

FESTIVITIES AND SUPERSTITIONS OF DEVONSHIRE.

BY MRS. JAMES WHITTLE.

AT the distance of a quarter of a mile from the turnpike-road, somewhere between Lyme and Exeter, a bye-lane leads to H——, which is traversed by few carriages but those coming expressly to the village, for it is not a thoroughfare to any place of importance. It lies in a valley, through which flows a stream, abounding in trout, that attracts many anglers to our neighbourhood in the fishing season. The village is perched on the side of a hill; the church forms a pretty object from a distance, being one of those square grey stone towers, partially covered with ivy, which are as peculiar to England, as is the scenery that surrounds us. Gently sloping hills, richly cultivated, rise from the valley, and nestled among them lie other little villages.

At the back of H—— the hill rises, and a very extensive wood covers many acres; it is one of the few remaining woods of "merrie old England;" large enough to lose oneself in comfortably, and beautiful enough to create a wish that, as in the days of good Robin Hood and his yeomen bold, the woods might be our dwelling-place.

How beautiful it is in all seasons! even now, when the frost covers the ground, and crisps the brown leaves beneath our feet, and the tall arms of the huge trees stretch naked and bare into the wintry sky, the banks and glens are as green as if it were summer prime; the ferns and mosses of infinite variety flourish now, when all other pretty weeds are gone; the curling fronds of the ferns, forming themselves into tall and elegant baskets, and the tiny leaves of the more minute and delicate kinds peeping through a carpet of bright green feathery moss. Then in the spring, thousands of primroses, violets, anemones, that lady of the woods, and wood-sorrel line the banks, or lay "their fairy gems beneath the giant tree;" these are succeeded in summer by harebells and hyacinths, both blue and white, all the curious tribe of orchises; in autumn we have the woodbines and wild roses, and the long wreaths of briony, with their dark glossy leaves and scarlet berries, twining around the bushes, intermixed with the lovely white convolvulus; but the glory of the autumn woods who shall describe?

But I must hasten back to our village and speak of its inhabitants; they are all, with few exceptions, composed of the better class of people; of respectable farmers who occupy and till their own land by their own labour and that of their family—the sons brought up to earn an honest livelihood by industry, not too proud to follow the plough in their father's steps, nor the daughters too conceited or puffed up by modern fashions to busy themselves in the dairy or hay-field, or even to enter into service at the houses of the neighbouring gentry. Many of these farmers form part of the yeomanry corps, which is the pride of South Devonshire.

At the head of the village community, and first in respect with all who know her, stands Dame E——, the widow of one who bequeathed her a small farm of about seventy or eighty acres, a comfortable house, and a large family to bring up. Well has the good old woman fulfilled

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her trust ; thrifty, provident, and hard-working, she has contrived to keep herself beyond the reach of anything like poverty ; her habits are simple, her wants few, and her store of the necessaries of life, nay, even of its luxuries is abundant. Her sons and daughters are settled around her, and her grandchildren are numerous as olive branches. It is delightful to see this respectable family receive the sacrament together ; the venerable matron kneels at the altar, beside her are her sons and daughters, a goodly row, and further off are arranged such of the third generation as are old enough to join in this holy ceremony ; it is sweet and pleasant thus to find brethren united at the table of our Lord, and to feel that a reverence for holy things is handed down from generation to generation.

Near to the good Dame E——'s house stands the cottage of the sexton, a grey-headed veteran, who has dwelt in the village from his youth upwards, known and respected by all around him ; the very soul of honesty, and as active in his old age as many a boy. I have seen the good old man labouring along under a burthen of hay, which younger shoulders would gladly have thrown off. He has long held the office of sexton ; long enough to bury many an old friend, ay, and many a young one too.

Stopping in his sad work of grave-digging one day, and resting on his spade, he looked up in my face and said, "Ah ! Ma'am, it's a wisht job I am after ; I live to see them all drop off ; I dandled her (the young woman for whom he was preparing the grave) on my knee years ago. I didn't think she'd a gone afore me ! And the merrie little chap too ! Well, well, we bide our time."

It was truly a melancholy funeral, that to which he alluded : a sister and brother were next day to be borne side by side to their last earthly home. It was the happy cheerful home of one of Dame E——'s sons that had been thus desolated.

