

THE BAGPIPERS

BY
GEORGE SAND

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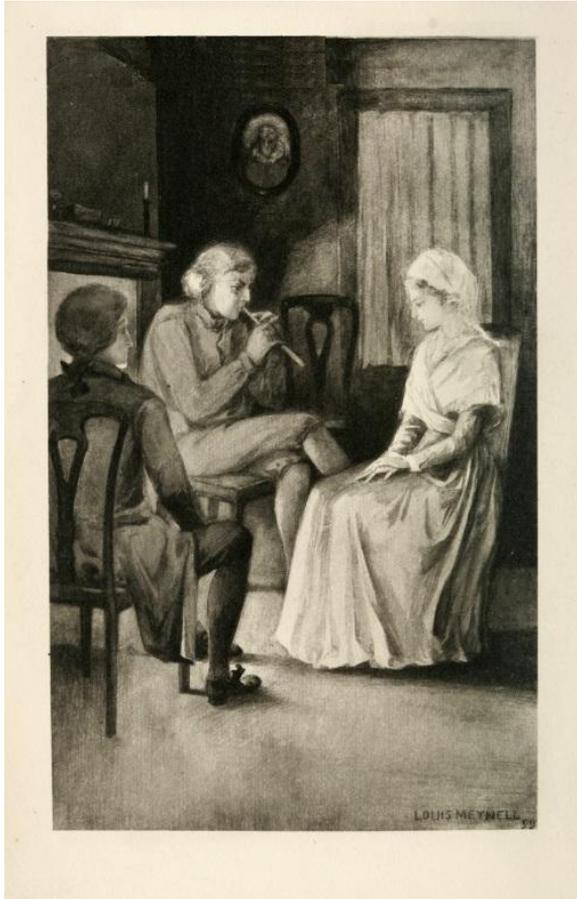
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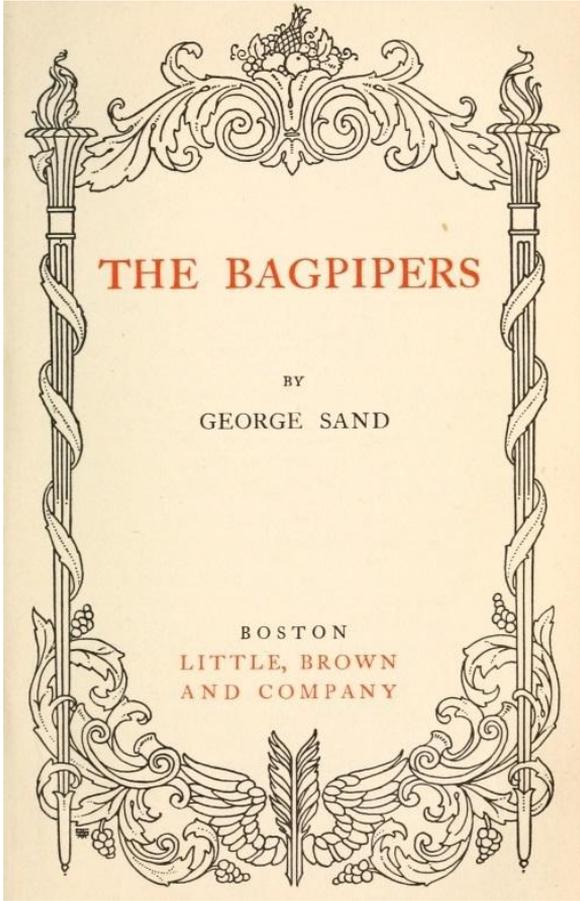
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Thereupon he blew into his flute.



THE BAGPIPERS

BY
GEORGE SAND

BOSTON
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TO M. EUGÈNE LAMBERT.

MY DEAR CHILD,—As you like to hear me relate the tales told by the peasants at our *veillées*,—I mean the watch-nights of my youth, when I had time to listen to them,—I shall try to recall the story of Étienne Depardieu, and piece together the scattered fragments of it still remaining in my memory. It was told to me by the man himself during several of the *breyage* evenings,—a name given, as you know, to the late hours of the night spent in grinding hemp, when those present relate their village chronicles. It is long since Père Depardieu slept the sleep of the just, and he was quite old when he told me this story of the naïve adventures of his youth. For this reason I shall try to let him speak for himself, imitating his manner as closely as I can. You will not blame me for insisting on so doing, because you know from experience that the thoughts and emotions of a peasant cannot be rendered in our own style of language without making them unnatural and giving them a tone of even shocking affectation.

