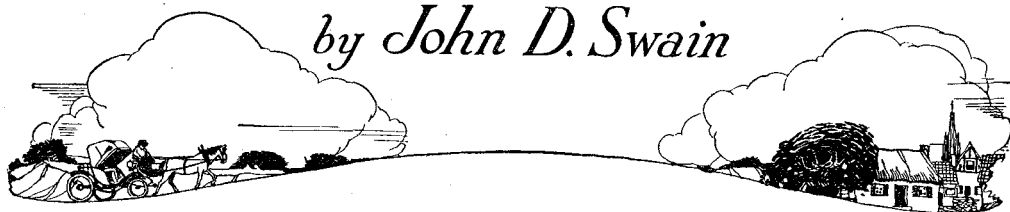


# The Broken Pitcher

by John D. Swain



CARSTAIRS rode in austere silence over the dunes of Brittany. His driver asked no questions, and evinced no curiosity. The peasant, as a rule, expects your confidences, and freely offers his own. The Breton variety is peculiar; his mind, to all appearances, a slate wiped clean.

It meant nothing to him that his fare, a handsome man with snowy mustache and the lean angularity which so often becomes an Englishman, had alighted at the little railway-station where even Frenchmen seldom paused, and asked to be driven to the inn of the Poisson d'Or, unknown to Baedeker. He was to receive five francs for the trip; it was sufficient. All men—save Bretons—were crazy anyhow; what would you?

As for Carstairs, a taciturn man even among Englishmen, it was half a century—fifty years to a day—since he had traversed these melancholy reaches to the scene of the one adventure of his well-ordered life—an episode which had, in fact, colored and altered his entire subsequent career.

Then, as now, he had journeyed down in a jerky little train which knew nothing of *vitesse*, whether *grande* or *petite*, with drovers, buyers of fruit and vegetables, a few marketwomen returning from the sleepy little terminal city to their homes, and a smattering of fishermen bound for their port, and loaded with dunnage.

Nothing had changed, it seemed. The people's faces, the strange *patois* of their frugal remarks, were the same. Over the

wide stretches of sand there were the same smells; the faint perfume of little sea flowers basking in the hot sun, the stronger aroma of apple-blossoms, now, as then, in full flower; over all, the salty tang of the sea, visible whenever the sturdy vehicle surmounted a hillock of sand, bound together by coarse sea-grass.

Taste in art changes from generation to generation. The passion for Rogers groups rages, and disappears with green woolen picture-cords and red plush mats for framed chromos. A quaint old Flemish or Italian master sleeps for centuries, is resurrected, and becomes famous overnight.

It has long been fashionable to smile tolerantly at Guido Reni, Carlo Dolci, and Greuze. But in the case of the latter, nearly every one has paused to bestow a sigh, or a smile, or both, on his little "Broken Pitcher." It may not be great art, but it is tender youth and beauty, the maiden just budding into the flower, the precious moment of life caught perfectly, and immortalized by one who knew.

Fifty years ago Carstairs, living easily in Paris, saw it, and saw it often, and came to love it. Had he not seen it, possibly he might not have bestowed more than an admiring glance at little Célestine Houbert. Had he not seen her, he would sooner have forgotten the painting. Seeing them both, he embarked on his adventure.

She was a *midinette*, which is much; but she was like the *cruche cassée*, the "Broken Pitcher," which was more. Almost, one might say, she *was* the "Broken Pitcher."

Greuze might have used her for his model, and scarcely altered a brush-stroke, a glint of her hair, a wistful appeal from her eyes. Her face was neither merry nor sad, but just wondering, with the vague inward stirrings of warm, breathing life in its ever mysterious alchemy.

In a week they were married. He was twenty, she sixteen; both were orphans. There was no one to consult, no one to object.

Carstairs possessed a moderate fortune, an ancient name; he was educated, but without genius or ambition. If his temperament prevented him from going high, it likewise protected him from falling low. Nature destined him to walk serenely in the sun, to take what he desired, but to desire nothing base; to live long and sedately, and be at the last buried in the great family crypt, with no high lights to make a biography worth while.

## II

THEY were young, and it was June. The sun shone, crocuses were everywhere, the moon was at the full; such a setting renders bargaining superfluous, delay worse than silly. The contract was soon struck. Because she came from Brittany, and he had never been there, they selected it for their honeymoon.

