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The Cripple

By MAURICE LEVEL

A grim, tragic story about a French peasant who stood helpless while a girl died for lack of his aid

BECAUSE he knew good manners, and although there was no one present but Farmer Galot, Trache said on entering:

"Good day, gentlemen!"

"You again!" growled Galot, without turning round.

"To be sure," replied Trache.

He raised his two maimed hands, as if explaining, by their very appearance, his instructions.

Two years ago, in harvest-time, a threshing-machine had caught him up and, by a miracle, dashed him to the ground again instead of crushing him to death. They had borne him off, covered with blood, shrieking, with arms mangled, a rib smashed in, and spitting out his teeth. There remained from the accident a certain dullness of intellect, short breath, a whistling sound which seemed to grope for words at the bottom of his chest, scrape them out of his throat and jumble them up as they passed his bare gums, and a pair of crooked hands which he held out before him in an awkward and apprehensive manner.

"Well, what is it you want?" snapped Galot.

"My compensation money," answered Trache with a weak smile.

"Compensation money! I haven't owed you anything for a long time. There's nothing the matter with you now but laziness and a bad disposition. To begin with, you were drunk when the thing happened. I needn't have given you anything."

"I was *not* drunk," said Trache quietly. The farmer lost all patience.

"At this moment you can use your hands as well as anybody. You keep up the sham before people, but when you are alone you do what you like with them."

"I don't move them then; I can't," mumbled Trache.

"I tell you, you are an impostor, a trickster, a rascal; I say that you are fleecing me because I have not been firmer with you, that you are making a little fortune out of my money, but that you shall not have another cent. There, that's final. Do you understand?"

"Yes, from your point of view," assented Trache without moving.

Galot flung his cap on the table and began to pace the room with long strides.

Trache shook his head and hunched up his shoulders. At last Galot squared up before him.

"How much do you want to settle for good and all? Suppose we say five hundred francs and make an end of it?"

"I want what is due to me according to the judgment of the court."

Galot became transported with rage:

"Ne'er-do-well, lazy-bones, good-for-nothing; I know what you told the court through the mouth of your doctor, and why you would not let mine examine you."

"It was upon the sworn evidence of the doctors that the case was decided," observed the cripple.

"Ah, it isn't they who have to pay!"

sneered Galot. "Let me see your hands. . . . Let me look, I say: I know something about injuries."

Trache stretched out his arms and presented the wrists. Galot took them between his heavy hands, turned them over, turned them back, feeling the bones and the fleshy parts, as he would have done with cattle at a fair. Now and then Trache made a wry face and drew back his shoulder. At last Galot pushed him away with brutal force.

"You are artful, cunning. But look out for yourself: I am keeping my eye on you, and when I have found you out, look out for yourself! You will end by laughing on the other side of your face, and to get your living you will have to work—you hear what I say?—to work."

"I should like nothing better," sighed the cripple.

Pale with wrath, Galot emptied a purse of silver money on the table, counted it and pushed it toward him.

"There's your money; now be off."

"If you would be so good as to put it in my blouse," suggested Trache, "seeing that I can't do it myself. . . ."

Then he said, as on entering: "Good day, gentlemen," and with stuffed pocket, shaking head and unsteady step, he took his departure.

TO RETURN to his lodging he had to pass along the riverside. In the fields the patient oxen trudged on their way. Laborers were binding the sheaves amid the shocks of corn; and across the flickering haze of the sultry air the barking of dogs came with softened intonation.

Near a bend of the river, where it deepened into a little pool, a woman was washing linen. The water ran at her feet, flecked with foam and in places clouded with a pearly tint.

"Well, are things going as you wish, Françoise?" asked Trache.

"Oh, well enough," said she. "And you?"

"The same as usual . . . with my miserable hands."

He sighed, and the coins jingled under his blouse. Françoise winked at him.

"All the same it isn't so bad—what the threshing-machine has done for you, eh? . . . And then, to be sure, it's only right; Galot can well afford to pay."

"If I wasn't crippled for life, I wouldn't ask for anything."

Thereupon she began to laugh, with shoulders raised and mallet held aloft. She was a handsome girl, and even a good girl, and more than once he had talked to her in the meadow, but now he reddened with anger.

"What is the matter with you all—dropping hints and poking your fun at me?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"If I gossip it's only for the fun of gossiping."

He sat down near her, mollified, and listened as she beat her linen. Then, wanting to smoke, and unable to use his helpless hands, he asked her:

"Would you mind getting my pouch out of my pocket and filling my pipe for me?"

She wiped her hands on her apron, searched in his blouse, filled his pipe, struck a match and, shielding it with her hand, said jokingly:

"You're lucky in meeting me."

He bent forward to light his pipe. At the same moment she slipped on the bank, lost a sabot, threw up her arms and fell backward into the water.

Seeing her fall, Trache sprang up. She had sunk immediately, dragging her wash-tub after her, in a place where the water was deep and encumbered with

weeds. Then her head reappeared, stretched out into the air, and she cried, already half choking:

"Your hand! Your hand!"

Trache stopped short, his pipe shaking in the corner of his mouth. Shriller, more despairingly came the cry:

"Your hand; I'm drowning. . . . Help! . . ."

Some men in a neighboring field were running. But they were at a great distance, and could only be seen as shadows moving over the corn.

Françoise sank again, rose, sank, rose once more. No sound came from her lips now: her face was terrible in its agony of supplication. Then she sank finally; the weeds, scattered in all directions, closed up again; their tangled network lay placid as before under the current. And that was all.

IT WAS only after an hour's search that the body was found, enmeshed in the

river growth, the clothes floating over the head. Trache stamped on the ground.

"I, a man, and powerless to do anything! . . . Curses, curses on my miserable hands!"

They tried to calm him as they consoled with him on his wretched lot, accompanying him to his cottage in their desire to soothe. Seeing him approach in this way, his wife uttered a piercing cry. What new disaster had befallen her husband? . . . They told her of the catastrophe, and of his anguish at not being able to save Françoise, whereupon she joined her lamentations to his.

But when they were alone behind closed doors, taking off his hat with a brisk movement, Trache rubbed his benumbed hands, stretched out his fingers, worked his joints, drew forth his pouch full of coins, flung it on the table and said:

"No, damn it. A fine business if I had given her my hand and she had gone and chattered to Galot! . . . No! damn it. . . ."