You also know by experience, that the peasantry guess or comprehend much more than we believe them capable of understanding; and you have often been struck with their sudden insight, which, even in matters of art, has an appearance of revelation. If I were to tell you in my language and yours certain things which you have heard and understood in theirs, you would find those very things so unlike what is natural to these people that you would accuse me of unconsciously putting something of my own into the relation, and of attributing to the peasantry reflections and feelings which they could not have. It suffices to introduce into the expression of their ideas a single word that is not in their

vocabulary to raise a doubt as to whether the idea itself emanated from them. But when we listen to their speech, we at once observe that although they may not have, like us, a choice of words suited to every shade of thought, yet they assuredly have words enough to formulate what they think and to describe what strikes their senses.

Therefore it is not, as some have reproachfully declared, for the petty pleasure of producing a style hitherto unused in literature, and still less to revive ancient forms of speech and old expressions which all the world knows and is familiar with, that I have bound myself to the humble task of preserving to Étienne Depardieu's tale the local color that belongs to it. It is, rather, because I find it impossible to make him speak as we do without distorting the methods by which his mind worked when he expressed himself on points with which he was not familiar, and as to which he evidently had a strong desire both to understand and to make himself understood.

If, in spite of the care and conscientiousness which I shall put into this task, you find that my narrator sometimes sees too clearly or too deeply into the subjects he takes up, you must blame the weakness of my presentation. Forced as I am to choose among our familiar terms of speech such only as all classes can understand, I voluntarily deprive myself of those that are most original and most expressive; but, at any rate, I shall endeavor to employ none which would be unknown to the peasant who tells the tale, and who (far superior in this to the peasant of to-day) did not pride himself on using words that were unintelligible to both his hearers and himself.

I dedicate this novel to you, my dear Eugène, not to give you a proof of motherly affection, which you do not need to make you feel at home in my family, but to leave with you, after I am gone, a

point of contact for your recollections of Berry, which has now become, in a way, the land of your adoption. You will hereafter recall that you said, at the time I was writing it: "By the bye, it will soon be ten years since I came here, intending to spend a month. I must be thinking of leaving." And as I did not see the why and the wherefore, you explained to me that, being a painter, you had worked ten years among us to observe and feel nature, and that it was now necessary you should go to Paris and seek discipline of thought and the experience of others. I let you go; but on condition that you would return to us every summer. Do not forget your promise. I send this book, a distant echo of our bagpipes, to remind you that the trees are budding, the nightingales have come, and the great spring-tide festival of nature is beginning in the fields.

GEORGE SAND.
NOHANT, April, 1853.

THE BAGPIPERS.

FIRST EVENING.

I was not born yesterday, said Père Étienne in 1828. I came into the world, as near as I can make out, in the year 54 or 55 of the last century. But not remembering much of my earlier years, I shall only tell you about myself from the time of my first communion, which took place in '70 in the parish church of Saint-Chartier, then in charge of the Abbé Montpéron, who is now very deaf and broken down.

This was not because our own parish of Nohant was suppressed in those days; but our curate having died, the two churches were united for a time under the ministry of the priest of Saint-Chartier, and we went every day to be catechised,—that is, I and my little cousin and a lad named Joseph, who lived in the same house with my uncle, with a dozen other children of the neighborhood.

I say "my uncle" for short, but he was really my great-uncle, the brother of my grandmother, and was named Brulet; hence his little granddaughter and only heir was called Brulette, without any mention whatever of her Christian name, which was Catherine.

Now, to tell you at once about things as they were, I soon felt that I loved Brulette better than I was obliged to do as a cousin; and I was jealous because Joseph lived in the same house, which stood about a stone's throw distant from the last houses in the village and rather more than three quarters of a mile from mine,—so that he could see her at all times, while I saw her only now and then, till the time when we met to be catechised.

I will tell you how it happened that Brulette's grandfather and Joseph's mother lived under the same roof. The house belonged to the old man, and he let a small part of it to the woman, who was a widow with only one child. Her name was Marie Picot, and she was still marriageable, being little over thirty, and bearing traces in her face and figure of having been in her day a very pretty woman. She was still called by some people "handsome Mariton,"—which pleased her very much, for she would have liked to marry again. But possessing nothing except her bright eyes and her honest tongue, she thought herself lucky to pay a low price for her lodging and get a worthy and helpful old man for a landlord and neighbor,—one too who wouldn't worry her, but might sometimes help her.

