

LONDON, SATURDAY, MAY 26, 1855.

Notes.

THE FOLK LORE OF A CORNISH VILLAGE.

Having pleasantly occupied my leisure in getting together all that is noteworthy respecting the past history and present condition of the place of my birth, I have thought that those chapters which treat of its folk lore might find an appropriate place in "N. & Q.," if abridged, and modified to suit its pages. Though the papers in another shape were read some time since before a provincial antiquarian society, they have never been published.

The place, whose popular antiquities are here to be recorded, is situated on the eminently romantic coast of the south-eastern part of Cornwall. The bold-bluff hills resting by the sea-line on a margin of craggy transition slate, alike attractive to the artist, and interesting to the geologist, have here, seemingly, suffered some disruption, and in the fissure is dropped the village, its houses resting on ledges in the hills, or skirting the inlets of the sea which forms its harbour. The inland country, for some distance, is a rapid succession of well-cultivated hill and "coomb," for that can scarcely be called *valley* which is but the acute junction of the bases of opposite hills. The population is part seafaring, part agricultural, and in reference to education as well off as such people generally are. In this quiet corner lurk many remnants of faded creeds, and ancient usages which have vanished from districts more subject to mutation with the circumstances which gave rise to them, as the side eddies of a stream retain those sticks and straws which the current would have swept off to the ocean. I begin with an account of our fairy mythology.

Though the piskies, in spite of the prognostications of the poets, have outlived the "grete charite and prayers" of the limitour, and the changes in politics and religion which took place when "Elizabeth and later James came in," it is scarcely to be expected that they will withstand that great exorcist, *steam*, when it shall make its appearance among us, and there is the greater need that "all the fairies' evidence" should be entrusted to your safe keeping.

The belief in the little folk is far from dead, though the people of the present generation hold it by a slighter tenure than their forefathers did, and are aware that piskies are *now* fair objects of ridicule, whatever they formerly were. One old woman in particular, to whose recital of some of the following tales I have listened in mute attention, was a firm believer in them; and I remember

her pettish reply, when a young friend of mine ventured to hint a doubt: "What! not believe in 'em, when my poor mother had been pinched black and blue by 'em." The argument was conclusive, for we could not then see its fallacy, though we have since learnt that the poor soul in question had not the kindest of husbands.

This creed has received so many additions and modifications at one time, and has suffered so many abstractions at another, that it is impossible to make any arrangement of our fairies into classes.

"The elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves"

are all now confounded under the generic name *pisky*. Some of the later interpolations are of a very obvious character, as will hereafter be pointed out. Our piskies are little beings standing midway between the purely spiritual, and the material, suffering a few at least of the ills incident to humanity. They have the power of making themselves seen, heard, and felt. They interest themselves in man's affairs, now doing him a good turn, and anon taking offence at a trifle, and leading him into all manner of mischief. The rude gratitude of the husbandman is construed into an insult, and the capricious sprites mislead him on the first opportunity, and laugh heartily at his misadventures. They are great enemies of sluttery, and great encouragers of good husbandry. When not singing and dancing, their chief nightly amusement is in riding the colts, and plaiting their manes, or tangling them with the seed-vessels of the burdock. Of a particular field in this neighbourhood it is reported that the farmer never puts his horses in it but he finds them in the morning in a state of great terror, panting, and covered with foam. Their form of government is monarchical, as frequent mention is made of the "king of the piskies." We have a few stories of *pisky* changelings, the only proof of whose parentage was, that "they didn't goodey" (thrive). It would seem that fairy children of some growth are occasionally entrusted to human care for a time, and recalled; and that mortals are now and then kidnapped, and carried off to fairy land; such, according to the nursery rhyme, was the end of Margery Daw:

"See-saw, Margery Daw
Sold her bed, and lay upon straw;
She sold her straw, and lay upon hay,
Piskies came and carri'd her away."

A disposition to laughter is a striking trait in their character. I have been able to gather little about the personalities of these creatures. My old friend before mentioned used to describe them as about the height of a span, clad in green, and having straw hats, or little red caps on their heads. Two only are known by name, and I

have heard them addressed in the following rhyme :

"Jack o' the lantern! Joan the wad!
Who tickled the maid and made her mad,
Light me home, the weather's bad."

I leave the stories of the *piskysled*, of which this neighbourhood can furnish several *authentic* instances, for the following ancient legends, all careful copies of oral traditions.