The young woman was the victim of a lingering consumption ; when first we came to the village, the hectic spot was on her cheek, but she still went about and sang as merrily as a lark, ay, and as sweetly too ; slowly she faded ; the buoyant step grew heavier and heavier, the breath became more laboured ; by and bye we saw her no more in the village ; her place was vacant in church, and her sweet voice was missed in the psalms ; we found that she could only crawl to the door on a sunny day ; the active household duties had long been laid aside, but the needle was still plied busily, and the lace-cushion showed signs of her industry. Gradually these, too, failed, and then she read more and thought more of that world to which she knew she was hastening. She suffered terribly, but her patience never forsook her ; she always spoke of death with a sweet smile on her face, and often said, "Why do you cry, mother ? would you keep me from Heaven ?" To one of her brothers she was devotedly attached—a little being who was the favourite and plaything of the whole village ; a very Pickle, whose merry, roguish ways, won pardon for all sorts of misdemeanours. The poor girl often looked at him with tears in her eyes, and then, as if speaking to herself would say, "I can leave them all—yes, all—but him ; would that I might take him where I am going." And so it was ordained. One Sunday night we were awakened by the news that the poor little fellow was seized with the croup, and lay at the last gasp ; human skill was unavailing, and before morning he was a corpse.

When his sister was told of it, she fervently blessed God, and said, "Now, I shall die in peace; I shall soon follow him; do not toll the bell, until it sounds the knell for us both." Before noon, her gentle spirit was freed from its suffering tenement. It was no wonder that the old sexton should moralize, albeit, he was little used to do so, as he dug that deep grave.

The event created deep sympathy, and the funeral was attended by a numerous tribe of relations and friends. It was a sight to move the hardest heart, as the funeral train quitted the farm-house and wound slowly up the village; we gazed on them with eyes dimmed with tears. It is the custom here, that when a young girl dies, her coffin should be carried to the grave by six young men; and that six maidens should bear the dead body of a young man; thus it was on the present occasion. The little boy's coffin, suspended on ropes, was carried by six of his female cousins, who held the ropes so as just to lift the coffin from the ground. In like manner, the poor sister's body was borne by six young men. The parents followed; brothers, sisters, and a long train of mourners succeeded. But I dwell too long on this our village tragedy.

Come with me to Dame E——'s chimney-corner; the fire burns brightly, and we will shut out the cold, frosty air, and listen to some tales of olden times, when the railways were not, and the steam pouring from the spout of the tea-kettle on the hearth brought none but pleasant thoughts;—when the Pixies loved mankind, and the Fairies dancing in the broad moonshine left the impress of their little feet on the dewy grass, or industriously stirred the butter over night, and laughed when the maiden came and found her work all done. Then, if a swarm of bees alighted on the ground, instead of on a tree, it was a certain sign that some one in the house would die during the year,—this is most religiously believed still. We listen with seeming reverence, for such superstitions are too closely twined around their hearts to be roughly handled, and one would not willingly shock the prejudices of these excellent people by any apparent ridicule. By this means we learn many strange tales, which I shall now try to pen.

These good old *commères* tell us that, in their early youth, the hell-hounds were often heard in the dead of the night on the hills around, baying with unearthly voices, until all good Christians, trembling in their beds, buried their heads beneath the bed-clothes, muttered a prayer, and vainly tried to sleep again. Once a powerful man, one, as we were assured, in no way likely to be daunted by spectres, ventured to traverse the bye lane which leads from D—— to the high road. In those days this was a feat which even Hercules might have declined, such was the character of the lane; however, the good man despised all fear, and laughed these ghostly terrors to scorn; so lighting his lantern at the turnpike-gate, he valiantly sallied forth. He had proceeded but half way, when lo! he heard behind him the rapid steps of a horse: at first, he took no notice of this—presently, however, a horse's head appeared over his shoulder. He stretched out his hand to turn the animal away, and where he plainly saw the head, grasped only thin air. At the same moment, his light was suddenly extinguished without any apparent cause, for there was not a breath of wind stirring; then the stout man's heart began to fail. He hastened his steps, when

the horse, which was still pursuing him, to add to his dismay, snorted in the most terrific manner: now indeed he gave himself over for lost. Pale, breathless, and half dead, he reached Dame E——'s hospitable door, and tottering to a chair, told his direful adventures, declaring that, for all the gold in the Indies, he would not venture a step further alone. The sequel of the story is, that very soon the brother of this farmer died, and, more wonderful still, was seen to pass through a field where several labourers were at work; entering at one gate, he walked within a few yards of them, and climbed over a stile at the opposite corner. To their horror, when they returned home, they heard that the poor man had been dead several hours before his apparition thus appeared.

