



### TELEN RUMENGOL<sup>1</sup>

*'Le paradis ne se gagne qu'aux pieds des saints de son pays.'*

**P**EACE reigned in the forest of Rumengol. Thither it was that Gralon, King of Ys, had fled, with the words of Primel, the anchorite, in his ears:—'My son, when thy heart is heavy with secret sorrow, take refuge in the eternal solitudes. The forests are tender to suffering man. God has made those sacred aisles the sanctuaries of peace: therein the harmony of the world is revealed.'

When the King of Cornouailles reached the spot where the Druids worshipped, the place of the menhir, the stone of healing, a vision of the Virgin came upon him:—'Mother of Sorrows,' said Gralon, 'if the good God grant me length of days, here on this spot will I build Thee a temple which shall stand for all time: its columns shall be numberless as the trees of the forest, and the eternal silence of the woods shall reign there.' But the King of Cornouailles had not the years for the fulfilling of that vow. Even as he spoke, the green moss was rest to him, and the gold-brown leaves that fell gently were stirred by the soft wings of death.

The Virgin greeted the weary old man as he crossed the threshold of paradise. Smiling graciously, she gave him

<sup>1</sup> 'Telen Rumengol' means literally 'The Harp of Rumengol,' and by extension the 'Pardon des Chanteurs.' This sketch of a Summer Pardon is adapted from a recent book on the Country of the Pardons, by the distinguished Breton writer, M. Anatole Le Braz.

thanks for the beautiful sanctuary which he had dedicated to her in the forest of Rumengol.

'If thou desirest aught of me,' said the Mother of God, 'joyfully will I hearken unto thee.'

'Alas!' replied the old king, 'my daughter Ahès dwells beneath the black waters which robbed me of my royal city of Ys; her soft voice calls men to their undoing; on moon-clear nights her fair form is seen on the crest of the waves.'

The Virgin bowed her head.

'Canst thou, O Holy Mary, still that voice which lures men to their doom, and brings down on Ahès, my beloved, the curses of the people?'

'That lies not within my power, O Gralon. So it is ordained. But hearken unto me. A race of singers shall arise, whose songs shall be sweet as the songs of the siren. In rhythmic words shall their thoughts be clothed. They shall soothe the sorrows which Ahès has caused; they shall give peace to the souls whom she has filled with dread. Each year, at the return of the month of May, which is my month, they shall flock to my Pardon at Rumengol. There, as from an inexhaustible spring, shall flow the inspiration of all the sweet songs and airs, the gwerz and sones, of the land of Arvor. From Rumengol my minstrels shall wander far and wide, and sing the strength of the men of Armorica, the beauty of her daughters, the heroic deeds of the fathers of the race, and thy renown, O Gralon! Field and plain, threshing-floor and village-green, shall re-echo their songs; and as they draw near, men shall say: "Behold the nightingales of the Virgin!"'

It is midway in the month of the hay-harvest. Pilgrims from all quarters repair to the Pardon of Rumengol: natives of Vannes, 'Gwénédours,' with smooth hair and sharply outlined features; broad-shouldered men of Scaër, with velvet-trimmed jackets; lads of Elliant in stiff collars, saint sacraments embroidered on the back of their coats. Women are there too: mothers



bearing the marks of age—the skin wrinkled, the figure broadened by field-labour and incessant child-bearing; bright, young girls, too, simple country flowers, the wings of their pure white coiffes outspreading like the petals of the wood-anemone. It is no great distance from Quimerc'h to Rumengol. From the ascending road are seen the green, undulating meadows of Cornouailles reflected here and there in the winding river; and, beyond, the blue rampart of distant hills, their jagged peaks touched by the golden light of the setting sun. The sky is cloudless; the wind soft as the living breath of the sea.

The summit gained, the gaze travels from that eyrie like a bird. Beneath, the gabled roofs, dotted here and there by woodland and meadow, recall the middle ages. To the left, grey, vanishing forms, the crests of Menez-Hom; and beyond these again, vague, distant shadows, motionless clouds they seem—the triple-peaked promontory of Crozon, that 'three-fingered hand' which stretches towards the heart of the Atlantic. To the right, the roadstead of Brest, called by the Bretons la mer close, an arm of the sea surrounded by fields and woods, expands its smooth, clear surface, whereon still fluctuates the rose and gold of a sun setting oceanward. Across a valley, full of green shade, the brown, sloping heathland of Hanvec withholds the last sun-glow; and there, invested with quiet light, clings, as a swallow to the eave, the little Mecca of Armorica, the holy oasis of Rumengol.