Colman Grey.—A farmer, who formerly lived on an estate in our vicinity, was returning one evening from a distant part of the farm, when, in crossing a particular field, he saw, to his surprise, sitting on a stone in the middle of it, a miserable-looking little creature, human in appearance, though diminutive in size, and apparently starving with cold and hunger. Pitying its condition, and perhaps aware that it was of elfish origin, and that good luck would amply repay him for his kind treatment of it, he took it home, placed it by the warm hearth on a stool, and fed it with nice milk. The poor bantling soon recovered from the lumpish and only half-sensible state in which it was found, and, though it never spoke, became very lively and playful. From the amusement which its strange tricks excited, it became a general favourite in the family, and the good folk really felt very sorry when their strange guest quitted them, which he did in a very unceremonious manner. After the lapse of three or four days, as the little fellow was gamboling about the farm kitchen, a shrill voice from the *town-place*, or farm-yard, was heard to call three times, "Colman Grey!" at which he sprang up, and gaining voice, cried, "Ho! ho! ho! my daddy is come," flew through the key-hole, and was never afterwards heard of.

A Voyage with the Piskies.—About a mile to the eastward of us is a pretty bay, on the shores of which may be seen the picturesque church of Talland, the hamlet of Portallow, with its scattered farm-houses, and the green on which the children assemble at their sports. In old time, a lad in the employ of a farmer who occupied one of the homesteads was sent to our village to procure some little household necessaries from the shop. Dark night had set in by the time he had reached Sand-hill; on his way home, when half way down the steep road, the boy heard some one say, "I'm for Portallow-green." "As you are going my way," thought he, "I may as well have your company;" and he waited for a repetition of the voice, intending to hail it. "I'm for Portallow-green," was repeated after a short interval. "I'm for Portallow-green," shouted the boy. Quick as thought he found himself on the green, surrounded by a throng of little laughing piskies. They were, however, scarcely settled before the cry was heard from several tiny voices, "I'm for Seaton-beach,"

—a fine expanse of sand on the coast between this place and Plymouth, at the distance of seven miles. Whether he was charmed by his brief taste of pisky society, or taken with their pleasant mode of travelling, is not stated; but, instead of turning his pockets inside out, as many would have done, he immediately rejoined, "I'm for Seaton-beach." Off he was whisked, and in a moment found himself on Seaton-beach. After they had for a while "danced their ringlets to the whistling winds," the cry was changed to "I'm for the king of France's cellar," and, strange to say, he offered no objection even to so long a journey. "I'm for the king of France's cellar," shouted the adventurous youth as he dropped his parcel on the beach not far from the edge of the tide. Immediately he found himself in a spacious cellar, engaged with his mysterious companions in tasting the richest of wines. Then they passed through grand rooms fitted up with a splendour which quite dazzled the lad. In one apartment the tables were covered with fine plate and rich viands, as if in expectation of a feast. Though in the main an honest lad, he could not resist the temptation to take away with him some memorial of his travels, and he pocketed one of the rich silver goblets which stood on the table. After a very short stay the word was raised, "I'm for Seaton-beach," which being repeated by the boy, he was taken back as quickly as he went, and luckily reached the beach in time to save his parcel from the flowing tide. The next destination was Portallow-green, where the piskies left our wondering traveller, who reached home, delivered his parcel of groceries, and received a compliment from the good wife for his dispatch. "You'd say so, if you only know'd where I've been," said he; "I've been wi' the piskies to Seaton-beach, and I've been to the king o' France's house, and all in five minutes." The farmer stared and expressed an opinion that the boy was *mazed*. "I thought you'd say I was mazed, so I brort (brought) away this mug to show vor et," he replied, producing the goblet. The farmer and his family examined it, wondered at it, and finished by giving a full belief to the boy's strange story. The goblet is unfortunately not now to be produced for the satisfaction of those who may still doubt; but we are assured that it remained the property of the lad's family for generations after.

Cornwall.

THOMAS Q. COUCH,

ANTIQUITY OF TABLE-TURNING.

The following extract from Monsieur Maimbourg's *History of Arianism* (translated in 1728 by the Rev. Wm. Webster, M. A., Curate of St. Dunstan's-in-the-West, and a copy of which work

LONDON, SATURDAY, JUNE 16, 1855.

Notes.

THE FOLK LORE OF A CORNISH VILLAGE: FAIRY MYTHOLOGY.

(Continued from p. 398.)