The lane where the phantom-horse was seen is still held in bad repute; and many, even of our younger neighbours, would go miles round rather than come through it after dark. One young man gravely asserted the other day, that he had seen, "with his own eyes," a headless man, riding on a horse, fly along the road and pass clean through the barred turnpike-gate.

A labouring man was lately seen, by several persons, crossing the meadows, returning from work with his bag of tools over his shoulders, when every one knew that his head had been laid in the grave many days previously. One man (but this was in years gone by) was returning from a neighbouring village at the dread hour of midnight, when he heard in the distance the baying of the hell-hounds: nearer and nearer they came scouring over the hills above him. Terrified, he threw himself under a hedge, and in a moment the whole hunt passed by him, dogs and horses all sending forth hideous unearthly noises, while flames spouted from their nostrils; a carriage brought up the rear, drawn by spectre horses, and all bounded forward through hedge and over ditch as easily as on a turnpike-road.

Of those little, merry wicked sprites the Pixies, too, we hear wonderful stories. They dwell in the hill-sides, and dearly love a little mischief: they are the Robin Goodfellows of the country round, and delight in plaguing dairy-maids, upsetting their milk-pails, souring the cream, hindering the butter "from coming," and diverting themselves with a thousand practical jokes. The farmers, too, complain of their pranks; for, when the whim seizes them, these little urchins mount the ponies or colts, left in the fields all night, and pulling hairs from their tails, twist them into stirrups for their tiny feet, or knot the mane and, sitting astride on the neck, ride away over moor and fell, over hill and dale, faster and faster, until the poor beast sinks down from very exhaustion, and is found in the morning by its owner, in its proper pasture, lying half dead in a ditch. I lately heard of a colt in the village, that was said to have been Pixie-ridden, and sure enough the poor starveling looked as if its urchin-rider had taken all the mettle out of it. The people are careful to propitiate these little imps, and when the apples are gathered, one is left on every tree for them, which they call the Pixie's hoard.

On old Christmas Eve, or Twelfth Night, the farmers, with their sons and labourers, go out in a body after dark, and sing to the apple-trees, to insure a good crop the following year. They take with them a bowl of hot cider and toast, which they conceal amongst the branches

of the tree ; this is an offering to the Pixies : then, standing round, they sing the following verse :—

“ What zeal ! what zeal in all our town !*
The cup is white and the ale is brown ;
The cup it is made with the Ashen-tree,
Come, my brave fellow, we'll drink to thee !
We hope the trees will blow and bear,
Until their boughs are ready to tear.

Hats full !

Caps full !

Three bushel bags full !

Hurrah ! Hurrah !”

On one of these occasions, when the party returned to the house, they found that in their absence all the cider had been drunk from the hogshead ; and while they were wondering how it had happened, a little Pixie slipped into the midst of them, crying out, “ I sipped once !” and instantly vanished. These customs are by degrees beginning to disappear ; but they are still kept up most scrupulously in some of the farm-houses. Amongst them is the “ Crying of the Neck,” during harvest. I have never heard it myself, but it has been thus described to me. When the wheat harvest is ended, the reapers assemble in the middle of the field they have just cut ; one, generally the oldest man of the party, stands in the centre, and the rest form a circle round him ; they then stoop down, with their hats in their hand, until they nearly touch the ground ; and slowly raising themselves, they stretch their arms and hats high above their heads, shouting all together, “ We hav'n—we hav'n—we hav'n !” words which seem to signify, we have it, or we have the corn ; the cider jug is circulated, and then they shout again, repeating the same words and the drinking three separate times. This custom is preserved in full force around us. I cannot find out what object there is in the “ Crying of the Neck,” whether it relates to the Pixies, or has its origin in some old tradition ; the people themselves cannot tell why they continue the practice, only that “ it was always done, long before our time.”†

In October a large fair is held in a neighbouring village, which, when the facilities of intercourse between town and town were few, was resorted to by people from all the surrounding country. Farmers went to sell and buy cattle, sheep, pigs, and corn ; and their wives to dispose of their dairy produce. Then were seen booths, like large houses, lining the street on either side, and wares of every description were temptingly exposed, to ease the good wife's pocket of her superfluous cash. Stores of all needful articles were laid in ; the kitchen and dairy were replenished with such utensils as had been worn out ; a stock of good useful calicos, linens, flannels, fustians, corderoys, &c., were purchased ; groceries and “ cloam” (as earthenware is called in Devonshire) were laid in for the year : while the maidens cast wistful glances at the handsome gown-pieces, ribbons, laces and gew-gaws, which were tastefully displayed before their longing eyes. Then each house was filled with visitors, and dainties of every kind covered the table ; scalt cream, white-pot, squab-pie, black puddings, and all the host of Devon-

* “ What zeal,” seems to me a corruption of Wassail ; for although in the written copy of the verse sent me the word is thus spelt, it is pronounced “ *aus-ale*.”