She hastily bought a few requisites. As the wife of Carstairs, she could not dress like a *midinette*; but she bought less than would have pleased him, although in her simple frocks she looked more than ever like the little maiden of Greuze. He placed a chain about her neck, a solitaire on her finger, for which latter extravagance she scolded him adorably in a mixture of Parisian and Breton idioms; and they set forth.

No one at the inn had expected them, or known them. She herself had been born, not in a town, but an isolated old farmhouse, long since occupied by strangers. They came here because it was the only public house whose name she could recall. She had never seen it.

No surprise, no French volubility, greeted them. They dined; a *poulet*, roasted; a big crock of cider; the whitest of bread, the freshest of butter and eggs, Breton cheese, and coffee, with a dash of cognac in his. Afterward, they had strolled down to the sea, and had their bit of love-making, two healthy, contented children.

They bought a flopping fish from an old man who had just beached his sloop, and it was served for their supper, with a sauce whose origin was lost in antiquity. And this was all.

For the next morning, young Carstairs awakened alone in the great chamber to which they had been assigned—a chamber filled with mighty dressers, with shining brass candlesticks lighting them to the bed into which they needs must clamber, laughingly, by means of a little pair of steps, a fall from which seemed as perilous as one from a painter's scaffolding.

Outside, the sound of the flowing tide crept, mingled pleasantly with the gossip of ducks and fowls, and the scent of apple-blossoms. Unalarmed, Carstairs lazily breathed in the fresh morning air, the warm sunlight that streamed through the open window. Nothing could happen in such a place. Nothing ever would.

Stretching, yawning, contented, and a little hungry, his eyes, roaming the great room, caught sight of a near-by table on which were the candles of the night before. By them lay a sheet of paper with writing on it. Beside that were the solitaire ring and the little chain. The traveling-bag in which Célestine had packed her simple belongings, with room to spare, was set primly against the wall.

Wondering, he slipped from bed as one would drop from a high wall. Taking up the paper, he read, in the idiomatic French that sounded so quaint, and read still more quaintly:

Farewell! I have gone, and you must not look for me, for it will be useless. I love you. There is no one else, and no harm threatens me. I am sorry, but I had to do it. I cannot explain, for you would not understand.

YOUR CELESTINE.

And that was the end of the honeymoon. He dressed quickly, and made agitated inquiries of the old woman who conducted the inn, of her two loutish sons, and of the peasant woman with thick ankles and red hands who cooked deliciously, but never smiled. None could tell him anything whatsoever; no one had seen *mademoiselle* since she retired. The inn and the out-buildings were searched; there was no trace.

Other and more extended inquiries, long and persistently continued, yielded no more. No neighbor, no one at the little railroad-station, the local postman, the fishermen;

she had simply vanished. And at last he was forced to depart, taking with him the gold chain and the ring, and one or two intimate possessions — her favorite blue hair-ribbon, her worn prayer-book, and, of course, the brief note she had left.

He paid the stolid landlady, and left a sum of money with her, and the address where he could always be reached if any trace, however slight, should ever be found.

### III

BUT the years went by, and no news came. Once in a while he had written, but without result. The old woman had died; the sons were conducting the inn. The apple crop had failed. Three fishing-smacks had been lost in the recent great gales; but of Célestine, nothing.

Gradually he came to think of her as dead. He did not forget her, but as far as possible he put her out of his mind, and ceased tormenting himself with futile conjecture.

His life was altered, of course. He was not of the type to pine away, or indulge in fine frenzies. He neither plunged into dissipation, nor sought refuge in bleak asceticism. But he could not marry; upon another wife, and possible children, he could not bestow the possible disaster of *her* return. Then again, he was a Catholic, and held strict views upon divorce.

Hence his social existence had to be readjusted. He could not pay to the various charming women of his set any attentions that might enlist their affections or be misunderstood. He had no intimate to whom he cared to relate his experience. He lived as a man's man; hunting and fishing wherever the fishing and hunting were good; sailing strange seas, idling away long days in many clubs in many cities; rather bored, but neither cynical nor pessimistic, and gradually and gracefully growing old.

And now, for no reason that he could give, he had been seized by an impulse to revisit the inn of the Poisson d'Or. Partly, perhaps, because it was a sort of wedding anniversary; more, because he had done everything else that he cared to do, and this offered a change.

