

## WHEN THE MARKET GOES HOME

**I**T has been market-day across the water, and the market-folk are on their way home and bringing, as it were, the market with them.

The boats are coming back from the other side of the bay heaped with empty baskets and with others still full of unsold goods, and crowded with servants and housewives and peasants squeezed together in a seething, bubbling mass, like sheep in a pen to whom have been given of a sudden the voice of jays. The noise is indescribable; quarrelling, arguing, shouting, laughing, with live ducks cackling and hens flapping their wings, with the thud and rattle of the wheezy engines, the splash of the paddles, and the shouting of porters and omnibus drivers on the quay:

'*Matignon et Saint-Cast, à vot' plaisir . . . .*'

'*Plancoët, Plancoët, 'ssieurs et dames . . . .*'

'*A . . . . domicile, à . . . . domicile!*'

'*Commissionnaire, 'ssionnaire . . . .*'

—such a hurly-burly as surely only French lungs can produce.

Up the hill they come in an unending procession, huge hooded omnibuses that are evidently the direct offspring of the old *diligences*, donkey-carts rattling and important, wagons from the country with jingling bell-hung harness on the big horses that stamp and stumble on the uneven cobbles. They are filled—and over-filled—with peasants on their way to far-off villages, or 'getting a lift' to nearer ones, with men in blouses, women in gay shawls and linen coiffes, who sit on the shafts, on the sides, who crowd the seats or perch insecurely on the piles of empty baskets. And they are all talking, singing, screaming, at the pitch of their shrill voices. . . . It has been a good market

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to-day, and good money; some has been spent at the *auberges* and *cafés*, no doubt, but the women have taken care that not too much has gone that way; only enough to add an extra touch to the gay intolerable delirium of noise.

The servants come up in groups by themselves, some wearing the coiffe of their village, others the long-streamered cap of the ordinary French *bonne*; there are peasants among them, broad-faced and sturdy, and Basse-Bretonnes from inland Brittany, with their melancholy eyes; and there are dozens of the gay shrewd hot-tempered *gallots*, with their quick wits and ready hands, money-making, astute, superstitious, cynical, true children of a country-side that has always been a melting-pot of races. They talk loudly of their mistresses, of their neighbours, of the last *fête*, of the market prices, of the next pilgrimage to Lourdes or Auray, all with the same indifferent gaiety; and the baskets they carry poised on their hips swing and bump and bulge, filling the narrow footway with their fat sides swollen by the vegetables piled high within them. And what vegetables! Such crisp and dewy lettuces, such polished glowing reds of carrots and aubergines, such mellow gold of pumpkins; as basket after basket is carried by, heaped with fringed and feathery cabbages, with creamy cauliflowers, with silvery artichokes, it is impossible to forget that this is a land of *primeurs*, that sends its wares to Paris and London.

And now it is the fish-women that clatter up the hill in their great sabots, eager to get rid of what is left over from market at enhanced prices to the English *milor's*. There are Cancalaises, tall, lithe, and muscular, handsome as gipsies and as turbulent, flattering, coaxing, cursing in the same breath, and swinging along in their quaint short cloaks, their black hair strangely combed into ridge and furrow beneath the

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small 'oyster-cap' of Cancale. As a Scot would tell you they are kittle cattle to deal with, and as ready to quarrel as to bargain. And there are the Jagouines, the women from Saint-Jacut along the coast, with flat fair faces and a singing speech that is peculiar to their *pays*. They have been for centuries the laughter-makers of their countryside and the tales told of them are without number; how they learned to count themselves in a curious and special manner, how they frightened away the Noroua (wickedest of all the winds), how they treated St. Joseph so that he drove the sardines away from the coast . . . and many others less reputable but all merry. Only it is not wise to trust too much to their broad, good-natured faces, for they are quite as able to get the best of a bargain as their neighbours—and they do it, too.

And now it is the *baragues* that climb the hill, the long narrow hand-barrows spread with a multitude of wares that have been brought over to do business up and down our streets as soon as the market is closed across the water. All sorts of things are sold on them, to the accompaniment of a constant *boniment*. Here is one piled with straw hats of every style and shape, wide-brimmed, high-pointed, strangely be-tasselled; another with boots and shoes, the big black *confortables* that *M'sieu le curé* wears in church, and the trim little slippers in red and blue and brown that fit like gloves—and are little thicker—inside the *sabots* of the country girls. And now comes the familiar *baraque des petites économies*, that travels unceasingly from market to market up and down the Clos-Poulet:

'Here is where the husband buys a present for his wife, and the good wife saves the pockets of her man . . . chinaware, earthenware, tinware, clothes to wear, all you want in the world or out of it . . . all at two sous, *les p'tites économies* . . .'