Slowly moving thitherward, a young shepherd-conscript tenderly and rhythmically chants the popular air of 'Our Lady of Rumengol':—

Lili, arc'hantet ho delliou,  
War vord an dour 'zo er prajou;

Douè d'ezho roas dillad  
A skuill er meziou peb c'houéz vad. . . .

Down where the salt sea-meadows are,  
Each lily gleams a silvern star:

'Tis God that clothed them so; each yields  
Its soul in fragrance o'er the fields. . . .

Other pilgrims catch up the strain, and the wandering air re-echoes from the opposite hill-side.

The road, descending, winds between two woods; above it, the meeting branches form a green trellis-work. From the fosses on either side this woodland way comes the faint sucking sound of thirsty water-plants. Not a breath of wind is astir: each leaf sleeps, or rather hushfully suspends, for everywhere is that sense of the approach of night which pervades a dusking wood.

Abruptly the road lifts itself out of the greenness; and, as the woods fall away on either side, the horizon is again visible. The path now leads through fresh-smelling ferns and fragrant, blossoming gorse. Behind, the shadows of evening deepen; though, on the hill-slope opposite, still lingers a mysterious light, infinitely delicate in tone, thrown up, it may be, from the distant surface of the sea. In this strange aureole the flame-like spire of Rumengol stands out distinct: the surrounding country seems to bow before it in silent adoration. All things breathe of prayer, and a scarce audible murmur rises from field and plain and meadow, a murmur recalling the spirit of dimly-remembered orisons.

Again the words of the local hymn burst from the lips of the wayfarers:—

Lili, arc'hantet ho délliou. . . .

From a field hard by comes an answering song, shouted by a band of excited blue-jackets on their way to the Pardon. Arm in arm they dance and sing:—

Entre Brest et Lorient  
Leste, leste,  
Entre Brest et Lorient  
Lestement.

The freedom of the song in no way shocks the young shepherd-conscript. 'Ah,' says he to a stranger pilgrim, 'these poor



lads sing what they know. Does it matter what they sing, if only they do sing? The good Virgin of Rumengol is not so particular. She hears the sound of their voices; that is enough. That they should hasten from Landevennec or from Recouvrance to worship her in her own sanctuary proves that they remember her, these brave lads of the fleet; and she is glad to see them again, ay, truly glad to see them happy and well. For the rest, she does not trouble. She is a true mother, our Virgin of Rumengol. You will see her soon, in her robe of gold, her face shining with welcome. A smile is always on her lips—it is for joy to her to see the worshippers light-hearted. She loves one and all to come to her singing some couplet, no matter what the words or the air. Thus is it that her Pardon is well called *Le Pardon des Chanteurs*.'

With these words the young bragou-rû joins the sailors, and his strong, rich voice soon dominates all others. Again and again the refrain rings through the air, poignant and clear as the song of the rising lark; and even when the words are lost, the sound of the floating music adds to the strange glamour of that summer evening.

Rough tents become more frequent; on the further side of the stream they form a street. A tallow candle stuck into a bottle casts a dim flicker over groups of people who talk noisily and embrace across narrow wooden tables. The crowd on the road grows denser. Here and there a gap is made by some beggar sitting cross-legged on the road, who, as he entreats for alms, rattles a string of amulets which hang round his neck; the passers-by, throwing a coin to him, draw aside with superstitious respect.

The single street of Rumengol, flanked on the left by about a dozen houses, on the right by the low wall of the cemetery, is lined with stalls. Groups of peasant women gaze in wonder at the medals, rings, trinkets, and charms which sparkle in the flaring light of lamp or torch, or they finger enviously the suspended chaplets and bright-coloured scapularies which

swing to and fro in the breeze. The men surround the stall where the game of mil ha kaz—a kind of primitive roulette, very popular among the Bretons, proceeds noisily, or exercise their skill in shooting at the Turk's Head. To gain a passage through these crowds is by no means easy, for a Breton during his leisure hours is immovable as a rock. Only by free use of the elbows may one at last reach the inn.