For any reason, or none, he was crawling over the Breton sands, drawing nearer and nearer to the ancient inn; and his mind was reconstructing the short and simple details that memory had left him. A few brief meetings in Paris; a *café chantant*

on Montmartre; a Sunday at Auteuil; the marriage in the ancient church of St. Leu; and the moonlight night at the Poisson d'Or. It was so little that he could almost literally recall every sentence they had exchanged.

And now he rode alone, with the burden of fifty years added. All else, even to the apple-blossoms, was as then.

Silently, even their wheels making no sound in the deep, clean sand, they followed the winding road to the inn. Toward noon its gray walls and red roof caught his eye, with the deep blue sea behind, and the gulls swinging overhead.

Leaving his silent driver at the cross-road, and directing him to wait for him at the inn, Carstairs walked down to the beach where so long ago he had strolled with Célestine.

Nothing had changed. An aged fisherman, who might well be the selfsame one with whom they had bartered, offered him, in a quavering voice, an uneasily flopping fish. He retraced his steps to the Poisson d'Or.

The driver was placidly sleeping beneath an apple-tree while his horse cropped the sweet grass in the yard. No one noted Carstairs's approach; no one met him in the brick-paved hall. Sounds of rattling pans drew him on to the kitchen at the rear. At the great stove, a young peasant woman with thick ankles and red wrists was roasting a *poulet*, and watching a mighty *pot-au-feu*. She looked stolidly up on hearing his steps.

"I was here many years ago, *mademoiselle*," he explained. "I have the fancy to see the apartment I then occupied."

He gave her a silver piece, and she nodded a brief thanks, wiping her hands on a coarse towel, preparatory to showing him up.

"It is unnecessary; I remember the way very well," he said; whereupon she returned to her cooking.

Carstairs mounted slowly to the first floor, in a house apparently deserted save by the cook and himself. The door of the room he sought was open, the sun streaming in, bearing scent of apple-bloom and the sound of droning bees and contented fowls. The great bed was there in its corner, with spotless linen, and the same little pair of steps at its head; the big dressers, too, and the table with its brass candlesticks.

He had been curious to see if any emotion would be roused by this strange return after many years. There was none, save a vague regret, a dull wonder. Well, he had accomplished his sudden fancy, and there seemed no sense in prolonging his stay.

As he turned to leave, there entered through the doorway an enormous black cat, on silent and padded feet, with nervously twitching tail and inscrutable green eyes which stared at him with indolent curiosity. And even as Carstairs returned his gaze, estimating his sleek weight, a voice from the stairs called:

"Michou! Michou!"

There are three notes in a woman's voice which are unmistakable in any language under the sun—her words to her lover, her baby, and her cat. Other notes are more open to conjecture.

The black cat was Micnou. If proof were lacking, Michou's detached expression would have sufficed. His tail twitched, the black slits in his eyes widened; otherwise he made no move.

Further calls resounded, coupled with Breton objurgations. Wooden shoes clattered up the stairs and down the hall. Carstairs waited.

#### IV

IN the doorway appeared an old, old woman with the thick, wide, short petticoats, the crossed shawl, the odd cap of the Bretonnaise. Her face was like one of her own winter apples. Her eyes were piercing, her ankles thick and bony, her hands gnarled and unshapely, from hard work, or rheumatism, or both.

Why he should at once have known her, and she him, Carstairs could never guess. Resemblance to the "Broken Pitcher" there was none; rather, she suggested the broken trunk of a storm-plagued tree.

He removed his hat and bowed.

"*Madame*," he said—he tried to say "*Célestine*," but it was too utterly preposterous—"you are, then, here?"

"*Oui, monsieur*," I know always that some day you will come."

"Why?" he asked, mildly curious.

She shrugged her bent shoulders.

"How can one say? But it was to be. Me, I know it."

"Yes, *madame*, I came to take one more look at the Poisson d'Or before I die. I am an old man, and my time is short."

She nodded.

"I, too, am old; my burial linen lies for long in the chest. I am ready."

She gestured slightly toward one of the wooden chests—the one on which the *Célestine* of long ago had laid out her traveling-set.

"But why, *madame*, did you do it?" he asked. "I never expected to know; but now we meet again, pray indulge my curiosity. Surely I deserve that much!"

"*C'est juste!*" she agreed. "But *monsieur* can never be expected to understand: That is why I never told him. It is useless. We are of a different race."

