THE ADVENT OF THE BRIAR PIPE

Monsieur Regard and Monsieur Buat had come to Beaucaire for the fair. As delegates from the *Chambre Consultative des Arts et Manufactures*, they could not miss such an important event, to which merchants and merchandise flocked from all Mediterranean countries, as well as from some countries in the North.

That evening they were dining in the inn, exchanging ideas and planning the next day when suddenly one of them broke off in mid-sentence, left speechless and grabbed the salt cellar. He examined it, weighed it up, sniffed it and scratched it with his fingernail. He gave it to his friend, who returned his quizzical and surprised expression and also set about scrutinizing the object excitedly. Being experts in wood products, they had great trouble understanding the nature of the wood. It looked good, both for its colour as well as for its grain, but above all the surface was hard, dense and tough. What on earth was it?

In the fifth century AD, an abbey had been founded at the foot of the Jura mountains, located where the River Bienne joins the Tacon. The Abbaye de Condat almost immediately became a place of pilgrimage and in the seventh century was later renamed in honour of Saint Oyend, which attracted even more pilgrims. In the twelfth century, the name changed once and for all to Saint-Claude de Besançon, as was the slowly growing town, named after the saint whose body had been found in an incorruptible state in 1160, 600 years after his death. On the strength of the miracles in Saint-Claude the place became one of the key places of worship in Europe: the inhabitants specialised in welcoming the pilgrims and in the production of objects in bone and horn, but especially in wood. At first the objects were religious in nature (statuettes, rosaries), but later they became more profane, such as boxes, spoons, simple musical instruments, pen holders, combs, necklaces, tobacco boxes, Ulm-style decorated pipe stems in porcelain or wood, and also whole pipes in wood. The abbey's fire in 1799 and subsequent Napoleonic oppressive measures against the clergy dealt a heavy blow to a place whose livelihood depended on pilgrims. Nevertheless, the artisans forged ahead and increased their smoking accessories continuing with the pipe stems and also increasing the production of pipes in boxwood or cherry wood. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Regard and Buat came into contact with the salt cellar,

Saint-Claude was working at full capacity and apart from the domestic workshops, it also included larger manufacturing centres run by hydropower. The two delegates at Beaucaire represented all those artisans, and it was embarrassing indeed to be unable to identify the material of the object. However, it wasn't long before they asked around and found out, acquired samples to take back home, test them to see if the wood was suitable for pipe making, which was not from the trunk but from a root, in fact briar root.

According to Madame Germaine Pacaud-Faton, member of a well-known family in Saint-Claude who mentions this episode at that time, the discovery of the salt cellar dates back to 1854. This is one of the most credible stories, but there are many other varied accounts of the first appearance of briar wood that are quite similar, but none that are identical. In general, the episode can be dated as shortly after 1850, but not in all cases. The "discoverer" in each tale is a wood trader from the Midi, a certain David suggested by a wood trader, or else a traveler in the Midi. Like the two delegates visiting Beaucaire, they all end up bringing back to Saint-Claude their find. However, there are others, such as farmers or artisans from Saint-Claude, the Midi, Ajaccio or other places in Corsica, who were already familiar with the briar root, to the extent that they were able to carve it to supply a substitute pipe to a Frenchman from Geneva, or an admirer visiting Napoleon's tomb or birthplace, who unfortunately had just broken their meerschaum pipe, or else a variation is an unlucky French pipe maker who lost his pipe in the Maquis. As remarked earlier, the events are frequently dated just after the mid-nineteenth century. A distinction then needs to be made between the dates of the "discovery" and later the first manufacture and sale of pipes in Saint-Claude. A celebratory booklet of the centenary that bears the dates 1856 - 1956 suggests that there is little doubt about the real date, but other equally trustworthy sources indicate slightly different dates. The events set in the Napoleonic regions, however, took place a few years after the death of the Emperor, in 1821, and this is where discrepancies arise. These inconsistencies increase in the case of a few antique French manufacturers who claim to have been making briar pipes as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. In other words, a jumble of similar but different accounts, which are in a certain sense comparable to processes in the classic oral tradition, whereby each person adds, removes or alters some information from an account told by someone else. But what is the truth about the origin of briar?

For centuries pipes were made from wood in a few forest regions in Europe. They were far less fragile than clay and sea-foam, and were ideal for making stems. However, entire pipes were made from wood and to solve the problem of the pipe burning easily the bowls were lined with tin or other materials. In the quest for ever better solutions, all types of wood were tested, both from the trunk and the root. They were looking for the densest wood, introducing and perfecting various processes of honing, drying and curing. This was natural, as the success of the artisans relied on the quality of the finished product. It seems strange that none of them ever tried testing the Erica Arborea root. However, the places in various parts of Europe where wooden pipe manufacture was mostly concentrated were more or less far from the Mediterranean coast, and only then in the hills. Not too far away from the sea, large evergreen shrubs grew producing lovely white flowers of which no one took much notice. Shrubs, not trees, whose branches at most could be used to make brooms or for the fireplace. Yet, the solution, the philosopher's stone for pipe makers was right there, close at hand, combined with the bushes, but well hidden: underground.

