

The three most important days in the life of a basler

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THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A BASLER

On Carnival Monday, a few minutes to four in the morning, all the lights go out in the centre of Basle. Hundreds of piccolos fill the air with their sounds, hundreds of drums resound. All of them begin with the same march *Morgestraich*. That is what the Basle citizen calls the opening of his carnival. Above the heads of the many early risers standing at the kerb, float the brightly painted lanterns, small ones carried as headgear by the drummers and piccolo players, and large ones borne shoulder high by four masked men. Gradually the weird lights fade as the sky becomes lighter with the rising sun. The frozen men, women and children, the "normal" as well as the disguised citizens, take refuge in the

warm and cosy inns to enjoy the traditional brown floursoup, and cheese and onion flan.

In the afternoon begins the long march of the "cliques" (a kind of carnival club). Individually, they march along the officially prescribed routes in the inner town. Every "Clique" treats a special subject, some event taken from the past year either in Basle or Switzerland. This is done with wit and ridicule, and the subject chosen is shown by grotesque, but most artistic costumes and masks. With every "Clique", of course, are groups of drummers and piccolo players. As they go along, mimosa sprigs, oranges of chaff are thrown from the accompanying floats, as well as the *Zeedel*, long, coloured strips

of paper elucidating the particular subject in witty, imaginative verses in the Basle dialect. In the market square there is the committee, the umpires who judge each individual "Clique".

The transition from afternoon to evening is slow, as gradual as dusk. More and more spectators withdraw to the inns and restaurants where, later in the evening, *Schnitzelbängler* circulate, singing aggressive, but amusing and facetious verses, illustrated by posters. Individuals in fancy-dress and mask make fun of politicians, friends and acquaintances they come across. Their glib tongue and special Basle humour are notorious. The fancy-dress balls have practically died out. On the other hand, "Cliques", groups and small bands wander through the streets and alleys of the inner town. And it is morning, 24 hours since the *Morgestraich* began, by the time the last carnival addicts go home. But only for a few hours. On Tuesday, the streets are taken over the *Guggenmusigen*, bands whose members play their musical instruments as much out of tune as possible, whilst still producing a coherent tune. And on Wednesday, Monday's "programme" is repeated from the afternoon on to well into the night. And then it is the end until everything comes round again next year!

S.N.T.O.