Père Brulet and the widow Picot, called Mariton, had thus lived in each other's good graces for about a dozen years; that is, ever since the day when Brulette's mother died in giving birth to her, and Mariton had taken charge of the infant with as much love and care as if it had been her own.

Joseph, who was three years older than Brulette, remembered being rocked in the same cradle; and the baby was the first burden ever trusted to his little arms. Later, Père Brulet, noticing that his neighbor had her hands full with the care of the two as they grew stronger, took Joseph into his part of the house; and so it came to pass that the little girl slept with the widow, and the little boy with the old man.

All four, however, ate together. Mariton cooked the meals, kept the house, made over and darned the clothes, while the old man, who was still sturdy enough to work, went out by the day and paid the greater part of the household expenses. He did not do this

because he was well-off and his living was bound to be good accordingly, but because the widow was kind and amiable, and excellent company; and Brulette considered her so much like a mother that my uncle grew to treat her as a daughter, or at any rate as a daughter-in-law.

Nothing in the world was ever prettier or sweeter than the little girl under Mariton's bringing up. The woman loved cleanliness, and kept herself as spick and span as her means allowed; and she had early taught Brulette to do the same. At the age, therefore, when children usually roll in the dirt like little animals, the darling was so clean and dainty in all her ways that everybody wanted to kiss her; but she was already very chary of her favors, and would never be familiar unless quite sure of her company.

When she was twelve years old she was really, at times, like a little woman; and if, carried away by the liveliness of her years, she did forget herself so far as to play while being catechised, she soon caught herself up, even more, it seemed to me, out of self-respect than for the sake of religion.

I don't know if any of us could have told why, but all of us lads, unlike enough when it came to catechising, felt the difference that there was between Brulette and the other little girls.

I must own that some in the class were rather big boys. Joseph was fifteen and I was sixteen, which our parents and the curate declared was a disgrace to us. Such backwardness certainly did prove that Joseph was too lazy to study, and I too lively to give my mind to it. In fact, for three years he and I had been rejected from the class; and if it had not been for the Abbé Montpéron, who was

less particular than our old curate, I suppose we might have continued so to this day.

However, it is only fair to confess that boys are always younger in mind than girls; and you will find in every Confirmation class just this difference between the two species,—the males being already strong, grown lads, and the females still small, hardly old enough to wear the coif.

As for knowledge, we were all about alike; none of us knew how to read, still less to write, and we only learned what we did just as the little birds learn to sing, without knowing either notes or Latin, by dint only of using their ears. But all the same, Monsieur le curé knew very well which of the flock had the quickest minds, and which of them remembered what he said. The cleverest head among the girls was little Brulette's, and the stupidest of all the stupid boys was Joseph.

Not that he was really duller than the rest, but he was quite unable to listen and so get a smattering of things he did not understand; and he showed so little liking for instruction that I was surprised at him,—I who could take hold of my lessons fast enough when I managed to keep still, and quiet down my lively spirits.

Though Brulette scolded him for it sometimes, she never got anything out of him but tears of vexation.

"I am not worse than others," he would say; "I don't want to offend God; but words don't come right in my memory, and I can't help it."

"Yes, you can," replied the little one, who already took a tone of ordering him about; "you can if you choose. You can do whatever you like; but you let your mind run after all sorts of things,—it is no wonder Monsieur l'abbé calls you 'Joseph the absent-minded.'

"He can call me so if he likes," answered Joseph. "I don't understand what it means."

But the rest of us understood very well, and turned it into our own childish language by calling him José l'ébervigé [literally, the bewildered, the staring-eyed]; a name which stuck to him, to his great disgust.

Joseph was a melancholy child, with a puny body and a mind turned inward. He never left Brulette, and was very submissive to her; nevertheless, she said he was as obstinate as a mule, and found fault with him all the time. Though she did not say much to me about my lawless, do-nothing ways, I often wished she would take as much notice of me as she did of him. However, in spite of the jealousy he caused me, I cared more for José than for my other comrades, because he was one of the weakest, and I one of the strongest. Besides, if I had not stood up for him, Brulette would have blamed me. When I told her that she loved him more than she did me, who was her cousin, she would say,—

"It is not on his account; it is because of his mother, whom I love better than I do either of you. If anything happened to him, I should not dare go home; for as he never thinks of what he is about, she charged me to think for both, and I try not to forget it."

