

THE SOLDIER'S RETURN By Melanie Waldor 1863

Translated and adapted by Frank J. Morlock C 2003

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Etext by Dagny

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CHARACTERS:

JACQUES, an old soldier of the Empire, decorated with the Medal of Saint Helena

KERVELAC, a sergeant-major of the first Zouaves

PETIT-JEAN, a rich farmer in love with Yvonne

YVONNE:, Jacques's niece and fiancée of Kervalec

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The action takes place in Brittany, in the courtyard of a farm, by the Quimper.

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Yvonne is seated at a bench with a spinning wheel in front of her.

PETIT-JEAN: (in farm-worker's clothes) Hello, Miss Yvonne.

YVONNE: Good evening, Petit-Jean.

PETIT-JEAN: What do you mean, good evening! (pulling his silver fob watch from his vest) It's not yet noon!

YVONNE: It means that when you come it's always time for you to leave.

PETIT-JEAN: Papa always told me: Have no fear! When a pretty girl pesters you, it's proof that she likes you a lot, because you've got money, my little Jean. And he laughed, he laughed, poor dear soul! Don't you go working like that, Miss; I have a big chest full of drapes.

YVONNE: Why don't you use them like other people?

PETIT-JEAN: Ah! There-you-go! You don't get it. It's a subterfuge, a trick! 'Cause I love you! I am not what I seem.

YVONNE: Well! Truly, that's so much the worse for you. (singing)

Beauty and the Beast is a story
That the sight of you makes me believe in.
With what charm they recount
The sad fate of a Prince!
His misfortune was cruel:
You remind me of him, feature for feature.
But, in the end, in the eyes of the beauty
He revealed himself for what he was.
Do like him. I wish
An end for your enchantment.

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Give up the role of the beast
For that of Prince Charming.

PETIT-JEAN: (giving her a poke) Naughty!

YVONNE: No paws—and none of your claws.

PETIT-JEAN: You give me my dismissal like a servant.

YVONNE: Would you be a great lord, perchance?

PETIT-JEAN: Not at all. But you see, in proper person, the son of a rich farmer, whose animals are crowned in the course of agriculture, even our last sow brought back a prize, an enormous price! Well, I place at your feet my hand and all my animals, since my late father is dead.

YVONNE: I refuse you, you and your animals.

PETIT-JEAN: I'm throwing myself at your knees.

JACQUES: (entering, to Petit-Jean) What are you doing there?

PETIT-JEAN: I'm trying to soften up your niece, I want to marry her.

JACQUES: (scornfully) And who might you be, little wretch?

PETIT-JEAN: The son of Blaizier by Quimperle.

JACQUES: (presenting him a stool) Give yourself the trouble of having a seat.

PETIT-JEAN: Oh! I know quite well—

JACQUES: What do you know?

PETIT-JEAN: That you will accept me for your nephew.

JACQUES: On the contrary, I'm kicking you out! Yvonne is promised to Kervalec, a brave soldier, who made campaigns in the Crimea and Italy.

PETIT-JEAN: Why, he's in Mexico—

YVONNE: He'll come back from there.

PETIT-JEAN: He doesn't have a sou.

JACQUES: He has glory!

YVONNE: And two good arms to work. (aside) If God keeps him for me. (she dries a tear.)

PETIT-JEAN: (to Jacques) You are poor as Job and you served!

JACQUES: Come on, enough discussion. If France rewarded all its braves with gold, the mines of Peru wouldn't suffice! Does one think of money when one serves one's country? Does one think of one's flesh when it's a question of saving one's country from shame or slavery? Go take a bit of a look at what's happening in Poland!

PETIT-JEAN: Hum! I prefer to remain in Quimperle.

JACQUES: And you have the face to come ask me for my niece in marriage, me, one of the oldest of the old, a medal from Saint Helena, to me who fought in Egypt, in Prussia, in Russia, and who saw the great man, (he removes his hat) face to face, just like I see you! Eh! When I think that by an act of Providence this great name which filled the universe, has returned acclaimed by all the people, and that I can again shout: Long live the Emperor! Ah! I say—I say that I've lived enough!

PETIT-JEAN: That's amusing! That makes me do something— (singing)

Yes, my heart beats, I feel brave

Brave for the first time;

I wasn't doing anything with my hands

And I was a slave to my pigs.

I saw only them, I saw only myself,

And the money that each gave.

It's bad to think of oneself.

For loving you, Miss,

That was still thinking of myself. (repeat) (throwing his hat in the air) Long live the Emperor.

YVONNE: Oh! In Brittany we really love Napoleon III; he's been so good for us and so brave! I still see the quarries at Angers. I was with my godmother then. They told him: Don't go that way! and he went even faster! He was surrounded by men almost savage! Well, they all offered him their hand, and I saw who was weeping!

JACQUES: Say damn! They felt that he went to them with the heart of a father, to love them, to console them.

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(The noise of petards.)

PETIT-JEAN: Heavens! They're shooting off petards!

JACQUES: I really think they're shooting them off. Isn't today the 15th of August? Is there in France one town, one village, one hamlet, where they're not yelling today: Long live the Emperor?

YVONNE: And here I was forgetting this day of celebration! I was thinking too much of Kervalec.

