

Saints and Easter Bunnies: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 5, Weeks 44 - 48

It being Easter, I feel we should start with a rather strange tale of moral virtue. Today, Easter Monday, we stopped the car in the middle of an unknown forest, to follow on foot a signpost which pointed down a dirt track to *St Alexis*. Woefully ignorant of my saints, I later looked him up . He lived in the 5th century, ran away from his new wife on his wedding day, lived an abstemious life as a beggar and man of God for many years, including seventeen years living under the staircase at his parents' palace (they no longer recognised him), praying and teaching the catechism to small children. Should you wish to identify him in church paintings, he is often depicted as a man holding a ladder or a man lying beneath a staircase.

We were on our way home from a flea market in Beblenheim, and trying a new route. On the map I'd noticed a little white forestry road which wound up the mountains behind Riquewihr and along it, in the middle of nowhere, a chapel of St Alexis. Hence our stop. As we got out, John remarked that the sign to St Alexis actually had in smaller letters underneath, the word *restaurant*.

So chapel or restaurant? We walked 300 metres down the dirt track, till the forest opened into a clearing with densely parked cars, a baroque chapel and a picturesque old farmhouse. There was also a strong smell of *choucroute garnie*, the popular Alsace pickled cabbage, smoked pork and sausage dish. The chapel of St Alexis was firmly closed, but from the terrace of the farmhouse came the happy buzz of conversation and the clinking of glasses and cutlery. It was a gloriously sunny day and the French were out celebrating Easter Monday in style. The tables outdoors were crammed with diners, and there were probably as many squeezed into various dark rooms inside. Set menus revolved around sturdy Alsace specialities of *potage, choucroute*, potatoes, ham omelettes, game, smoked ham and fruit tarts. It was a delightful scene to come across in the middle of a forest: a church and a popular *ferme-auberge*. Shame we didn't get to see the baroque altar showing the death of St Alexis (apparently he died clutching a piece of paper revealing his true identity).

We'd had our first reminders of Easter a month earlier (just before I returned to Nottingham for a couple of weeks). Dorinda had often mentioned a favourite *salon de thé* in Villé with good hot chocolate and patisseries. Villé is not one of the quaint vineyard villages. It is situated on the old salt route from Lorraine to Alsace, and suffered the usual fate of Alsace villages (sacking by the alcoholic-sounding Armagnacs, pillaging, plague and famine) during the Middle Ages. The historic highlights of our stroll round the vestiges of the ramparts were the old abattoir and the prison.

The *salon de thé* was one of the larger and most prosperous-looking shops in the town. It was doing a steady trade in bread and chocolate Easter hares. Two very colourful ladies, in floating pink, gold, black and turquoise garments, were serving more slowly than we expected, until, close-up it was obvious that these ethereal creatures must be in their eighties. John nearly swept the crumbs and debris off our table, until he realised that the heap of broken egg

shells were an artistic Easter decoration. There was also a leaflet explaining the origin of the secret recipe for their traditional biscuits, which had been handed down generations of master-bakers after a pilgrim en route to Compostella (via the salt route) had given it to them in grateful thanks for his rescue and shelter one night. One of the colourful ladies gave more orders to a youthful baker for replacements for the rather ugly, lumpy chocolate lambs and hares which had just been sold, then proceeded to tie scarlet bows round the necks of the next Easter victims. She explained that in Alsace the Easter eggs are not laid by hens but brought for the children by the Easter hare. She also revealed that their papa had bought the bakery (and the secret biscuit recipe?) back in the thirties.

A few minutes before mid-day, a steady flow of single elderly ladies and gentlemen passed our table and headed through a doorway for their Saturday lunch in the restaurant in the next room. It was a versatile place. Their elderly hostesses, now transformed into waitresses, must have been exhausted by the end of the day. We left (without a lumpy chocolate bunny) to try to find, further up the valley, traces of the old single track goods line which the Germans had installed during the first world war to supply their troops up on the mountain ridge which at that time formed the border between France and Germany. We parked where the old station must have stood, and walked between high banks which would once have been tunnel walls and followed the course of the old track for a kilometre. (We had just bought, at the annual Amnesty book fair in St Die, a couple of old walking magazines from the nineteen-eighties with an interesting article and diagrams concerning the *tacot* and the traces of the old line).

Having explored that section, we drove further along the old salt route to the intriguingly named *Chapelle de la Jambe de fer*. Below the tiny chapel the Germans had quarried and crushed stone for ballast and trenches and had made another railway station for loading and transporting the stones. Before the chapel was built in 1840, there had been for a century a statue of the virgin, which a grateful shepherd had placed in a pine tree after he miraculously found his lost sheep. Inhabitants from both sides of the Vosges used to come from far and wide for the annual Pentecost pilgrimages. They would come pushing handicapped people, and would leave behind walking sticks, crutches and wooden legs in gratitude for healing. The inhabitants of the nearest village even arranged for a harmonium to be dragged up the slopes by two oxen to accompany the worship and torchlight evening procession. But these scraps of information still don't completely explain the Virgin's strange name, *Notre Dame de la Jambe de fer*.