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There follows a stall on which is sold jewellery—a diamond brooch that is ‘better than real’ for four sous; and another laden with ribands and flowers and the gaily-coloured stay-laces and garters that seem to command so brisk a sale. Then comes literature; it may be in the shape of an old woman with a pack on her back and a huge red umbrella under her arm, that open and upside-down makes a handy substitute for a stall; or it may be a wheeled tray heaped with gaudy pictures and photographs, where the Pope and the President, the *bon Dieu* and the Saints, ‘*Crédit est mort*’ and the latest prize-fighter, are tumbled together pell-mell. And again, it is the vendor of *cantiques* and ballads, the printed sheets at one sou each that are still, as they have been for centuries, the main literature of the peasants. You can sing them to almost any tune you like—or you can learn a new tune by listening to the vendor, who sings as he sells; they will tell you all the details of the latest murder (as well as many that never existed), the latest scandal, or the story of your own particular saint; and, most popular of all, they will give you the countless verses of the *cantique* of Lourdes. In older days—and not so old as one might imagine—the peasant could not read these sheets for himself, but bought them for the crude woodcuts that kept the subject in his mind; and for the rest, he stood and listened to the vendor’s chant till he had learnt the words and air. And though there may be few that cannot read now, the old habit holds; still they stand and listen, still the man who sells chants as he goes, and his voice rings out lustily in the familiar refrain:

*Ave, ave, ave, Maria . . . .*

Pushing past him, now comes a long *baraque* that manoeuvres its way amazingly amid the press of traffic as the voice of its proprietor dominates even the sur-

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rounding din. It is covered with heaps of stockings of every conceivable kind (save that in the days that I remember, no silk ones, or near-silk, were to be seen); stockings of every size and colour, scarlet, blue, purple and the violent pink that is the joy of the peasants, white for the little girls of the First Communion, striped socks for the babies, enormous blue worsted hose for the fishermen :

'*V'là vo bas . . . .*

Big stockings, middling stockings, little stockings,  
Good stockings, stockings not so good—

*V'là vos bas . . . .* '

The proprietor is grave and responsible, with the air of owning a shop of dimensions—as, indeed, he does, in spite of taking a barrow to market; he cries his *boniment* sonorously, as befits one who on occasion joins the singing-men in the great church across the water. He has a boy to push his barrow and walks beside it with dignity and composure, waving with complete unconcern a ridiculous stocking in either hand :

'For long legs, for middling legs, for short legs,  
For all who have two legs,

*V'là vos bas . . . .* '

Still the steamers make their way across the water from the closing market and still there seems to be ever a new cry added to the mounting medley of voices, the braying of donkeys, the clatter of sabots and the cracking of whips. Here come the *lançon*-sellers with their long baskets on their backs :

'*En . . . . voulez-vous, du lançon frais . . . .* '

Or it is the *Craqu'rins de Pleurtuit* carried on white-covered trays; or the merry little song of the *Berlingot* seller.:

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‘ *A la gui-gui, a la guimauve,  
A la vanille pour les jeunes filles,  
Au citron pour les garçons . . . .* ’

—or the vendor of cream-cheeses; he wears a long pink smock and a high fool’s cap on his head with a bunch of feathers at its point, and he can be seen almost as far off as he can be heard, which is saying a good deal. His tune is delightfully gay and haunting, and he accompanies it on a gaudy—and noisy—little drum :

‘ *Voilà du bon fromage-a-lait,  
Il vient du pays de celui qui l’a fait—  
Celui qui l’a fait est de son village,  
Hé, mesdam’s, v’là du bon fromage . . . .* ’

There are the clappers of the *plaisirs*, the shrill whistles of the *ki-ri-kiris*, the chorus of the last Paris chanson, and ever above all the Gregorian-like chant of the stocking-seller :

‘ For straight legs, for crooked legs,  
*V’là vos bas . . . .* ’

—and the sweet long-drawn cadence of the *cantique* :

‘ *Ave, ave, ave, Maria . . . .* ’

It is only as the afternoon closes, when the last boat-load come in and the last carts and omnibuses have rumbled up the hill on their way to far-off villages and even the *baragues* have gone somewhere out of hearing, that market-day is over at last; the quiet gathers round once more, the quiet that is a musical silence—full of the splash of water far below, of the rustle of drowsy leaves, and of the chiming of the distant Angelus.

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