† In Hone's Every Day Book, this custom of “ Crying the Neck” is described in the manner in which it is performed in the North of Devon. It varies from that adopted here in some particulars, but must have had the same origin.

shire delicacies, abounded. The scattered members of families then gathered round the paternal hearth, and all was festivity and merriment. The fair retains now but a shadow of its former glory; but some old customs connected with it prevail still, which induce me to mention it. Every householder in the village is allowed to brew beer and retail it without a license during this week. For weeks previous to the time, the village smells like a vast brewhouse; the fragrant steam from malt and hops issues from almost every door, for all are eager "to hang out the bush," and thus add to their precarious earnings.

Another old practice obtains at this time. The fair begins on a Wednesday, and lasts two days: very early on Monday morning, long before dawn, a troop of boys and men make the tour of the neighbouring villages, armed with cows' horns, through which they blow sounds that

"Startle the dull cold ear of night."

and banish sleep from all who are unhappy enough to come within their influence. I had never heard of the custom, and when the long blast assailed my sleeping senses, I started up, believing that the hell-hounds were indeed come, and that it was the horn of the demon huntsman that I heard. Soon, however, I recognised merry, laughing voices, which issued from no phantom forms, but from living, breathing mortals, singing beneath our windows some doggerel verses, summoning all who are not sluggards to rise from their beds.

The object of this nocturnal visitation is to arouse the inhabitants of the farm-houses, that the washing, and baking, and usual business of the week may be despatched betimes, in order to allow the maidens leisure to enjoy the fair. For this kind office they are rewarded with potations of cider, which the awakened sleepers rise to offer them. They stop before every house to wind their horn and shout their most unmusical song.

On Easter Sunday a belief exists, and many still maintain its truth, that those who rise before dawn, and climb the highest hill within reach, will see as the sun rises above the horizon, the figure of a lamb in its disc, which vanishes when the beams of the bright God of day shine forth. The lamb is, of course, typical of our Saviour, who arose on this day from the dead. Another strange superstition attaches to Christmas time: it is said, that as the morning dawns of the day on which Christ was born, the cattle in the stables kneel down; and I have heard it confidently asserted that when the new style came in, the younger cattle only knelt down on the 25th of December, while the older bullocks reserved their genuflections for Old Christmas day, or the 6th of January.

But of all the wondrous tales we hear, none are to be compared with those that relate to witches. It is strange that in the nineteenth century people can be found who give serious credence to the existence of, and power possessed by, those poor old women, who from their ugliness, singular and lonely habits, gain the reputation of being witches. Such an one is reported to dwell in a village not far from this; the picture that was drawn of her for my edification was certainly rather revolting; a little shrivelled old hag, lame and decrepid, with a skin like a tanned hide, and withered bony arms; and eyes "oh, ma'am if you could see her eyes, you'd never forget them, they are for

all the world like a cat's in the dark, or like two coals of fire." She wanders about the country, peering into people's dwellings, foreboding evil and dreaded by all who fear to offend her, believing her to hold the power of blighting their fortunes and spreading ruin and death through their homes.

There are two Witches, the Black and the White: the former inflicts the evil, the latter administers the remedy; when the former has cursed a house and "*overlooked*" its inmates, then nothing can remove the spell but the counter-charms of the more potent spirit dwelling in the latter. The Black Witch lives alone in a little hovel, and has three large black cats, who follow her about, and who of course, are looked upon as imps under her command. A few instances of her power which were related to me by our neighbours, who implicitly believe in their truth, will best show how much she is feared.