Just below the ground's surface, but not always (roughly one in three) the Erica Arborea produces a growth, a sort of rhizome, an oval or spherical mass called a "burl" from which the roots extend. The fact that this is not always present suggests that it may be an anomaly caused by some external interference, as may happen with other plant species. Nevertheless, when the burl is present, it serves to anchor the plant firmly to the soil and above all hold water in periods of drought. Following a forest blaze the shrub is able to grow again, thanks to the nutrients stored in the rhizome. Pipe makers looking for this material need to find plants that are at least fifty years old, otherwise the burl (when it is present) is too small. Once the plant above ground has been removed, the burl is extracted laboriously from the soil. It is then roughly stripped of the roots, kept moist and sheltered from the sun (to avoid cracking as it slowly dries out) until it is transported to the sawmill. Here it is cleaned more thoroughly and then cut into ebauchons and plateaux which will be used for the pipes, discarding the rotten, useless or flawed parts. At this point, the ebauchons and plateaux are graded according to quality and then boiled in huge vats of water to remove all resins and tars. They are then slowly dried and cured. Only at the end of the process will the pipe maker come into play. Nowadays, finding the perfect burl is less easy than it was in the mid-nineteenth century, when the harvesting of Erica Arborea was just beginning. Moreover, the

plants are sought in places that have been untouched by fire in the last seventy years: burls that have stimulated regrowth of the plant following a fire are of no use. In addition, quality pipes require spherical burls and this complicates the matter further.

Going back to the early nineteenth century, or even earlier, let us step into an artisan's shoes, who is familiar with the notions of refining, curing and carving wood, who has ended up in an area of Mediterranean scrubland: how likely is it that he could have found the Erica Arborea plant out of all the others (without even knowing the species) exclaiming: "That's what I need to make a pipe"? Most unlikely. However, if for some reason he happened to see a burl, one of the best ones, wouldn't he have been at least curious and might think: "Let's try to use this"? Something like this must have happened at least around the mid-nineteenth century. Whether this occurred prior to this date is difficult to prove, but two things should be taken into consideration: many of the great discoveries arise out of an unpredictable string of chance events and an invention may be considered "ahead" of its time, thus lying in limbo before appearing on the scene when all the favourable conditions come together. If the tale of the salt cellar is true, in 1854 in the Beaucaire area (almost at the mouth of the Rhone, thus near the Mediterranean) or in any case in the South of France (the Midi) burls of briar were already being extracted and in some way crafted into objects. Some books, without any solid evidence, speak about crude briar pipes carved with knives well before 1850 and in use until 1870, or else of briar pipes shaped by inmates in the prison of Nimes in 1851. Other accounts, other more or less reliable versions refer to shepherds that made their own pipes in briar, or of someone that had bought blocks of pre-treated briar in Beaucaire that were ready to be carved and had taken them back to Saint-Claude. We will never know for sure what actually happened.

Ultimately, however, does this matter? It may be true that someone had already discovered the burl's properties and crafted more or less perfect pipes before the new material arrived in Saint-Claude. However, even if this were so, hardly anyone had noticed. Only when the first samples arrived at the foot of the Jura mountains, when all the inhabitants, fully equipped with tools and professional skills set to work, repeatedly experimenting and starting up production and distribution, only then did a new age actually begin, and briar pipes appeared on the scene in all their

glory.

It wasn't long before the artisans in Saint-Claude became familiar with the burl and perfected the various stages in the manufacturing process. The fact that the wood was so hard and dense did not discourage them: indeed, it was precisely the material of their dreams. However, the greatest surprise was when they came to smoke the pipe: the well-honed wood had no strong taste that overpowered the taste of the tobacco. Moreover, thanks to the mineral substances in the wood, it resisted heat much better than other types of wood. Its irregular structure also contained countless tiny cavities that interrupted the continuity of the material, thereby providing excellent heat insulation in the bowl and porosity that was essential to absorb the liquids related to combustion. Not only was briar a denser type of wood, it was also the ideal solution for the tobacco pipe.

It was also the ideal solution for Saint-Claude. Taking into account the nearby towns, the number of wood turners increased from 500 in 1811 to 2300 pipe makers in 66 different workshops in 1892. The number further rose to 4000 in 1912 and 6000 in 1925. Initially, there was very little difference in the shape of the smoking device compared to previous models, but what made the difference was the material itself: one needed only to try it out to realise this, and an increasing number of smokers did just that. Pipe making in Saint-Claude, which quickly acquired the status of capital of pipe makers, had developed into an industry, with solutions that were technically at the forefront: in 1863 Joseph-Honoré Dalloz, a sculptor and inventor from the town, designed a machine based on the principles of the pantograph that was capable of duplicating twelve identical pipes from one larger model. The factories expanded rapidly and became better equipped: profits soared.

However, around the turn of the century, or shortly before, alarm bells started to ring: numerous pipe specialists were packing up and leaving for London, drawn by attractive offers. Briar pipes were manufactured there from the 1860s, and a Frenchman, Emil Loewe, is said to have been the first to make briar pipes in London. However, London, becoming once again the capital of pipe manufacturing, was not the only city where briar pipes took root: from the 1870s production was established in Nuremburg and Dublin, and in Molina di Barasso, Italy, in the province of Varese, where the Milanese manufacturer, Ferdinando Rossi, established a large factory in 1897. The pipe makers of Saint-Claude would

remain the leaders for a number of years, but they no longer had the monopoly.

As for the other pipes, in the mid-nineteenth century while briar pipe making was still in its infancy, clay, meerschaum, porcelain and other materials continued to be used, but their fate had been sealed: in addition to cigars, this new fascinating material was another cause for concern in the competitive market, a truly lethal combination that was capable of even weakening the giants, of altering the characteristics of smoking worldwide.