

**BALLADS AND
SONGS OF
BRITTANY**

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TOM TAYLOR

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By TOM TAYLOR

TRANSLATED FROM THE "BARSAZ-BREIZ" OF VICOMTE HERRART
DE LA VILLEMAURQUÉ.

WITH SOME OF THE ORIGINAL MELODIES HARMONIZED BY
MRS. TOM TAYLOR.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. TISSOT, J. R. MILLAIS, R.A., J. TENNIEL,
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INTRODUCTION.

THE Brittany which still retains so much of its ancient tongue, national character, and local usages, as to separate its population from that of the rest of France even more distinctly than the Welsh or the Highlanders are separated from the English, comprehends the three departments of Finistère, Morbihan, and the Côtes du Nord. These departments include the four ancient bishoprics of St. Pol de Léon, or the Léonnais, Cornouaille, Vannes, and Tréguier, each of which was formerly, and is still in great measure, a district with distinct dress, usages, and local character, both in the landscape and the people.

The Léonais (the Lemovicas of the Merovingian sovereigns) forms the extreme western horn of Brittany, and includes almost all the *arrondissements* of Morlaix and Brest. It is the richest and most varied region of Finistère. Its fields are fertile; its population (setting Brest aside as a French Portsmouth, only Breton in name), scattered in small villages or

isolated farms, live a life of extreme simplicity, which still retains most of the characteristics of an age of faith. The church is the great point of reunion for the *Lésnards*, its "*parades*," or festivals of patron saints, furnish its great occasions of rejoicing; the "Day of the Dead"—the day after All Saints' Day—is its chief family commemoration. The whole population is in mourning: the day is spent in religious services, in masses and prayers for the dead. The remains of the supper, which crowns the offices of the day, is left on the table, that the dead may take their seats again round the remembered board. The festival of St. John—the Christian substitute for the Druidic Sun-feast—is still celebrated. Beal-fires blaze on every hill-side, round which the peasants dance all night, in their holiday clothes, to the sound of the *binioe*—a kind of rustic hautboy—and the shepherd's horn, or of a rude music drawn out of reeds fixed across a copper basin. The girl who dances round nine St. John's fires before midnight is sure to marry within the year. In many parishes the curé himself goes in procession with banner and cross to light the sacred fire. A brand from it is preserved with reverence: placed between a branch of box blessed on Palm Sunday, and a piece of the Twelfth-night cake, it is supposed to preserve the cottage from evil by thunder. The flowers of the nosegay which crowns the beal-fire heap are

powerful talismans against bodily ills. Intensity of religious faith, passing into the wildest, and often grossest superstition, is the dominant character of the inhabitant of the Léonais. He is grave, intense in his feelings, though reserved in the expression of them, distrustful of strangers, and profoundly attached to his own country, its beliefs and usages. His dialect is long-drawn and almost chaunt-like. His dress is dark, almost always black or dark blue, relieved among the men only by a red or blue scarf round the waist; among the women, by a white *coiffé*, like a nun's *béguine*. Marriages are contracted as readily and as improvidently as in Ireland; hospitality is a custom as well as a duty, and the poor, down to the most abject beggar, are "God's guests."

The Léonais presents the gravest side of the Breton character, and has more in common with the Welsh than with the Irish Celt.

But a parallel to the mingled joyousness and pathos of the Irish temperament is to be found in Brittany—among the *Kernévotes*, the inhabitants of Cornouaille, the district which lies round the mountains of Arré, between Morlaix to the north, and Pontivy to the south, bounded by the Léonais northwards, and southwards by the district of Vannes. The northern portion of this region is wild and barren; the southern, in parts at

least, smiling and amene. Its coast scenery, especially about Quimper, is grand and terrible. Round Penmarch (the Horse's head), one of the most westerly points of the Breton coast, the dash of the Atlantic on the rocky headland is as terrific as anything on our own Cornish coast. Under the shadow of this headland lay the town of Ia, whose drowning is the subject of one of the ballads in this collection.

Till within the last forty years mass used to be served once a year from a boat on the Menhirien (or Druid stones), which at low spring-tides rose above the sea, and were believed to be the altars of the buried city, while all the fishing-boats of the bay brought a devout population of worshippers to this Christian sacrifice at Druid altars. The Kernéwote of the coast has many points of resemblance with the Léonard. Like him, he is grave almost to gloom, austere, and self-restrained. He dwells habitually on the sadder aspects of his faith, and celebrates most respectfully its sadder ceremonials. But the Kernéwote of the interior is the Irishman of Brittany, mingling with the pathetic ground-tone, which everywhere underlies the Celtic character, flashes of humour and joyousness, giving himself up with passionate impulsiveness to the merriment of the marriage-feast, the wild excesses of the carouse at the fair or opening of the threshing-floor, the mad round of the *jabadao*, or the fierce

excitement of the foot-ball play or wrestling-match, which often winds up the Cornish *pardons*. His dress is of brilliant colours, always bordered with bright scarlet, blue, or violet: about Quimper are worn the *banyou-bras*, the loose, Turk-like breeches—a relic of the old Celtic garb. It is the costume of Cornouaille that is known popularly as Breton—the bright jacket and vest, often with the name of the tailor and the date of the make worked in coloured wools on the breast, the broad belt and buckle, the buggy breeches and gay leggings, and the hair falling on the shoulders from under a broad-brimmed felt hat, or on the coast, one with narrow brims, turned up at the edge, and decorated with a many-coloured woollen band, its ends flying in the wind. It is in Cornouaille that the old marriage ceremonial, with its elaborate diplomatic arrangements of *Darvoudan* and *Breutaër*,* is kept up with most state and lavishness of outlay. The wrestling-bouts of this region are the most sharply contested and numerous attended. It is remarkable that wrestling—essentially a Celtic exercise—is in England confined to that side of the island where the Celtic nationality retained its latest hold; and the wrestling practice of Cornouaille, even down to the favourite hugs and throws, may be paralleled by the laws of the game as still carried on

* See their songs in this volume, Part II.