

## THE 'WHITE BROTHERS' OF SAINT-MALO

ON the day of the *Fête-Dieu* or *Corpus Christi* in Saint-Malo and the surrounding district known locally as the Clos-Poulet, the windows of all the confectioners' shops, large and small, are heaped with little bags of *dragées* or sugared almonds, known (on this occasion only) as *Cornets-de-la-Saint-Jean*. Till recently it was also the custom to sell them in the streets, when from early morning the cry could be heard :

*' Les cornets de la-Saint-Jean,  
Pour les petits et pour les grands,  
A chacun pour son argent . . . '*

—and there were few who could not spare a few sous to buy them, if only to give away to the children. But as their name indicates, these *cornets* do not really belong to the festival at all and were only transferred to it when *la-Saint-Jean* fell more or less out of observance; in earlier days it was on the 24th of June that they made their appearance, and if one goes back further their origin is as interesting as it is remote. For the *Cornets-de-la-Saint-Jean* have a history that dates back some six hundred years, and they are all that is left to-day—these gay and gilded little 'pokes' of sugared almonds—of a very ancient and noble Confraternity.

It was somewhere about the year 1240 that, under the auspices and with the support of the Bishop Geoffroi, the *Confraternité des Frères-Blancs de Saint-Jean* was first founded at Saint-Malo; and there still exist very precise details of its earlier years in certain ancient MSS, some of which (originals or copies) are now preserved in the archives of the town. Somewhat

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later, about the middle of the sixteenth century, the *Etablissements de la Société*, or schedule of its rules and customs, were re-considered, amended, and considerably added to, and printed copies of these are still in existence. We know a good deal, therefore, and from reliable sources, about the Society. We know, for instance, that to become eligible as a member, it was necessary to be of 'respect-worthy life and habit,' and to undertake to settle all differences and disputes, not by law, but according to the decision of arbitrators named and chosen by the provost of the Confraternity. At first sight this seems a little hard on the lawyers; but as we read of no complaints on their part, I fear they suffered less from the stipulation than the Society intended—and hoped. Perhaps the good people of the city were a little too fond of carrying their troubles into the courts, or perhaps there were difficulties with the undesirable aliens that already flocked to take sanctuary in Saint-Malo—I cannot say; but although the Brotherhood very soon included all within the city—and indeed in the Clos-Poulet—who were friends of peace and order, I cannot discover that the legal profession was distressed by any serious loss of business.

The confraternity was placed from the first under the rule of thirteen *jurats*, of whom one held office for life and was entitled the Abbot; and another, elected yearly, was called the *prévôt* or Provost. I am not certain whether the Abbot was ever a churchman or in orders—I am inclined to think not; though the Society seems to have practised so curious an admixture of the conventual and the secular, that it is difficult to be sure. We know, certainly, that in 1376 a house or *hôtel* was given for its use by one Guillaume Picaut, surnamed *Morfouace*, and that from this date onward the abbot lived there, and there convened the *jurats*. The site of this ancient building is still known and its memory is preserved in the significant name of the

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street in which it once stood—the Rue de l'Abbaye-Saint-Jean. In many old deeds and papers, moreover, this hotel is commonly called 'the abbey'; yet nowhere is there any definite suggestion of a strictly religious foundation, nor is the Confraternity ever described as an Order.

What exactly the Society did, and what its duties were, I find rather difficult to define. Undoubtedly its main object in the beginning was to encourage and promote the piety and faith of its members; and we know that it maintained two lamps at the Altar of the Holy Sacrament in the Cathedral and provided for the celebration of several weekly Masses. Probably it undertook many other charitable duties; in 1787 its income was used to support the *Marmite des Pauvres*, but it is true that by that time the Society itself had almost faded out of existence. Its possessions had once been very great; but by the end of the eighteenth century all that remained appear to have been one or two small invested interests, an old house in Saint-Malo (the Abbey?) and a barn or *grenier* outside the walls—the whole amounting to not more than nine hundred francs yearly. It is difficult to be sure what that sum meant in 1787—assuredly very much more than it means to-day; but even these last poor remnants were finally confiscated when the Revolution came to Saint-Malo.

There is, however, one part of the Society's activities of which we have many details; for the *Frères-Blancs* were the *Sonneurs-de-Mort*, or the *Sonneurs-d'Ames*, as they are variously styled in the old writings. In those days before newspapers existed—and when few could have read them if they had—it was usual to make known by word of mouth every death that occurred within the parish; and the manner in which this was done is detailed in the amended and enlarged Statutes passed at a General Chapter of the

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Confraternity held in the Abbey in the year 1543. Here it is laid down that—

*'Le crieur des prières par les rues pour recommander à la dévotion des fidèles les défuncts de la Société, aura deux petites cloches, et une robe blanche avec un agneau en écusson devant et derrière. Il aura pour crier tous les lundis matin, avant le jour, 50 sols tournois.'*