Shortly after our exploration of the Villé valley, we had another encounter with Easter egg-shells. Roger and Dorinda had returned for a few weeks to their house in the next village of Mandray, and we planned a few restaurant trips with them. Because, as you will have gathered, we like the *Frankenbourg* in La Vancelle, we have always ignored the *Elisabeth* further up the road. But we decided that the time had come to try it. We walked through their rather dark bar, and were surprised when it opened up into a light and airy restaurant at the back. I won't go into details of the food, as John now gives a full account (with tantalising photos) on the website. Suffice it to mention that

the chef (who has only been running the restaurant for two years, after retiring from business and retraining) had prepared a little something in egg shells with which to greet his customers as they perused their menus. We don't know if it was the very undercooked egg or the slowly cooked salmon and haddock that upset John's stomach for a few days afterwards.

We haven't been back since. But while I was away, John, Roger and Dorinda returned to the *Frankenbourg* for a reassuringly good meal. As well as the restaurant photos, the event is also commemorated by a photo of Dorinda standing in Ste Marie aux Mines with a straw rabbit towering above her. Apparently they were looking for garden leaflets at the tourist office when they encountered this alarming Easter decoration.

Our latest restaurant trip was a farewell lunch with Roger and Dorinda at the *Blanche Neige* on Good Friday. Those of you who dined there on John's birthday, can imagine us first sipping our aperitifs outside in the Easter sunshine. Once inside, we ate our way through the menu in a leisurely fashion. Then after the main course and to soften us up for the dessert, the egg shells arrived! However, unlike the *Elizabeth's* under-cooked offering, these contained a delicious white chocolate mousse with a vivid orange mango coulis in the centre. The perfect Easter eggs. We had our coffees outside on the terrace. On the accompanying bonbons trays we found four endearing marzipan Easter bunnies.

We thought we'd seen the last of our Easter bunnies on Easter Sunday at Plainfang's 35th *Foire aux lapins*. This annual event always causes traffic to slow down on the main road from here to the Col de Bonhomme. So we approached it on the back roads. I had forgotten quite how many other things were to be found at the Rabbit Fair. We first encountered the mattress display. Then there were two attractive stalls of hand-woven baskets of all shapes and sizes to hold anything from logs to apples or baguettes. The longest stall held Vosgian bergamot boiled sweets (who buys them all?). A Disney roundabout outside the church would have drowned any music from within, while, to get to the lunch time meal of *baekeoffe* (a traditional Alsace meat stew) in the town hall, you had to skirt the crashing dodgems. We could also have bought children's baseball caps, red plastic sexy underwear, or goats' cheese. Finally, we came to the cages of rabbits looking for new owners. Presumably they weren't for instant consumption but for breeding, as there were babies too. I thought the prettiest were the squirrel-red coloured ones. We were reminded of Nicola who would have wanted to rescue them all.

Finally, on Easter Monday, after gobbling up the last of John's home-made hot cross buns, we set out for the *vide grenier* at Beblenheim in Alsace. This was not the first flea market of the year for John, as he had gone over to Mandray's whilst I was away. (Mandray's is held in the community centre almost opposite Roger and Dorinda's house. As their front door opens straight onto the road, the cars jostling and queuing to park outside are a great nuisance to them. Entre deux Eaux, of course, is much better organised with a huge field to park on, under the efficient command of our firemen). Anyway, we have been to Beblenheim's several times on Easter Mondays, notably with Wendy and John one year. It has a satisfying mix of dealers and inhabitants and the sun always

shines. There was plenty to look at. I fancied an old advertisement for Moroccan dates. John fingered an Ultrafex camera. He has a small collection of these, which can now be seen on the website. His main criteria for collecting has been that they have to cost less than 4 euros and be in working condition. So he started to play with the camera. "I don't know anything about cameras but it's very old", said the dealer hopefully, "probably from the forties". "I think it's about 1961" said John who'd made a study of their development, "you can see that they're using plastic". The price came down rapidly. Interestingly it still had a film inside. However, as it wasn't in full working order and had a broken strap clip, it was rejected. No doubt its price went back up again.

We were approaching the last stalls and were still empty handed when we both spotted a little copper dish with three hares racing round its rim. It was green with age and had dollops of candle wax on it. We couldn't read the inscription on the base. But we both liked it. "One euro" said the stall holder indifferently. When John cleaned it up at home the base of it read *Exposition canine Luxeuil les Bains 16 juin 19?3*. The missing digit could be 0 or 6. So what was the connection between the exhibited dogs and the depicted hares? Hopefully not hunting. John's researches have found that the three hares chasing each other in an everlasting circle form a well known motif and there is even a Three Hares Project tracing their spread along the Silk Route from Ancient China to Devon. However the Project's theories about fertility and the lunar cycle, not to mention the following quote, hardly provide a helpful link with a dog exhibition: The theory of the Ancients that the hare was hermaphroditic and could procreate without a mate led to the belief that it could give birth to young without loss of virginity. In Christian contexts, the three hares may be associated with the Virgin Mary in her role in the redemption of mankind. This might explain why a three hares boss is often juxtaposed in western European churches with a boss of the Green Man, perhaps a representation of sinful humanity

Anyway, putting theories aside, that was how we found the last of our Easter hares. Then on the way home we encountered our strange Easter saint (and meal) in the forest.

We hope you all enjoyed your Easter activities too!