One most respectable farmer's wife told me, that she knew what she was going to tell me was all true, because it had happened to a cousin of hers, and that he had lost hundreds of pounds by the machinations of the Black Witch. It seems that the farmer's wife had refused one morning to give the old woman a draught of milk, which so enraged her, that she cursed the household and the stock, casting an evil eye on them all "sure enough" as my informant went on to say; "the cattle all fell sick, and many died, and every thing went wrong, and ruin stared them all in the face. The wife at length fell ill, and her child and a servant, and lay at death's door. It was then high time to go to the other old woman, who told them to take a bullock's heart and stick it full of pins and burn it, and that when it was all consumed, the stock would recover and the people get well, and all be set right again. And so it all happened; and this must certainly be true, for there they are all alive now."

More marvellous still is the following tale, which I heard from the daughter of the good old people who were the chief actors in it. By some unlucky chance they had displeased the old witch, who put her curse upon them, and their house; the charm soon began to work, twelve fine bullocks, that were nearly fat enough for market, fell sick; all the usual remedies were tried in vain, nothing did them the least good; they hourly grew worse and death seemed at hand. In the evening when the family drew round the roaring wood fire, and were bewailing their impending loss, the good man spied a little creature perched in the chimney corner; it was something like a cat, but yet it was not a cat, it grinned like a monkey, was covered with hair, had large bright staring eyes, wore a bright scarlet coat, and hopped and skipped about, now settling on one thing, and now on another. In vain they pursued it; it eluded all attempts to catch it, and then springing through the barred door, disappeared. It was seen too by day jumping on the backs of the cattle, and every thing it touched seemed blighted; it returned to the house the following evening; the farmer determined to shoot it and tried to reach down his gun which hung over the chimney-piece, but an irresistible power forced his arm down; then he took up a huge stick and pursued the little imp about the room, striking at it repeatedly; but although he appeared to hit it, not a blow made any impression on it. It seemed to enjoy frolicking about, and led the "maister" (as the farmer is always designated) a fine dance; springing into the dresser it hid itself amongst the plates

and cups, and saucers, never rattling or moving one of them, but running in and out, where not even a mouse could have crept; then leaping down it squatted under the table, and, as the man came near, jumped away. The farmer declared he was then compelled, by a force he could neither see nor resist, to open the door, when the little sprite bolted through his legs and hid behind some corn-sacks which stood in the entry; these the good man turned over, belabouring the spot where he had seen the enemy conceal itself, but to no purpose; the active young imp was up again, unhurt. And now it bounded upstairs, laying itself down in the beds, frightening the family at night, by creeping under the bed-clothes or perching itself on the bolster. Meantime the bullocks were at the point of death; what was to be done? The White Witch must be consulted; accordingly the farmer went to her dwelling, and related his case. The "wise woman" told him that he must, when every one was asleep, make a huge fire of white thorn on the hearth, then take a new ashen-bowl, in which nothing had ever been put, and bleed that bullock which seemed the worst into it; the bowl containing the blood was then to be put into the midst of the blazing fire, and if before midnight it had not cracked, or been consumed, he was to break it into pieces, spill the blood, and conceal the fragments in the ashes. Now the farrier had declared that to bleed the cattle would be to kill them on the spot; yet in spite of this verdict, the farmer persisted in following the advice given him by the Witch. He did so, failing in no point; and wonderful to tell, the bowl though standing in the very centre of the flames, remained untouched by them, so that as the clock struck twelve, the farmer broke it and did as he had been directed. No one will of course venture to doubt the perfect cure effected; the bullocks rose up immediately, went on eating as usual; the little imp troubled them no more, and tranquillity was restored to the house.*

The belief in spirits haunting certain houses pervades all classes about us; people call them "troublesome houses." One pretty, old-fashioned farm-house of a superior order, which stands in a village about two miles from us, and which cannot fail to attract the notice of every passer-by, had the character in former days of being "troublesome."

The tale runs that in the civil wars much treasure was concealed in the walls and under the floors of such old houses, and that the spirits of the owners of this hidden wealth cannot rest until it is discovered; that they wander through their old haunts, frightening all who may haply behold them. By such a ghost was this farm-house haunted, and so frequent were its visits, so terrific the noises heard, that at length the owners of the place were fain to apply to the clergyman of the parish for aid. He came in due state, accompanied by a brother divine; and after divers ceremonies and exorcisms, the ghost was driven from the house, and compelled to take up his abode in a deep pit, at a considerable distance from it. It appears, however, that the power of these clergymen extended only to a certain point; the ghost was banished, but his exile was not to be perpetual, for every year he is allowed to approach nearer to his old haunts by the length of a cock's stride; and though the pit is far removed from the house, yet eventually

* This red-coated little imp puts one in mind of the Leprechauns of Ireland, whose feats much resemble those of the Devonshire imp here described.

these cocks' strides must accomplish the distance. May it not happen in our time!

