

## THE MILLER OF CARNAC

Equidistant from the river in the Crach and the peninsula of Quiberon, at the extremity of an immense heath strewn with little hamlets, between the growling waves and the singing pines, in the midst of dolmens and menhirs, some fifty white houses are clustered around a gray steeple. That steeple is the bell-tower of the church of Saint Corneille,<sup>1</sup> the patron of animals and the poor in spirit; the white houses are the houses of Carnac.

Carnac does not resemble Auray, which is a town, nor Trinité, which is a port, nor Plouharnel, which is a farm, nor Saint-Columban, which is only an anchored boat; Carnac is neither a town nor a village, neither rural nor marine.

Carnac is a place of pilgrimage for sick animals, a tranquil nest in which mariners worn away by the sea can go to run aground, a sacred field to which poets and scholars come in order to dream. It is not loved by its neighbors, jealous of its such church, its two notaries and its physician. That enmity has endured for centuries, and takes advantage of any excuse to burst forth. During the Chouannerie Carnac sided with the blues; in 1848 it was in favor of the whites.<sup>2</sup>

Today, peace is on the lips but not in the hearts. The people of the heath think that there are too many mariners around the church of Saint-Corneille, and the fishermen of Pô think that there are too many peasants in the mariners' inn.

I, who am neither a man of the sea nor a man of the heath, would love Carnac passionately if one were not rubbing shoulders so frequently with poets, scholars and collectors fanatical about enriching their museums with a pebble, overturning menhirs and disemboweling old tombs.

The poets who think they can speak as loudly as the sea, whereas their empty strophes tinkle like little bells, deafen me; the scholars searching for Roman roads, the Commentaries of Caesar in hand, annoy me, and the vandals who destroy what they cannot understand irritate me. So I only like Carnac for six months of the year, and I wait before visiting it until the breeze is too brisk for the sensitive wings of those linnets, parrots and owls. The heath is, however, charming when the oak leaves redden above the wash-houses, when the gray willows shine in the middle of the meadows, when the sunlight gilds the rows of menhirs and when the dormant Ocean extends its long blue arms between the sparkling salt-mills and the flowery islets of the river of the Crach.

Tourists, be accursed!

In winter the landscape becomes grim; the furious sea howls, the west wind breaks the pines, and rain drowns the heath. But the Ocean's wrath is even more beautiful than its caresses, and the rush-flowers have an even sweeter perfume than that of honeysuckle. If I could choose between winter and summer, I would still choose winter for visiting Carnac.

It is true that I have a friend out there, and one can converse better when the evenings are long.

My friend is the miller of the mill of Kermau.

You don't know Kermau, the diamond of Carnac? It's necessary to go to Carnac, if only to see Kermau. The menhirs of Carnac are small by comparison with that of Lochmariaker, as big as an obelisk; the funereal grottoes of Carnac are trivial by comparison with that of Gavriuis, the holy island of

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<sup>1</sup> Breton legend associates the Saint Corneille who was pope from 251-253 A.D. with the Breton Saint Korneli or Cornely, who was allegedly pursued pagan soldiers, whom he turned into the stones of the impressive megalithic alignments of Carnac, constituting more than 4,000 individual stones, nowadays an important national monument and tourist attraction but not as well-known in 1865, although they had been visited and publicized by several Romantic writers, including Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Flaubert

<sup>2</sup> The Chouannerie was a general term applied to the royalist uprisings of 1794-1803. The Revolutionaries were the "blues" and the Chouans the "whites,"

Morbihan, the heath of Carnac is not a large as a thousandth part of that of Elven, the cliffs of Carnac are only half as high as those of Croisic and the hats in Carnac are not as pretty as those of Guérandes, but only Carnac has Kermau!

Kermau is a former manor huddled under old oaks. It backs on to the heath and gazes at the sea. Between the sea and it, broad meadows snake long a crystalline stream.

I don't want to describe Kermau to you; even a photograph wouldn't give you an idea of it, for a photograph wouldn't tell you that its mossy walls are as pink as the cheeks of cherubim, that its sharp roof is as shiny as the throat of a wood-pigeon, that the ivy that embroiders it is as fresh as an emerald, that the pond that bathes it is as silky as a Milanese breastplate, that the spring that sings at its door is as limpid as your eyes, my charming reader. But I shall simply tell you, in order that you can recognize it at a distance, that it is composed of a main building flanked by two small towers, that its windows have lattices as light as convolvulus stems, and that the skylights in its roof resemble two spear-heads.

From the road to Auray you can perceive it between the heath and a clump of oaks. It is in the middle of a square formed by thick walls flanked by corner turrets. The wall that touches its two flanks encloses a small courtyard in front of its façade, and a large garden on the other side. The garden, surrounded by terraces, is planted with apple trees. On the terraces here is a double row of laurels twenty feet high. In the corner facing the rising sun two large pink stone slabs cover two tombs; in one of them a Templar reposes, and in the other a fay.

The limpid spring is beside the courtyard, between Pierre the Miller's farm and the château. When you go to see Kermau, mention me to Pierre. If he isn't at the farm go to the mill and you'll find him there.