The Pisky Threshers.—The next legend, though connected by us with a particular farm-house in the neighbourhood, is of much wider fame, and well illustrates the capriciousness of their tempers, and shows that the little folk are easily offended by an offer of reward, however delicately tendered.

Long, long ago, before threshing-machines were thought of, the farmer who resided at C., in going to his barn one day, was surprised at the extraordinary quantity of corn that had been threshed during the previous night, as well as puzzled to discover the mysterious agency by which it was effected. His curiosity led him to inquire into the matter; so at night, when the moon was up, he crept stealthily to the barn-door; and looking through a chink, saw a little fellow, clad in a very tattered suit of green, wielding the "dreshel" (flail) with astonishing vigour, and beating the floor with blows so rapid that the eye could not follow the motions of the implement. The farmer slunk away unperceived, and crept to bed; where he lay a long while awake, thinking in what way he could best show his gratitude to the pisky for such an important service. He came to the conclusion, at length, that, as the little fellow's clothes were getting very old and ragged, the gift of a new suit would be a proper way to lessen the obligation; and, accordingly, on the morrow he had a suit of green made of what was supposed to be the proper size, which he carried early in the evening to the barn, and left for the pisky's acceptance. At night, the farmer stole to the door again to see how his gift was taken. He was just in time to see the elf put on the suit; which was no sooner accomplished than, looking down on himself admiringly, he sung:

"Pisky fine, and pisky gay,
Pisky now will fly away."

Or, according to other narrators:

"Pisky new coat, and pisky new hood,
Pisky now will do no more good."

From that time the farmer received no assistance from the fairy flail.

Another story tells how the farmer, looking through the key-hole, saw two elves threshing lustily, now and then interrupting their work to say to each other, in the smallest falsetto voice: "I tweat, you tweat?" The poor man, unable to contain his gratitude, incautiously thanked them through the key-hole; when the spirits, who love to work or play, "unheard and unespied," in-

stantly vanished, and have never since visited that barn.

They seem sometimes to have delighted in mischief for its own sake. Old Robin Hicks, who formerly lived in a house on the cliff, has more than once, on stormy winter nights, been alarmed at his supper by a voice sharp and shrill: "Robin! Robin! your boat is adrift." Loud was the laughter and the tacking of hands when they succeeded in luring Robin as far as the quay, where the boat was lying safely at her moorings.

The Fisherman and the Piskies.—John Taprail, long since dead, moored his boat one evening beside a barge of much larger size, in which his neighbour John Rendle traded between this place and Plymouth; and as the wind, though gusty, was not sufficient to cause any apprehension, he went to bed and slept soundly. In the middle of the night he was awoken by a voice from without bidding him get up, and "shift his rope over Rendle's," as his boat was in considerable danger. Now, as all Taprail's capital was invested in his boat and gear, we may be sure that he was not long in putting on his sea-clothes, and going to its rescue. To his great chagrin, he found that a joke had been played upon him, for the boat and barge were both riding quietly at their ropes. On his way back again, when within a few yards of his home, he observed a crowd of the little people congregated under the shelter of a boat that was lying high and dry on the beach. They were sitting in a semicircle, holding their hats towards one of their number, who was engaged in distributing a heap of money, pitching a gold piece into each hat in succession, after the manner in which cards are dealt. Now John had a covetous heart; and the sight of so much cash made him forget the respect due to an assembly of piskies, and that they are not slow to punish any intrusion on their privacy; so he crept slyly towards them, hidden by the boat, and, reaching round, managed to introduce his hat without exciting any notice. When the heap was getting low, and Taprail was awaking to the dangers of detection, he craftily withdrew his hat and made off with the prize. He had got a fair start, before the trick was discovered; but the defrauded piskies were soon on his heels, and he barely managed to reach his house and to close the door upon his pursuers. So narrow indeed was his escape, that he had left the tails of his sea-coat in their hands. Such is the evidently imperfect version of an old legend, as it is remembered by the fishermen of the present generation. We may suppose that John Taprail's door had a key-hole; and there would have been poetical justice in the story, if the elves had compelled the fraudulent fisherman to turn his hat or pocket inside out.

Our legend of the pisky midwife is so well related by Mrs. Bray, that it need not again be

told, the only material difference being that in our story it was the accidental application to her eye of the soap with which she was washing the baby, that opened to her the secrets of fairy land. (Abridged by Keightley, *Fairy Myth.*, Bohn's edit., p. 301.)