Michou, having fulfilled his part, rose silently, and departed unnoticed. *Célestine* continued:

"*Monsieur*, when you meet me, I am young, and pretty, and warm-blooded; but all the same, me, I am Bretonne to the bone. I think of this, too late, when we are on the train, and even when we walk on the beach, and above all that night, when I lie awake and smell the apple-blossoms, and hear the sea and the crickets. I was doing the impossible, *monsieur*. You were kind and good to me; you were rich; but sooner or later you shall tire of the little Breton peasant girl. Never am I anything else, in heart. Even Paris I hate. You shall take me to strange countries, and I shall talk with great people; but they are not my people, nor their ways my ways. And some day you are ashamed of me, and some pretty girl from your own people shall make the eyes at you, and you shall not love me any more, and we shall be wretched. And so, for your sake, and my own sake, I leave you. There was nothing else to do. But," she continued, "you are not Breton. You cannot understand!"

Carstairs stroked his white mustache, unable to tear from his mind the little maiden whom Greuze painted so long ago, and whom he had found alive. He roused himself with an effort.

"In a way, I understand," he said. "But why did you not tell me? I would not have held you against your will!"

"Ah, *monsieur*, you think so now, because your blood it has cooled, and time has healed. But then! *Nenni!* You would have teased me, and who knows? I might have yielded. I was afraid, *monsieur*, afraid of you, and afraid of my own self. It was better that I should go."

"But tell me, at least, how you managed



to get away without any one seeing you. I moved heaven and earth to find a trace of you!"

Célestine shrugged, her seamed palms outthrust.

"But I never go, *monsieur*! I am always here!"

Carstairs reeled as if struck.

"Good Heavens, woman!" he cried. "You are mad. It is impossible!"

"It is the truth of God," she asserted vehemently. "The people here, they too were Bretons; they understood perfectly. I tell them, early that morning—the old woman and the two sons. They ask no questions; they know. And they have just lost their servant, and are glad to give me her place. *Monsieur*, I have never been five kilometers from this place in fifty years. They hid me, until *monsieur* left."

Carstairs found his voice with difficulty.

"But—but—the letters I received? The old woman died years ago."

Célestine nodded solemnly.

"*De longue main*, as *monsieur* says. While she lived, she answered *monsieur's* kind inquiries; afterward, I, Célestine, for the sons could not write nor read. Now the inn is mine."

A slow anger was rising in Carstairs's breast—not so much at Célestine; he felt that he had escaped growing old with a specter, and wondered if luxury and leisure, manicures and hair-dressers, could ever have softened the ghastly old age that had crept upon her. But there burned a deep resentment against the lying old woman, dead out there in some little burial-ground by the sea—against the young men who had hidden her away and taken as a servant drudge the pretty little maiden to whom he had given his name.

"You married one of those fine sons, I suppose?" he sneered.

Célestine shook her head in pious horror.

"*Monsieur* knows he speaks not the truth," she said. "We Bretons are all Catholic."

"Well, so am I!" he cried. "What about me? You spoiled my life, without a thought. I could never have a wife and children."

"Ah, not so! True, *monsieur* is of the church, but it is not the same. He is not Breton. And he is great and rich and powerful; he could find a way. It is done. Me, I am ignorant, I do not know how; *néanmoins*, it is done."

"Well, I didn't," he growled.

But she only shrugged her shoulders, unconvinced.

"I want to see those two young men! Send them up to me! I will at least give them a piece of my mind, before I leave this cursed inn!"

"One of them is dead long ago," she said, with a quiet dignity. "The other, he is very, very old; much older than I am, or than *monsieur* is."

"Well, I want to see him anyhow," insisted Carstairs.

So she clattered away in her wooden sabots, leaving Carstairs to glare about him, his mind even yet hardly able to grasp the incredibly simple solution of his life's mystery.

And presently, in the doorway, there stood a veritable ruin of a man; stooped, leaning shakily upon a thick cane, cap in hand, and bestowing upon Carstairs a senile and toothless grin. No one could fail to see that the broken body housed a mind as broken.

Carstairs impatiently thrust a coin into his hand. His shred of an intellect associated the money with tobacco, and he bowed many times, muttering unintelligible phrases; then he tottered away. But what struck Carstairs with sickening force was the sudden, involuntary clenching of Célestine's hand when he offered the coin. He felt certain, though he tried to stifle the thought, that she would not refuse a *pour-boire* herself. Probably a man of coarse fiber would have tendered it to her.