The little hostelry stands at the end of the street, a stone's-throw from the church; the warm glow from its narrow mullioned windows has a look of welcome. A deep crimson light fills the lower room; in the vast open hearth expands a mass of red flame, and above swing the simmering black pots. Fifty people or more, some squatted on the ground, their plate between their knees, crowd together in this heated atmosphere, and thankfully eat their supper.

It is a strange scene, now, towards ten o'clock, the scene in this votive church. Behind a pillar stands the Madonna of Rumengol, her face lit up by the taper offerings of the people. These tapers fill the church with a mysterious gleam; a hallowed light that rests like a benediction on the snow-white coiffes of the worshippers, and on the worn faces—a soft, wonderful glow, born not only of the litten tapers and the candle-offerings in dim recesses, but out of humble minds and tender hearts filled with the beauty of prayer. Kneeling in a circle before the steps of a side-altar a group of women recite an Ave, and the whole church responds. The ceaseless rise and fall of their voices is as a fitful wind passing through a forest of leaves. 'Until morning the watch will continue, and as a dream from a thousand weary lips this prayer will issue.

Outside the building another chant is heard, a slow chant in a minor key, one of those characteristic Breton strains in which the same phrase recurs again and again, now muffled as a sob, now penetrating as the howl of a wounded dog. Thus begins another watch, the vigil of the singers in God's acre.



It is about three o'clock. Already, eastwards, a roseate light suffuses the frontiers of the morning. A tremor is in the air ; it forebodes the incomparable awakening of the sea on a Breton summer day. Here amid these wide, peaceful expanses of the extreme West, where man is still in harmony with Nature, the dawn has lost nothing of its pristine solemnity or grandeur.

Rounding the isle of Tibidi, the Rock of Prayer, a sail comes into view, and others follow, notes of brown here and there in the uniform grey of the horizon. It is the procession of boats from Ouessant entering the 'river.' It may be that these heavy fishing smacks, built for daily struggle with wind and tide, have some secret sense of the solemn part which they now play. In single file they advance slowly up the inland sea, furl their sails, and disembark their passengers: all is done noiselessly, well-nigh without gesture. Some women fall on their knees and kiss the ground where begins the blessed zone of Notre Dame of Rumengol. Then in small groups they make their way towards the 'House of the Saint.' All go barefoot; each carries a taper.

They are tall, these women, for the most part, with somewhat masculine, regular features, their faces fresh and rosy with the salt breath of the sea. Their beautiful eyes, with the sea-shadow in them, are limpid as the pools that sleep over green-brown wrack in the rock-hollows; pathetic, too, they are, in their depths lie the memory of past griefs, the presentiment of sorrows to come. No woman of Ouessant is there who from birth till death is not a living prey to the terrors of the sea which robs her of father, lover, husband, sons. And this is why from the cradle to the tomb they are clad in black. The dress is black, the apron black; black, too, the coiffe, save for the severe folds of white across the forehead.

The men, fine muscular fellows, in grey or blue woollen jerseys, with huge fists, and placid features, follow the women. These pilgrims from the parched isle of Ouessant know not the warm breath of the country and the fragrance of the fresh-mown hay, yet they move on, absorbed in their devotions, their eyes fixed on

a belated star which hangs low in the sky immediately above the village spire. It is as a celestial sign to the islanders. Gazing at the pale beam, they raise as with one voice a hymn to the Virgin, the Breton version of the Ave Maria Stella:—

‘Ni ho salud, stéréden vor!’

It is a motley throng which crowds the graveyard of Rumengol after the Mass of Dawn. Every type of the Armorican is here: the stolid, taciturn Léonard, born to be trader or priest; the Trégorrois, frank yet sharp of tongue, with deep, expressive eyes; well-built men of Pont l'Abbé, quaint pictures in their embroidered vests and ample velvet trousers. It is a world of reliefs and contrasts, but all are as one in the deep fellowship of an ancient faith, of an ancient race.

The sun is now high above the horizon. Already from the direction of Le Faou, Landerneau, Châteaulin, creaking omnibuses and brakes filled with bourgeois families hasten to Rumengol as to a pleasure fair. The

Midnight Vigil, the Mass of Dawn, are over: the Pardon des Chanteurs is at an end.

EDITH WINGATE RINDER.



N