn and the tinkle of the bell, passed into the further shadows.

Again the silence gathered under the trees full of the small whispering noises of the night, and closed in round the ancient chapel. Closed in, too, round that which lay on the path at the foot of the chapel step; and round the rude stone shape that seemed to have flung itself down upon it as if in some deadly struggle. Closed in round a hand thrown open to the sky, on which still lay a few pennies.

The Virgin Without a Face, bad or good, knew how to keep her own.

VI

When they went in the morning and lifted the stone figure from off that which lay below, they say she was smiling—smiling horribly—though she has no face at all. And they put her back into the old chapel, turning what ought to have been her face against the wall, as she has stood ever since; and no one has had the courage to look to see if she is smiling still. For they had seen it once . . . and that was enough.

M. C. BALFOUR.