I have been unable to discover any traces of a belief in the existence of water-spirits. An old man was accustomed to relate that he saw, one stormy day, a woman, with long dank locks, sitting on the rocks in Talland Bay, and apparently weeping; and that, on his approach, she slid into the water and disappeared. This story is easily accounted for by supposing that he saw a seal (an animal that occasionally frequents that locality), the long hair being an allowable embellishment. Our fishermen talk of "mormaids;" and the egg-cases of the rays and sharks, which sometimes strew our beaches, are popularly called "mormaid's purses;" but it is extremely doubtful whether these notions are a part of our old mythology.

Besides the piskies, but of a widely different character and origin, are the spectre-huntsman and his pack, now known as "the Devil and his dandy-dogs." The genius of the tradition is essentially Scandinavian, and reminds us of the grim sights and terrible sounds which affright the belated peasant in the forests of the north. The tradition has become variously altered in its passage down to us, but it still retains enough of the terrible to mark its derivation. "The Devil and his dandy-dogs" frequent our bleak and dismal moors on tempestuous nights, and are more rarely heard and seen in the cultivated districts by the coast, where they assume a less frightful character. They are most commonly seen by those who are out at night on wicked errands, and woe betide the wretch who crosses their path. A very interesting legend is told here, though it has reference to the wild moorland district far inland.

The Devil and his Dandy-dogs.—A poor herdsman was journeying homeward across the moors one windy night, when he heard at a distance among the tors the baying of hounds, which he soon recognised as the dismal chorus of the dandy-dogs. It was three or four miles to his home; and, very much alarmed, he hurried onward as fast as the treacherous nature of the soil and the uncertainty of the path would allow; but, alas! the melancholy yelping of the hounds, and the dismal halloo of the hunter came nearer and nearer. After a considerable run, they had so gained upon him, that on looking back—oh, horror!—he could distinctly see hunter and dogs. The former was terrible to look at, and had the usual complement of *saucer-eyes*, horns, and tail, accorded by common consent to the legendary devil. He was black of course, and carried in his hand a long hunting-pole. The dogs, a numerous pack, blackened the small patch of moor that was visible;

each snorting fire, and uttering a yelp of an indescribably frightful tone. No cottage, rock, or tree was near to give the herdsman shelter, and nothing apparently remained to him but to abandon himself to their fury, when a happy thought suddenly flashed upon him, and suggested a resource. Just as they were about to rush upon him, he fell on his knees in prayer. There was strange power in the holy words he uttered: for immediately, as if resistance had been offered, the hell-hounds stood at bay, howling more dismally than ever; and the hunter shouted "Bo shrove!" "which," says my informant, "means, in the old language, *the boy prays.*" At which, they all drew off on some other pursuit, and disappeared.

This ghastly apparition loses much of its terrible character as we approach more thickly populated districts, and our stories are very tame after this legend of the Moors. Many of the tales which I have heard are so well attested, that there is some reason to conclude that the narrators have really seen a pack of *fairies* (the local name, it is necessary to add, of the weasel); of which it is well known that they hunt gregariously at night time, and, when so engaged, do not scruple to attack man.

We have no Duergar, Troll, or swart fairy of the mine; for ours is not a mining neighbourhood, and our hills have no fissures or caverns such as they delight to haunt.

Another object of superstition among our fishermen is the *white hare*, a being resembling the *létiche*. It frequents our quays by night; and is quite harmless, except that its appearance is held to predict a storm.

Very palpable modifications of the old creed are to be noticed in the account of the "Devil and his Dandy-dogs," as well as in the opinion commonly held, that the fairy ranks are recruited by infants who are allowed to die without the rite of baptism.

It is with a feeling of jealousy that we first make the discovery, that the familiar tales which we have been taught from earliest days to associate with particular localities are told in foreign tongues by far-off firesides. But they soon assume a loftier interest when we become awake to their significance; and find that in them may be traced, as an eminent antiquary remarks,—

"The early formation of nations, their identity or analogy, their changes, as well as the inner texture of the national character, more deeply than in any other circumstances, even in language itself."—Wright, *Essays on Subjects connected with the Literature, &c. of England in the Middle Ages.*

The stories of the "Pisky Threshers" and the "Pisky Midwife" frequently occur, with variations, in the legends which Keightley has so industriously collected in his learned and interesting *Fairy Mythology*; but the "Voyage of the Piskies"

and "The Fisherman and the Piskies" are not so common. The former will, however, remind the reader of the adventures of Lord Duffers, as given by Aubrey. In Mackie's *Castles, Palaces, and Prisons of Mary Queen of Scots*, a similar tale is told of a butler in the house of Monteith; with this difference, that the traveller had witches for his companions, and a bulrush for his nag.

