

LA BOUL'NEU

IN that strip of country that lies between France and North Brittany, and is locally known as the *pays gallot*, the racial characteristics of the people are peculiar. They come of a very anciently mixed stock, and do not closely resemble either of their neighbours; less excitable than the French, they are shallower and more pleasure-loving than the Bretons, and if they follow their church with no less faith, they treat it, sometimes, with more levity. They fulfil the duties that belong to the solemn days of Lent and Easter—though in Saint-Malo, at any rate, carnival has a surprising habit of breaking out on all the earlier Sundays of Lent—but they are very ready to turn to the irresponsibilities of life with a sense of having done all that is required of them. They lose no time in starting on that amazing series of fairs and *assemblées* that follow on each other's heels during the latter half of April and May.

In the district surrounding Saint-Malo, indeed, one of the oldest and best-beloved of these *assemblées* is held no later than on Easter Monday, when all the world and his wife, his children and his neighbours, set forth on their yearly pilgrimage to *La Boul'neu*—which is, being interpreted, the very ancient fair of Bourgneuf, a small village on the road between Dinard and Pleurtuit. It is not, of course, a pilgrimage in any literal sense of the word to-day; but of what it may have been in the past it is impossible to speak with certainty. These gatherings have been for centuries so closely linked with the local saint—and in Brittany and the *pays gallot* the saints are so surprisingly local—that it is difficult to be sure what exactly they may once have been. The origin of the *Boul'neu*

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is so ancient that no one now knows how or when it came into being; and even its existence is so unimportant to all outsiders that the ordinary visitor is unaware of it. It may be conjectured, in fact, that the *assemblée* of Bourgneuf existed in some form for centuries before it became an *assemblée* at all.

In any case, every year when Easter Monday returns, fathers and mothers, children and grandchildren, friends and neighbours, come this way from all the corners of the countryside; we find them going with us, we meet them already returning, these latter carrying carefully upright long wands with strange round objects strung upon them, giving the bearers a quaint look as of some antique ceremony. They are hot, dusty, tired—for it is a long walk for feet not over-used to exercise; but they are cheerful and satisfied, for once more in the ever-recurring seasons they have gone out on Easter Monday *pour manger la Boul'neu*.

The road that we follow is always a hot and dusty one, but to-day it is hotter and dustier than ever, for it is trodden by hundreds of tramping feet; feet of to-day that will make this little yearly pilgrimage as long as they can walk at all—and feet, I like to think, of yesterday, that have passed this way year by year through the centuries, and perhaps in the spirit are treading it with us still. The hedges are white with the rising dust, the scanty poplars throw but a flicker of shade under the hot spring sun, the broad margins are already trodden to a monotonous grey. Here and there is a small stall where the usual fairings are sold; here and there is a beggar, a man selling and singing *cantiques*, or the account in verse of the latest local crime, or a hurdy-gurdy grinding out some music-hall ditty. Presently a cottage comes in sight, then another—and in a moment more the crowd turns a corner and swings into a widening of the road with small houses

on either side and at the further end a squat grey church. This is Bourgneuf.

Here the press is so great that it is difficult to move about, especially as what room there is is blocked by several booths; there is even a tent or two where a fat woman, a juggler, or a 'real' mermaid may be seen, as much banging of drums announces. But it is no more at best than a very humble village fair, and at first sight it is not easy to see what has made the Three Towns—Dinard, Saint-Malo, Saint-Servan—turn out to attend it.

The Three Towns know, however, what they have come for. The crowd forms into queues before some four or five of the cottages that have odd beehive-shaped excrescences (rather like, though bigger and more important than, those found in parts of Somerset) built on at one side of them; and slowly, good-humouredly, with much talk and laughter the line moves up, each person in it carrying a wand newly cut from the hedgerows. As in turn they reach the beehive hut, from the door of which a hot flowery breath streams forth, there is a pause and an exchange of pence for the smoking-hot *cimereaux* freshly drawn out of the oven. Hence the wands, for the cakes, or more precisely biscuits, are far too hot to handle, and being made with a hole in the middle for the purpose, the purchaser lowers his wand and they are threaded upon it like great flat beads. Then he passes on; and, if he follow the ancient custom, the *cimereaux* are eaten on the spot; but in almost every case some are carried off to be enjoyed later at home.

In the first place, however, he will go to the stalls which are nearly all of the primitive restaurant order, supplying refreshments of sorts. At one he can get a bowl of *café-au-lait* and, if he be lucky, a corner of an overcrowded bench; at another, where a row of casks are standing ready, he may be served with a

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mug of cider. A little further on, a woman seated under a big umbrella will sell him a slab of butter which he spreads thickly on the *cimereaux* though they are still almost too hot to eat. Or he may choose other dainties from the stalls and charcoal stoves about him; *galettes de blé noir*, for instance, a sort of buckwheat pancake made on a griddle that is locally called a *tuile*. These may be eaten hot with the *cimereaux* or black bread; or cold, soaked in cider or sour milk; or, as generally at the fairs, wrapped round a sausage or a sardine. And if he can afford to patronise the larger booths that supply their customers with plates, he may have a *pâté de Bécherelles*, which is made by dropping an egg on to a hot *galette* with a little butter and salt and, when just set, spreading it over the surface of the pancake and rolling them up together. There may even be *soles-de-guèret*, which are made of 'poux'—in the patois *piao*—or porridge of buckwheat, cut into the shape of small soles and fried in black butter; and if a mere onlooker may comment on them (without being too critical of their cleanliness) they all smell extremely good. But these are merely adjuncts; what matters on Easter Monday at *la Boul'neu* is the eating of *cimereaux*—and without doubt, as on every other possible occasion, the drinking of cider.

Cimereaux de Pleurtuit . . . Cracquelins de Saint-Malo . . . though I have tasted both I cannot be precise as to the difference between them. The former only are made with holes for stringing them on wands; and the latter are not sold at the ancient ovens. But both can be bought at all seasons in the towns, and their names are familiar to such as listen to the street cries and note the sellers with their piled-up baskets covered with a white cloth. Then why this custom of the *Boul'neu*? Is it a shadow of some disused pilgrimage and its after-feast; or is it a memory

of something still older that has slipped out of memory? I cannot say.

All that I know is this : for years unnumbered these cakes have been made in this countryside in primitive and unchanged bakeries; for years unnumbered they have borne the name that has come down to us from their earliest makers, the Cymri, whose daily bread they were and who baked them in just such ovens as these; and for years unnumbered the people of the Three Towns have come out to eat them on Easter Monday at the little old village of Bourgneuf.

Surely to-day the dusty road must be trodden by the feet of shadowy thousands, who in their time have also passed this way *pour manger la Boul'neu*.

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