The mill of Kermau is a windmill perched on a funerary mount ten minutes from the château; it has four red sails, a slate roof and a blazoned door. Its owner is the finest player of the binlou in all of Morbihan and one of the best storytellers in all Bretagne.

While the millstones turn Pierre plays the binlou<sup>3</sup> when he is alone, and he tells stories when he receives visitors. He receives a great many visits, because one can't go to Carnac without following the alignments, and one can't pass the mill of Kermau, situated in the middle of those alignments, without stopping to listen to the original and charming melodies that take flight from the window of the blazoned mill. As soon as one stops, a floury hand shows itself and invites you to come up.

One climbs a steep granite staircase and enters a round room, in the middle of which he millstones are purring. Sacks of wheat on one side, sacks of flour on the other, are leaning against the walls. Pierre is lying on two or three of them; one sits down to get one's breath back and the conversation commences. To the local people Pierre talks about the most recent wedding, to mariners the most recent storm, and for strangers he names the seventeen bell-towers and the twenty-two islets that can be seen from his two windows. The tassel of his cotton bonnet serves to designate the places he is talking about. About every bell-tower, every islet and every clump of trees he knows an anecdote. Listen to him:

Between that round tower, which is the bell-tower of Sainte-Anne, and that wooded hill, which is on the edge of the Auray river, you can see the smoke of the farm of Marie-Jeanne, the sister of Georges Cadoudal. She's a countess and she hasn't been made a cardinal.

"There's the steeple of Auray. Beside it is the Charterhouse, all marble inside; the field of martyrs is there, a little to the right.

"That village at the entrance to the peninsula of Quiberon is Plouharnel; two gold necklaces were found in a tomb there, one of which weighs eight hundred grams. That strip of sand is the camp of Hoche, the famous general!<sup>4</sup> The émigrés disembarked in that cove. That's the burg of Quiberon, opposite Belle-Isle.

"On that point is Saint Colomban. Facing you, to the right of the Château de Kermau, is Bomer, where there are proud lads. One day they said to themselves: 'We're from Bomer, we don't want to drink

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<sup>3</sup> A binlou is a Breton instrument closely related to the bagpipe, also known in the Auvergne; L'Estoille would probably have encountered it in the Monts de la Madeleine.

<sup>4</sup> Lazare Hoche (1768-1797), famous (or notorious) for his suppression of the Vendean counter-revolution.

in Carnac.’ And they summoned an innkeeper from Plouharnel. The first evening they got him drunk and they left him between two wines for three months. At the end of the third month the innkeeper sobered up and saw that his cellar in which he’d invested two thousand francs, was empty. The lads had only paid him seventeen sous; he died of chagrin. They’re proud lads, the lads of Bomer!”

“That fine yellow pigeon-loft is the château of a baron who made himself a park.

“In a field of rushes near that pond, my uncle was shot by a firing squad—a worthy man if he hadn’t had ideas that he didn’t understand...”

The millers of Bretagne are all free spirits, to some extent. The peasants claim that they’re also thieves, to a degree.

Perhaps the peasants are often right, but Pierre is an exception to the rule, so you can address yourself to him in confidence, provided that you’re not an antiquarian. Oh, he doesn’t like antiquarians. One day, he said to me:

“Those messieurs from Vannes are true rats, they dig everywhere. The proof is that they’ve hollowed out Mont Saint-Michel, that big hill over there with a chapel on top. They’re rats who know the best places; they found a basket in the Butte Saint-Michel full of precious stones, which they took away, but they made a portrait of it which they gave to Carnac. They’re good lads in Carnac! All the same, I wouldn’t want to be in their place; they’ve touched the fay’s stones.”

“What fay?” I said to him.

“The fay of Kermau, the one whose tomb is in the garden.”

What if I were to tell you the legend of the fay and the Templar? It is more interesting than anything I could tell you about the monuments of Carnac—and then, I have already written it down under Pierre’s dictation. He read the beginning of it to me from a greasy piece of paper which is part of his family papers, for Pierre is the last of the Comtes de Kermau, and he has the right, as he puts it: “to put in embroidery on his bonnet” the escutcheon that is engraved on the door of his mill.

Pierre claims that the manuscript is as old as the story, but he is mistaken; his manuscript is a modern translation of a “*chanson*” of the crusades.<sup>5</sup> A Kermau, a rector or deacon, amused himself by translating from Breton to French an old story whose conclusion has been eaten by rats.

This is what remains of the Kermau manuscript entitled *The Song of the Templar*:

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost!

Noble barons, unfasten your helmets, and noble ladies, put down your spindles, in order to listen to the song of a pilgrim overseas.

I have arrived from Jerusalem, where Christ preached; I have wept on the Mount of Olives where Christ wept; I have prayed on the Holy Sepulcher, where Christ was buried.

Be silent, noble demoiselles, and your tears will flow in listening to the story of Richard the Templar.

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<sup>5</sup> As noted in the introduction, *chanson* is usually translated in English as “song,” and I have done so here and, more importantly, in translating “La Chanson d’Arthur” and *La Chanson de l’alouette*, in spite of the ambiguity of the French term, which made troubadour *chansons* significant models for modern poetry in prose.