

## NORTH DEVONSHIRE FOLK LORE.

Whilst modern supernaturalism is presenting new chapters of the marvellous, you may be willing to preserve the memory of a departing credulity in the shape of a strange story from North Devon, and a few notes of wonderful powers not less firmly believed, and perhaps not less worthy of belief, than the spiritual intercourse of your London saloons.

Four years ago, as Rector, I had to repair the chancel in this parish. On raising the pavement the masons came upon an excavation in the underlying rock, which had contained a box about 15 or 18 inches in length. It fell to pieces when discovered, and the builder supposed it might have contained the body of a still-born child. But on returning home from my parish round, my man accosted me with the inquiry, whether I had seen what the masons had found? As I had not, he described it to me; adding, that he had every reason to believe that there were some very affecting circumstances connected with it. It required very little encouragement to draw the following story from him:—It might have been sixty years ago or more, at Barnstaple Fair (the great epoch in these parts), when a young woman, belonging to our parish but in service just beyond its borders, being jeered by her companions, declared that she would go to the fair and not return without a sweetheart, though it should be the Evil One himself. Molly Richards's charms, however, attracted no admirers; and she was jogging homewards alone, when she was joined by a man who called himself Will Easton, and who, after a little parley, was allowed to mount behind her. He frequently visited her in the evenings, but always disappeared as soon as a light was brought across the threshold. Often he was heard singing; and the farmer's wife once called out, "Thee's got a beautiful voice, Will; I wish thee'd let us see thy face,"—but her request was in vain. So the courtship went on, till one night a terrible noise was heard, as of a number of men threshing upon the roof; and the unfortunate Molly was found wedged in between the bed and the wall, in a place where you could not get your hand. Ten men could not draw her out; and they brought twelve parsons to conjure her, but all in vain, till a thirteenth, the parson of Ashford, came; who, being a great scholar, outwitted the enemy. He asked the spirit whether he claimed immediate possession, or whether he would wait till the candle which they had lighted was burnt out. And the unwary spirit, either out of politeness, or fear of so many clergy, having consented to wait until the candle was burnt out, the parson immediately blew it out and put it into a box; which box, it was believed, had been built into the wall of Marwood church. But when the masons came

upon a small box underneath the pavement, my man had no doubt that it was the identical box. And, "Sure enough," said he, "when they came to search, they found the snuff o' the candle." He "minded the woman," when he was himself a boy: an awful old woman who used to wander about by the lanes and hedges, as if she had something dreadful upon her mind. The farmer with whom he served his apprenticeship was one of the ten who tried to drag her out from behind the bed; and he never liked to have the matter talked of, nor would give any satisfaction to "his missis" when her feminine curiosity set her asking about it. They said that her death was awful; and that the overseer, who was with her at the last, spent the night reading his Bible, and declared that nothing should induce him to go through such another night.

Such was the story told to me by a middle-aged man, who can read the newspaper, and is by no means a fool; and he says it shows us how dangerous it is to utter such rash words. I afterwards asked a woman of eighty about the case. She remembered the woman, and told the story with some small variations: "They did say—but people will tell lies as well as truth—that she was heard screeching as the devil carried her away over Lee wood;" but she was sure there was something in it, for Jan Janson, the tailor, told her so, and he was one of the ten who tried in vain to pull her out.

I found this latter old woman one day searching for a verse which she was sure was in the Bible, which enables you to charm an adder so that it cannot bite you: it must not be told, however, to one of your own sex; but only by a man to a woman, and conversely, or else "you lose your charter, and the serpent will bite you." I have a worthy parishioner who assures me that he knows words that will stop bleeding; and that persons have been brought to him, wounded or bleeding at the nose, whose bleeding he has thus stayed. I cannot persuade him that the bleeding would have stopped as soon, if he had kept his good words to himself.

It is generally believed that the seventh or ninth son or daughter (the succession not having been broken by the intervention of a child of the other sex), has the power of curing scrofula. Operator and patient must both be fasting; and something of a mesmeric treatment (*striking* is the local word, cf. 2 Kings v. 11, and *streichen*, Germ.) is repeated seven or nine times successively on the day of the week on which the operator was born. No money must pass, but a present is given by the patient. A blacksmith in this parish, and a small coal-dealer in the adjoining parish, are famous in this way. The operation is said to have a weakening effect on the mesmeriser; and I was told that one of these two men (I forget which) was

so exhausted by the resort of afflicted persons to him, that he was forced to change his residence. Usually the operator and patient must be of different sexes; but some persons are supposed to have the power of healing both males and females. Several persons have assured me that they could get no benefit from doctors, but that the striking had not been performed more than two or three times when they found relief. I knew a woman who set off on this errand upon a winter's morning; she slipped upon some ice, breaking her arm and extinguishing the light in her lantern; but her faith was so strong that she went on her way, and, as she says, received great benefit.

