

The Soul Cakers

An Old Village Memory

By C. B. HUTTON

"Here's one or two or three good-hearted lads,
We're all of one mind,
For this night we come a Souling;
We hope you'll prove kind.
If you gi' us nowt, we'll snatch nowt,
But wish you good cheer,
And we'll come no more a Souling
Till this time next year."

SO ran the first verse of our own Cheshire village Soul Caking Song, which up to half a century ago we were wont to hear at October ending in the dark, misty evening, heralding the Soul Cakers' Play. The song continued with an inviting reference to the household cellar full of "Ale, brandy, whiskey, and all sorts of wine," and ended with a blessing upon the Master and Mistress of the house, and all the little children. It was a somewhat doleful dirge, if sung slowly, as it usually was, but quite in fitting with the eerie atmosphere of Allhallows Eve, October 31st., with its Old Folks' tales of devils and witches, or the Eve of All Souls, November 1st., when once the Dead were supposed to re-visit their former earthly abodes. For these ghostly visitants it was once the custom to leave refreshments at night in the form of small spiced cakes, called Soul Cakes, and the Soul Cakers formerly came around begging for these spiced morsels. Of course we village youths of half a century ago, knew nothing of these origins, nor did we ever see a Soul Cake. The old custom to us was merely a convenient way to get money for fireworks on Bonfire Night, November 5th.

The Soul Cakers' Play, with which patrons were entertained, was just one of the several versions of the old Christmas Mummers' Play, but with the characters and words almost unrecognisably altered through ignorant, oral transmission down the centuries, for it seems that the play originated in the ancient, pagan fertility rites connected with the dying year, the central theme being a death and a rising again.

The chief characters in our (Frodsham) village play were King George, and the Violent (Valiant?) Soldier, who indulged in mortal combat, the Soldier being slain, but restored to life again by the Doctor on the intercession of the mysterious Old Woman. Evidently King George and the Soldier were changes topically due

to the Napoleonic Wars. Before then, they were St. George and the Saracen Warrior, these dating from the Crusades. Earlier still they may have been the Norse Gods of Light and Evil, Baldur and Loki. Then there was the uncanny Horse's Head, a horse's skull, tarred, and with reddened teeth. It was mounted on a stout stick, and manipulated by a player hidden under a cloth behind. This property was highly treasured, the "uninitiated" not being allowed to handle it. It was "summat yo' munna do," an ancient taboo. This Horse's Head may date back to the time when a horse was sacrificed to Odin. The Driver of the Horse had to be something of a wag, using the evergreen old country jokes, such as the one of the man, who made his nag wear green spectacles to make wood shavings look like grass; and the other about the stingy owner, who had almost got his donkey to live upon nothing a day, when unfortunately it died. Some radio comedians still use these jokes, when hard up.

Other characters were Dairy Dout, which can have many interpretations, and Belsher Bob (elsewhere Belsie Bob). He was of course Beelzebub, an addition from some old mystery play of the Middle Ages. Belsher Bob carried a clog on his shoulder. One Authority tells us this clog was originally a club, another instance of the errors through oral transmission. Then there was Little Box, who declared "My box is of the finest wood. A copper or two will do it no harm. A shilling or so will do it some good." Open the Door is self-explanatory, but this part was not a favourite role, being given to the daftest, and thickest-skinned posteriorly, for some householders did not like their clean kitchens invaded by a mob of muddy-footed tatterdemalions.

For the players' costumes, coats were turned inside out, and adorned with numerous strips of coloured rags or paper pinned on. The Doctor wore a top hat and long coat in imitation of the travelling Quack. His "wizardry" had become the recitation of a string of many syllabled comic nostrums, and diseases. Other treasured properties were a red soldier's tunic and helmet. Soot or burnt cork, chalk and red raddle from a hillside quarry were the "greasepaints."

When rival gangs of Soul Cakers met, there would be dirty work at the crossroads. A fight between two Belsher Bobs could be a bloodsome affair. It would be a terrible disgrace if the Horse's Head were captured, for it meant disastrous ill-luck. Each year, after the Play, the Head was secretly buried again.

We still have our mince pies, and even hot cross buns and Simnel Cakes, but the recipe for the making of Soul Cakes has gone, although the old custom of providing ginger bread or parkin on Bonfire Night may furnish a likely clue.