PETIT-JEAN: (with irony) You think of Kervalec. (sings)

If you often see by a pretty belle,
A proud soldier promising to be faithful,
And forgetting the next moment,
That soldier—he's French. (repeat)

JACQUES: (pulling him by the ear) How about shutting up, good for nothing. (singing)

If you see a soldier full of audacity
Extend his hand to give mercy to a vanquished
Without getting puffed up with success
That soldier—he's French. (repeat)

YVONNE: (singing)

If you see a soldier praying and
Kissing the cross his mother sent him
Later fighting like a lion
That soldier—he's French. (repeat)

(The noise of drums is heard.)

PETIT-JEAN (aside) I left Quimperle without saying anything! Are they advertising for me?

(Rifle shots are heard.)

JACQUES: Ah! That fine noise! It reminds me of the salvos of artillery when I was a cannoneer.

(The whole village enters, drum at the head. Kervalec, dressed as a sergeant-major of Zouaves, with the cross of honor is in the midst of a group of peasant girls holding branches of leaves.)

YVONNE: (noticing him) Kervalec!

(Yvonne staggers; Petit-Jean wants to support her but she repulses him and rushes into the arms of Kervalec.)

JACQUES: (to Petit-Jean) See what would have happened to you if you had married her.

PETIT-JEAN: (scratching his ear) Better to happen before than after.

YVONNE: (to Petit-Jean) Sing that song again that you were singing just now.

PETIT-JEAN: Since he's returned?

YVONNE: Are you afraid?

PETIT-JEAN: Me, afraid of ghosts!

YVONNE: Then sing!

PETIT-JEAN: (in a voice not very assured) (singing)

If you—often—see by a pretty belle
A proud soldier—swearing—to be faithful
And forgetting it—the next moment
That soldier—he's French,
That soldier—he's—

KERVALEC: (interrupting him) If you had mustaches, little boy, I would teach you another song, meanwhile, listen to this: (singing)

If you see, full of faith
Somewhere at the other end of the world
A soldier certain of success
That soldier—he's French! (repeat)
(The chorus repeats the couplet.)

KERVALEC: (to Yvonne) You knew quite well I would return; see, I have the cross! Almost an officer's epaulette, and in passing through Paris, I saw the Emperor!

ALL: He saw the Emperor!

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KERVALEC: And the Empress and the little one! And here's what I am bringing on their behalf.

(Kervalec pulls a gold cross and earrings in gold from a jewel case.)

YVONNE: (joining her hands) God, is it really possible!

(Yvonne puts on the earrings and Kervalec attaches the gold cross to her and kisses her.)

JACQUES: And they are remembered by Yvonne!

KERVALEC: My colonel brought me the order today. The Emperor wanted to know why I was returning to the village when I was on my way to becoming general.

JACQUES: (with pride) It's just like under his uncle; today the lowest of the low can become the greatest!

KERVALEC: (to Yvonne) And when the Emperor learned that it was to marry you, he made me deliver through his son—(turning towards the peasants) Do you hear, through his son—500 francs in gold for the wedding, and a jewel box for the bride. The Empress remembered that you offered her a bouquet when she passed through Quimperle.

(CANTATA)

YVONNE: Brittany's always thinking

Of the Empress Eugenie.

In the hovel she is blessed.

May God give her long life!

Lovable and beautiful like his mother

The young son of the Emperor

Already, they say, takes after his father.

The wit, the calm, the sweetness!

He knows that France and glory

Are only safe under Napoleon.

He knows that this name from history

Is the greatest name today.

CHORUS: He knows that France and glory

Are only safe under Napoleon.

He knows that this name from history

Is the greatest name today.

KERVALEC: Nothing in France degenerates

The bee's worth more than the fleur de lys.

The son is worthy of his father.

And Solferino is worthy of Austerlitz.

From the dusty deserts of Africa

Where my feet never trembled

I took my turn in Mexico

And set up my tent in Puebla!

The enemy so full of arrogance

Fled before our flag.

And left in French hands

The silver keys of Mexico!

REFRAIN OF THE CHORUS

JACQUES: Memories of the first Empire,

You remain graven in my heart.

Once more I see in my delirium

The ghost of the Emperor.

His eye commands victory.

His cannons trace furrows

And all the reflections of his glory

Illuminate his battalions.

But in the soldiers of the Crimea

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And Mexico's fiery skies
I see again the Grand Armee.
The Uncle lives again in the nephew.

REFRAIN OF THE CHORUS

PETIT-JEAN: I guess I haven't got the figure
Of a grenadier or cavalry hussar.
But I think that in battle
At least I'll show some valor.
Very often a soul inured to war
Inhabits a very thin body.
I love the Emperor, my country
I will never betray 'em.
If I can't get myself enlisted
As a regimental officer
I will be a border patrolman
To serve the government.

REFRAIN OF THE CHORUS

KERVALEC: When our eagle spreads his wings
It's to achieve a noble end.
To his almost immortal valor
Italy owes its salvation.
He protects, in his glory everywhere
The cause of suffering nations.
Also God by a victory
Marks each of his flights.
Yes, it's God who always inspires him.
Much later the universe will see
One of his feathers used to write
The history of a new Caesar.

REFRAIN OF THE CHORUS AND GENERAL RONDELAY.

CURTAIN