Instead, he bowed and left the room, following her down the stairs in silence.

At the great hall door, he bowed again.

"*Adieu, madame*," he said simply.

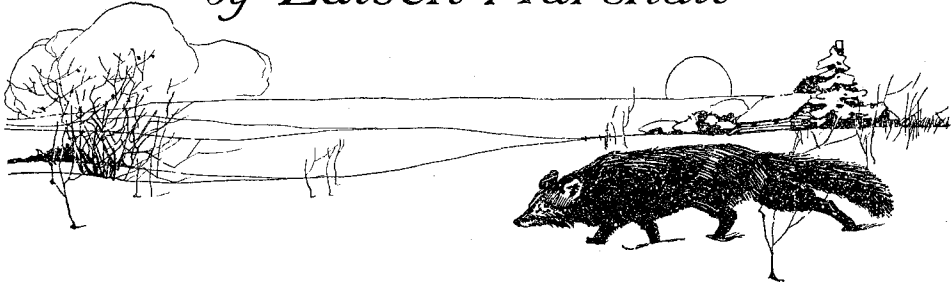
"*Adieu, monsieur*!" she curtsied; not even a "*Dieu te garde*," as they parted after fifty years, this time forever.

He awakened his driver; the reluctant horse was dragged from his grassy repast, and they rolled stolidly away through the sand. He did not look back, but where the crossroad forked he turned his head.

Célestine stood in the doorway of the inn of the Poisson d'Or, not looking at him, so far as he could see, but watching a flock of fowls which threatened to trespass upon her scrubbed brick hall. And her knotted fingers seemed to clasp and unclasp, as if they still yearned to clutch one of the coins with which *monsieur's* pocket was so well filled.

# The Black Fox

by Edison Marshall



**S**KULKING, boldly hunting, killing, hiding, sleeping, and rising to skulk and hunt and kill again, Morgan, the black fox, was living out his wild life. That night, while Hargraves the trapper stood in his cabin doorway, in the snow-swept north, he was in the zenith of his power and beauty.

The room behind Hargraves was warm from the noisy fire; there were thick blankets and tobacco and grub and "hooch"—everything that a man needs in the north. Before him lay the wilds, in all their ruggedness and cruelty; brilliant with their snows; awful in their heavy, brooding silence; weird with the sharp-lined, grotesque shadows of bush and scrubbed tree—always unconquered and mysterious and untamed.

The cabin, with its rough comfort, was the home of Hargraves, as was fitting to his nature; and the outside was the home of Morgan, the fox, as was fitting to his nature. The fox changed it from a barren, empty place to a habitation, of which he was the center, much as a woman can change with her presence a shack of boards into a home.

No one knew much about this Morgan, the black fox of the Chilkoot River. It was his river, his valley, yet no one knew why, for there were creatures inhabiting it with him that could crush him with one blow in a pitched battle. There were wolves and bears and moose; but for all that, the Chilkoot was Morgan's valley.

He was so swift that not one of the larger beasts could overtake him to pitch

a battle. He was so wise that no man had ever endangered him. He was so clever that he fed well and was sleek and trim and strong when the other beasts about him were dying of starvation. And Morgan was the king of all the foxes.

As trappers know, the black and silver foxes are smaller than the southern breed of foxes. While the latter are fifty-six inches long from their pointed noses to the end of their brushes, their northern cousins measure hardly forty-five. Morgan, to conform to the dimensions of his breed, should have stood but thirteen or fourteen inches. Instead, men who had seen Morgan—and they could be counted on the fingers of two hands—knew that he was not only bigger than other black foxes, but bigger than the largest of the southern breeds.

His coal-black body, like an ink-spot against the snow, had seemed as large as a wolf's. His track was half again as large as those of the rest of the foxes. His fur was more beautifully black.

No one knew exactly how he got the name of Morgan. Some said that an old soldier, who had fought in the Civil War, and in his last days had prospected in the Chilkoot Valley, had named him Morgan after the famous Confederate raider.

"They're both daring robbers," he was reported to have said.

There was another story—more widely believed—as to the origin of his name. It was said that a French Canadian, a trapper, who had known French mythology, had named the elusive creature after Morgan the Fay, the shadowy and mystic