I will only ask room for one more story, told me by a clerical neighbour. A man had lost his way on the moor; and, somehow, whatever direction he took, it always brought him back to the same spot. He had heard of the pixies, and the tricks which they will play folks, and how they were to be baffled. Very likely it was all nonsense, but there was no harm in trying; so he stripped off his coat, and turned it inside out, and after that he had no difficulty in finding his way home.

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#### OLD MEMORIAL RHYMES.

Amongst the MSS. from the Tenison Library sold last year by Sotheby and Wilkinson, there was a remarkable Latin Service Book, or Prymer, dated 1555, unfortunately imperfect, but full of curious particulars. I venture to offer you notices of two for your valuable publication.

1. In the sale catalogue in which this manuscript was announced, it was stated that on the recto of the calendar for March, there was to be found the following stanza:—

"In Marche after ye ferste C  
The nexte Priuie tel you me  
The yridde [*thridde* or *third*] Sunday ful I wis  
Paske dai, sikir [*surely, certainly*] hit is."\*

When the rule which is expressed in this memory-verse is rightly understood, it is probably the shortest and easiest of all the extant formulæ for finding the real date of Easter. The "ferste C" is emblematically the first new moon in the month; the crescent C (C; but the next line has been either corrupted or not understood.

The word is printed *priuie* in the sale catalogue, which might signify the *next secret symbol*; but it

[\* This imperfect Sarum Missal is to be resold on the 27th inst. by Messrs. Sotheby and Wilkinson. In the Catalogue of this sale a more correct reading of the lines is given:—

"In Marche aftir the ferste C  
The nexte prime tell to me.  
The thridde sunday ful I wis  
Paske dai sikir hit is."—ED.]

is much more likely that it ought to be read *prime*, that is, the next full moon, for which that term is used in the tables prefixed to the Common Prayer Book. The universal application of this rude old rhyming rule of the fifteenth century may be exemplified thus:—

1786. NEW MOON, Wednesday, March 29th; 1st Sunday, April 2nd; 2nd Sunday, 9th; 3rd Sunday, 16th—EASTER.

1860. NEW MOON, Thursday, March 22nd; 1st Sunday, 25th; 2nd Sunday, April 1st; 3rd Sunday, 8th—EASTER.

1861. NEW MOON, Monday 11th; 1st Sunday, 17th; 2nd Sunday, 24th; 3rd Sunday, 31st—EASTER.

1862. NEW MOON, Sunday, 30th; 1st Sunday, April 6th; 2nd Sunday, 13th; 3rd Sunday, 20th—EASTER.

And so much for this curiosity.

2. There are some other specimens of memory-verses in the calendar prefixed to this very curious book. Take the verse for November, with the best illustration of it which I can give. The verse is as follows:—

"Sayntes<sup>1</sup>. Saules<sup>2</sup>. in Heuen. ben. syc. ker.  
As. say. eth. Mar. tyn<sup>3</sup>. Brice. er<sup>4</sup>  
Re. corde. Hue<sup>5</sup>. and. Besse<sup>6</sup>. that. tell. Cade.<sup>7</sup> (Qy.  
canne?)  
Cle. ment<sup>8</sup>. Ka. the. rin<sup>9</sup>. and. Sat<sup>10</sup>. an<sup>11</sup>."

From the strange division of the syllables, and the insertion of the full points between them, these nonsense rhymes were evidently intended to be said as a game, by which young persons or the commonalty might learn the principal holydays in every month. The manner of playing this pastime was either by holding up one hand, and touching the ends of the fingers with the other, as each syllable was recited; or by laying one hand down upon a table, spreading the fingers, and touching the intervals whilst uttering the words.

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#### Minor Notes.

EMENDATIONS EMENDED.—Some time since, in "N. & Q.," I corrected the following passage in Peele's *Edward I.*,—

"To calm, to qualify, and to compound  
Thank England's strife of Scotland's climbing peers."—  
by reading *The ambitious* for *Thank England's*, which made excellent sense; but yet did not

<sup>1</sup> 1st Nov., All Saints. <sup>2</sup> Nov. 2nd, All Souls. <sup>3</sup> 11th, S. Martin. <sup>4</sup> 13th, S. Brice, Bp. and Conf. <sup>5</sup> 17th, S. Hugh Bp. <sup>6</sup> 19th S. Elizabeth. <sup>7</sup> Evidently a misprint for *canne*, shown by the rhyme; <sup>8</sup> 23rd S. Clement, Pope; <sup>9</sup> 25th, S. Catherine. <sup>10</sup> 29th, S. Saturnus. <sup>11</sup> 30th S. Andrew.