And at a somewhat later date this practice was widened and made more general; deaths were announced as they occurred, and were not confined to '*les défuncts de la Société*'—unless indeed that had come to include all the inhabitants of the city. Up to the date of the Revolution—though by then the Confraternity was moribund, if not wholly dead—the *sonneur* or watchman in his white gown and sounding his little bells passed through the narrow streets in the darkness of the night, chanting solemnly—

*'You are asked to pray for the soul of such-an-one who has departed from this world for another. De profundis clamavi ad te . . . .'*

—while next day he went round again, this time to announce the hour of the funeral. The Revolution presently put an end to this, as to so much else, but only temporarily. The custom of 'sounding the bells,' as it was called, was soon revived; and it survives to the present day in a modified form in many of the villages and smaller towns of the Clos-Poulet. It is no longer a *frère-blanc* who chants his announcement through the dark streets, his little bells calling the sleepers to awake and pray; but still the 'bidder' in her mourning blacks goes from door to door to make known a death and the date and hour of the burial, and to ask your prayers and invite your attendance. It is less picturesque; but it is in spirit a survival of the ancient custom.

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But it must not be thought that the White Brothers were solely concerned with serious duties and mournful occasions; they also provided what an irreverent French writer has described as 'one of the biggest shows of the year' in the life of Saint-Malo—the lighting of the Fires of Saint-John.

This festival lasted for three days, though I imagine that the third was of less importance—merely an ordinary holiday; no special celebrations appear to be connected with it. But on the first—Saint-John's-Day itself—the Confraternity walked in full state, preceded by its banner and office-bearers, from the Abbey to the *Place-de-la-Cathédrale*, where the first fire was blessed and set alight; thence, singing as they went the litanies of the Blessed Virgin, to the *Place-Saint-Thomas*, where the second fire was kindled with the same ceremonies. After that, they went to the Cathedral, where in front of the altar of their patron they knelt to sing a special hymn in his honour; the rest of the day was taken up with private festivities and with excursions to the neighbouring fires. These were innumerable, and must have strangely illuminated the green hills and valleys of the Clos-poulet in the summer twilight.

But oddly enough it was not till the twenty-fifth—the following day—that the greatest observances took place; a solemn High Mass was celebrated at the High Altar, a splendid official banquet was given at the Abbey, and a dinner served to the poor, not only of the city but of all the neighbourhood that cared to claim a share in it; and these uninvited guests, it is said, sometimes were counted by thousands. The procession, moreover, if we can judge by the old records, must have been on this day of an astonishing magnificence. Not only were the streets swept and cleaned, but laid with carpetings of flowers and sweet herbs as

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they are to-day garnished for the *Fête-Dieu*; windows and balconies were hung with draperies and green boughs were set so as to arch over the narrow ways beneath. And along these begarlanded lanes and alleys of old Saint-Malo, below the innumerable flashing panes of the great windows, came the procession headed by *les quatres petits prévôts et leur greffier*, whose special duty it was to press back the encroaching crowd; and then the bands of musicianers from all the country-side, who were paid and lodged and fed during the three days of the *fête* by the Confraternity. After these followed the long line of *frères-blancs* and *soeurs-blanches* in their white mantles and bearing flowers, and last of all the *jurats*, the *Grand Prévôt*, and the Abbot. And we are told that by a special honour accorded by Duke John V. of Brittany on an occasion when he was present and himself walked in the procession, the *jurats* were henceforth on this day dressed and robed exactly as had been the Duke; they wore 'white velvet mantles over gowns of white damask, bordered and laced with gold, a stole of heavy embroidery representing the jewelled baldric of the Duke, and a tippet of the Brittany ermines. On their heads was a cap or casque of white velvet, topped with floating white plumes,' and in their hands tall canes crowned with flowers—surely a very splendid sight! And I may perhaps note that as this applies to all the *jurats*—thirteen of them—including the Abbot, it may confirm the suggestion that his office was a secular one. It is difficult to imagine him in these robes and floating plumes, if it had been otherwise.

Last note of all—the triviality that has survived the centuries when all the magnificence and the stately ceremonial has passed and been forgotten—the White Brothers and Sisters as they walked in procession scattered on each side *dragées* and sweetmeats amongst the onlookers; a custom that presently changed to the

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distribution of little packets of bonbons tied up with gold cord or gaily-coloured ribbons.

Now the Confraternity no longer exists—for more than a century it has been dead; its wealth has been lost or confiscated, its customs and ceremonies have passed into oblivion or been preserved only in dusty records, its very existence is known to few—but still on the *Fête-Dieu*, if not on Saint John's Day, the foolish little 'pokes' are heaped in the windows and bought for the children, and still after nearly six centuries they are called as of old *les cornets-de-la-Saint-Jean*, the last trifling remembrance left to-day in the Clos-Poulet of what was once a great and pious Confraternity.

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