THOMAS Q. COUCH.

Cornwall.

ANTICIPATED INVENTIONS, ETC.

Here is a volume entitled *Les Récréations Mathématiques, premièrement revues par D. Henrion, &c.*, 5th edit., Paris, 1660, in 12mo., pp. 416. This may or may not be a scarce book; but it contains a number of curious items, which relate to things which we have been wont to regard as but of yesterday. To some of these I shall refer; selecting some for amusement, and some for instruction:

1. To guess the number which any one has thought of (p. 1.).
2. To divide equally eight pints of wine by means of three unequal measures: one of eight, one of five, and one of three pints (p. 32.).
3. To find the weight of the smoke produced by the combustion of any body (p. 41.).
4. Of the magnet, and needles touched by it (p. 158.). This article contains an anticipation of the electric telegraph, very similar to the one given in the *Spectator*. He says:

"Some say that by means of a magnet, or such like stone, persons who are distant from each other may converse together. For example: Claude being at Paris, and John at Rome, if each had a needle touched by a stone of such virtue, that as one moved itself at Paris, the other should be moved at Rome; then let Claude and John have a similar alphabet, and agree to speak every day at six o'clock in the evening. Let the needle make three turns and a half, to signal that it is Claude and no other who wishes to speak with John. Claude wants to say, the king is at Paris ('Le Roi est à Paris'); and makes his needle move and stop at L, then at E, then at R, O, I,—and so of the rest. Now, at the same time, the needle of John agreeing with that of Claude, will go on moving and stopping at the same letters; so that he can easily understand or write what the other would signify to him."

The writer adds:

"It is a fine invention, but I do not think there is a magnet in the world which has such virtue; besides, it is inexpedient, for treasons would be too frequent and too much protected."

This article is illustrated with a dial, inscribed with the letters of the alphabet, and furnished with a needle as an index, the needle turning upon a pivot in the centre.

5. Of Æolipiles (p. 168.). We have here a

sentence which is anticipatory of the steam-engine. The words are:

"Some fix before the holes mills, or like things, which revolve by the motion of the steam: or they make a ball turn by means of two or three tubes curved outside."

6. Of the thermometer (p. 170.).

7. How to load cannon without powder (p. 254.). It is proposed to use air or water, both of which are to be subjected to heat, which rarefies the air and evaporates the water. Very much like an anticipation of air and steam-guns.

8. How to convey a stream of water from one mountain to another, without an aqueduct, on the principle that water will rise to the level of its source (p. 281.).

9. How to make a pound of water weigh as much as ten, twenty, or thirty; and to balance 10,000 or 100,000 lbs. of lead (p. 299.). Precisely that which the hydraulic press was invented to do.

10. How to enable a blind man to read (p. 318.). This is so remarkable as to deserve notice. From Aristotle's observation, that the sense of touch is *ὡσπερ μείσιτης* of the rest, he infers that a blind man may read by means of touch, and proposes large well-shaped letters in relief: "de grosses lettres relevées en bosse et bien taillées."

From these specimens it is apparent that the work contains a good deal of curious, amusing, and instructive matter. Perhaps some of your correspondents can tell me who was its original author, and when it was first published? We see how some of the most useful inventions were in their origin mere idle fancies, or at most but playthings; and we may learn hence to hope that some of our brightest geniuses may yet learn great lessons, even from the unambitious precincts of a toyshop, or from the pages of a book of sports.

B. H. C.

BEN JONSON'S "CATILINE."

To a passage in this noble drama (Act IV. Sc. 2.), Mr. Gifford has appended a note, which, from a critic so deeply versed in our elder literature, displays a singular misapprehension of a not very obscure word. It occurs in the speech of Cicero before the senate, after Catiline had unexpectedly entered; and which is, in fact, merely a spirited version of Cicero's first oration:

"Canst thou here
Deny, but this thy black design was hinder'd
That very day by me? thyself closed in
Within my strengths, so that thou could'st not move
Against a public reed:"

Gifford's predecessor, Whalley, being sorely puzzled by the passage, had ventured in his edition to alter the reading to "Against the public weal." "And so," adds Gifford, "it actually