

## CHARLEMAGNE IN THE CLOS-POULET.

IN that stretch of country that may be described as lying between France and Brittany—the *pays gallot*—there is a still narrower district that encircles the Three Towns (Saint-Malo, Saint-Servan, and Dinard) and lies along the banks of the Rance. It is known in the local speech as the Clos-Poulet, a quaint phrase with a ring of the patois about it, and like the patois itself venerable and significant; for it has a meaning that is plainly declared by the name of a village within its borders, Saint-Pierre-Marc-en-poulet, or in the Latin *Sanctus Petrus de Marco in pago Aletho*.

Now this 'Aleth' deserves at least a word in passing. Very long ago—I cannot give a precise date, but it was in 'the time of the Saints' when they crossed the water (in stone boats or not, as you may prefer) as missionaries to the folk of Armorica: when Saint-Malo found his way to Saint-Aaron's hermitage on the rock then rising in the midst of forests that was later to be called after him; when men of our own race, our own blood, Scots, Welsh, and Irish, came here to conquer, to teach, and to pray, saints and fighting-men, an endless list of amazing names, Coulfmith, Armaël, Cadocanam, Jagu, Maclou—somewhere in the fifth or sixth century, Aleth came first into being. Very little is known of that first settlement, but it was the home of one of the many early bishops or missionaries, more important than the rock of Malo to which some centuries later the Bishop and his Chapter removed. And somewhere very early in the ninth century it emerges from the shadows, if not into the full light of history, at least into the daybreak of a clear tradition. For here, to the settlement of Gwic-Aleth or Quidaleth, which being translated is the *vicus* or town of Aleth,

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came bands of Saracens after their defeat in the Pyrenees in 811; and Aleth lay then, as its lost foundations do now, on that small peninsula that juts out from Saint-Servan into the waters of the Rance, and is covered to-day by the Cité and the Fort. It was a walled settlement—that we know, for some of the stones of its wall and of its church were laid bare some thirty or forty years ago; but while it has vanished wholly into the past and died out of common memory, the name of the land that lay about it, the ‘Pagus Alethi,’ or as it became in the passing of time the Pagalet, the Ploualet, the Poélet, and finally the Clos-Poulet, is still in daily use. And it seems fitting that within the confines of this ancient Clos-Poulet there are still preserved, or were till quite recently, many old and elsewhere forgotten memories and customs.

Some of the oldest and not the least beautiful of these are connected with the Forty Days of Lent—that season that in this countryside is so oddly made up of contradictions, of solemnity and of gaiety, of church-going and of holiday-making, that surely no other time of year can be compared with it. There are daily fairs—there is even one that is held on Good Friday; there is the constant song of bells on the air, the ancient alleys of Saint-Malo are hung with comic masks and gaily-coloured dominoes, and up and down the streets and in the courts is heard the haunting sweetness of the unforgettable Lenten *cantique* :

*Nous voici dans votre cour  
Pour chanter des louanges—  
La Passion du doux Jésus,  
O mon Dieu! qu'elle est grande . . . .*

—wailing and sighing through a dozen or more verses, like the very voice of Lent itself. And in the hidden hamlets and byways of the Clos-Poulet the *frairies*

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meet in their ancient chapels for the evening prayers that they have said together—for none know how long.

Throughout Brittany and the *pays gallot* these chapels are often to be seen, sometimes standing by the roadside all alone, more often in a hamlet that is itself the centre of other such hamlets; chapels, ancient and consecrated, where Mass is said once a year on the day of patronage by a priest from some not too distant church. At other seasons they are used by the *frairies* or lay confraternities, if that is not too imposing a word to use for such a simple banding-together of the countryfolk. These little chapels in which they meet are very small and poor, for they are the property of the peasants who use them in Lent and again during the month of May; small and poor, with no beauty beyond a bare but meticulous cleanness. The coarse linen is spotlessly white, the bleached wood is scrubbed into rough fibre, and the paint has long been worn off the plain boards of the Altar.

There are—or were till not long ago—many of these chapels about the Clos-Poulet; but I speak here only of the one that I myself know and have visited some few years since. This one has, moreover, a wonderful history behind it; for tradition says that it dates back to those far days when Charlemagne reconquered Armorica from the heathen—the Saracens—in a great battle on the prairies of Cézembre, where now is sea. And if anyone cares to read the marvellous story of that battle: of how Aquin-of-the-White-Beard, Moorish prince in Aleth, answered Rippé, the holy Bishop of Dol, whom Charlemagne had sent to offer him peace and Christianity, by launching at him a javelin 'which transfixing him but harmed him no more than a rose-leaf blown by the wind'; of the wonders of Aquin's palace in Aleth, whereof the doors were 'of gold, shining like stars new-fallen on a hill'; of how he was forced out of his walls by thirst, his well de-

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filed; of his being killed by the hands of the great King himself on the very step of sanctuary; of the death of his wife, 'who was strangled by the tresses of her yellow hair'—these things with many more can be read in the curious poem found in the sixteenth century in the convent on Cézembre, and now in one of the great libraries in Paris. And if the story it tells be not true, at least it is a very wonderful and ancient tradition; as old, perhaps, as this other that has come down to us, that the little chapel of Saint-Etienne, hidden away between Saint-Servan and Saint-Jouan-des-Guéréts, was founded by Charlemagne himself in the heart of the Clos-Poulet in memory of its deliverance from the heathen by the battle fought on St. Stephen's Day, some thousand odd years ago.

The little chapel as it stands now shows small sign of its traditional origin; though the stones of the lower courses of its walls are noticeably ancient. Uplifted on a low mound in the midst of its small hamlet, there is a Crucifix worn into shapelessness by ages of rain and wind and sun beside its door; within, there are mouldering benches on an earthen floor furrowed into holes and ruts by countless generations of restless feet, of knees bent in prayer. There is nothing beautiful or stately about it, nothing solemn, nothing at first sight that is even curious; it is only when one has time to think and understand that the strangeness and solemnity of the place become evident.

For the seats set along the wall inside the rough altar-rail are used only once in the year by priest or clerk, but constantly by the *frairie*, the peasants who have joined together during the centuries in a sort of brotherhood to maintain this chapel; and the chest in the corner holds no sacerdotal vestments, but only the coarse white gowns that they slip on over the smocks in which they have just come from the spring plough-

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ing. And that deep hollow in the wooden altar-step has been worn, in the passing of time, by the one kneeling there whose turn it was to lead the prayers and the *cantiques* and the long repetition of litany and chaplet, while further back on the earthen floor kneel the women and children, the old men and the young boys.

And not here alone in this poor little chapel on its historic ground but in many another such, the peasants yet find time and will to come together on these dark Lenten evenings, as their fathers have done before them. They are tired enough, God knows, for they have worked since dawn in the fields and the spring labour is not light; some of them have far to come, for the houses are scattered and these *frairies* include many hamlets; there is no priest to lead them, or to preach to them, but only a rude wooden Crucifix nailed to the wall and the familiar prayers that they say aloud and the *cantiques* that they have learned from their mothers.

And yet here, in this chapel of Saint-Etienne, is preserved a memory of that St. Stephen's Day more than a thousand years ago, when Charlemagne drove the heathen out of the *Pagus Alethi*—the Clos-Poulet.

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