I often hear our betters say: "I went to school with such a one; he was my college companion." We peasants, who never went to

school in my young days, we say, "I was catechised with such a one; that's my communion comrade." Then is the time we make our youthful friendships, and sometimes, too, the hatreds that last a lifetime. In the fields, at work, or at the festivals, we talk and laugh together, and meet and part; but at the catechism classes, which last a year, and often two, we must put up with each other's company, and even help each other five or six hours a day. We always started off together in a body every morning across the fields and meadows, beside the coverts and fences, and along the foot-paths; and we came back in the evening anyhow, as it pleased the good God, for we took advantage of our liberty to run where we chose, like frolicking birds. Those who liked each other's company stayed together; the disagreeable ones went alone, or banded in twos and threes to tease and frighten the rest.

Joseph had his ways; they were neither horrid nor sulky, and yet they were not amiable. I never remember seeing him really enjoying himself, nor really frightened, nor really contented, nor really annoyed with anything that ever happened to us. In our fights he never got out of the way, and he usually received blows which he did not know how to return; but he made no complaint. You might have supposed he did not feel them.

When we loitered to play some game, he would sit or lie down at a little distance and say nothing, answering wide of the mark if we spoke to him. He seemed to be listening or looking at something which the others could not perceive; that's why he was thought to be one of those who "see the wind." Sometimes, when Brulette, who knew his crotchets, but would not explain them, called him, he did not answer. Then she would begin to sing,—that was sure to wake him up, as a whistle is sure to stop people from snoring.

To tell you why I attached myself to a fellow who was such poor company is more than I am able to do; for I was just the opposite myself. I could not do without companions, and I was always listening and observing others; I liked to talk and question, felt dull when I was alone, and went about looking for fun and friendship. Perhaps that was the reason why, pitying the serious, reserved boy, I imitated Brulette, who would shake him up sometimes,—which did him more good than it did her, for in fact she indulged his whims much more than she controlled them. As far as words went she ordered him about finely, but as he never obeyed her it was she (and I through her) who followed in his wake and had patience with him.

The day of our first communion came at last; and, returning from church, I made such strong resolutions not to give way to my lawlessness any more that I followed Brulette home to her grandfather's house, as the best example I could lay hold of to guide me.

While she went, at Mariton's bidding, to milk the goat, Joseph and I stayed talking with his mother in my uncle's room.

We were looking at the devotional images which the curate had given us in remembrance of the sacrament,—or rather I was, for Joseph was thinking of something else, and fingered them without seeing what they were. So the others paid no attention to us; and presently Mariton said to her old neighbor, alluding to our first communion,—

"Well, it is a good thing done, and now I can hire my lad out to work. I have decided to do what I told you I should."

My uncle shook his head sadly, and she continued:

"Just listen to one thing, neighbor. My José has got no mind. I know that, worse luck! He takes after his poor deceased father, who hadn't two ideas a week, but who was a well-to-do and well-behaved man, for all that. Still, it is an infirmity to have so little faculty in your head, because if ill-luck has it that a man marries a silly wife, everything goes to the bad in a hurry. That's why I said to myself, when I saw my boy growing so long in the legs, that his brain would never feed him; and that if I could only leave him a little sum of money I should die happy. You know the good a few savings can do. In our poor homes it is everything. Now, I have never been able to lay by a penny, and I do suppose I'm not young enough to please a man, for I have not remarried. Well, if that's so, God's will be done! I am still young enough to work; and so I may as well tell you, neighbor, that the innkeeper at Chartier wants a servant. He pays good wages,—thirty crowns a year! besides perquisites, which come to half as much again. With all that, strong and lively as I know I am, I shall have made my fortune in ten years. I can take my ease in my old days, and leave a little something to my poor boy. What do you say to that?"

Père Brulet thought a little, and then replied,—

"You are wrong, neighbor; indeed you are wrong!"

Mariton thought too; and then, understanding what the old man meant, she said,—

"No doubt, no doubt. A woman is exposed to blame in a country inn; even if she behaves properly, people won't believe it. That's what you meant, isn't it? Well, but what am I to do? Of course it deprives me of all chance of re-marrying; but we don't

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