I shall content myself with mentioning one more fact relating to these superstitions, though many others might be cited. One night two men, notorious smugglers, were passing over a high hill overlooking the sea, carrying a number of brandy kegs with them, which they were going to conceal amongst the rocks on the shore. The moon shone ever and anon from behind the rack of cloud that was scudding rapidly across the heavens, portending a wild and stormy night; a gleam revealed to these men a sight that curdled their blood with fear; on a tree, hanging by the topmost bough which whirled round and round the trunk, as if set on a pivot, swung a little old woman no bigger than a magpie, with glaring eyes. She looked at them sternly, and demanded the brandy; the men, far too frightened to encounter her gaze a second time, at once threw down their kegs at the foot of the tree, and taking to their heels never stopped till they reached the habitations of men. Such are the tales that fill the heads of the people around us.

Among the customs which belong to Christmas there is one that deserves our notice, as a remnant of the pastimes of "merrie Old England." On Christmas-day boys dressed in various costumes, go about from house to house acting a sort of play. This as well as many other ancient customs is gradually falling into disuse; time was, within the memory of many now alive, when these old plays were acted by men and women, and got up with the greatest care; when ladies lent their ornaments and feathers and brocades to deck out the "King of Egypt" and "fair Sabra," and the itinerant band were gladly welcomed in the houses of the gentry.

In our days the ancient usage, though not extinct, is confined to a younger generation; boys still continue to perform a play, but neither in "properties" nor in the characters assumed does it equal the former representations.

These plays are evidently a remnant of the ancient Mysteries, Pageants, Masques, Mummeries and Disguisings which are recorded as having been represented before kings and nobles, as early as the year 1170. These continued to form a part of the Christmas festivities of the Court until the Commonwealth, when they were suppressed by act of Parliament, and all celebration of the "Popish holiday of Christmas" was prohibited. For twelve years these "Dysgysyngs and dyvers pleyes" were suspended. In the preface to a curious collection of Christmas Carols (published in 1833 by William Sandys) we find the following extract from an old book entitled the "Vindication of Christmas" wherein old Father Christmas laments the neglect into which he had fallen. "But welcome or not welcome I am come;" he says, "my best and freest welcome with some kinde of countrey farmers was in Devonshire."

After the Restoration, these merrymakings, pageants, masques, and entertainments were never revived in the Court; but traces of them gered amongst the nobility, and even yet, in some of their princely mansions, Christmas is celebrated with generous hospitality, and games, pastimes, and cheerful revelry, resound through the halls, where the yule-log burns brightly, and goodly barons of beef, plum puddings, and mince-pies, with strong ale, rejoice the inward man.

The wassail-bowl is of great antiquity, having been the accompani-

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ment to the boar's head, and being peculiar to Christmas time. The entrance of the wassail bowl into the festive hall was hailed with shouts and songs; it contained "lamb's wool," a beverage compounded of hot ale, nutmeg and sugar, in which pieces of toasted bread and roasted apples were swimming. In some places, the wassail bowl was carried round the country to the different gentlemen's houses on Christmas Eve, the bearers singing a wassail song, in return for which they expected to be admitted to partake of the good cheer, or to receive a small gratuity in money. Some of these songs are still extant, though the usage connected with them has, I fear, become extinct.

On Christmas Eve, it is the custom in all the farm-houses of this neighbourhood to "burn the ashen faggot." All the labourers and servants are invited, and a huge fire is heaped up on the wide hearth; it was in Dame E——'s house I witnessed the curious scene I shall attempt to describe. She herself sat the presiding genius of the evening, dressed in her usual costume of eighty years since; her fine portly figure encased in the hard wooden corset, then worn by all classes; the tidy dark gown with short sleeves, displaying her muscular arms, rendered strong and brown by hard labour; the handkerchief crossed over the bosom, and confined by her clean apron; the cap so white, and so simple bound on the head with a broad coloured ribbon—this was her dress. Her face beamed with kindness and benevolence as she stood in the midst of her retainers, the matron of the village. We all sat round the hearth in a circle; the fire light deepening the shadows on the hard featured mahogany countenances around, and setting off the peculiarities of each form. The ashen faggot which lay on the hearth consists of a long, immense log of ash, surrounded with smaller branches, which are bound to it with many withies, forming one large bundle; it filled the whole hearth, and as it burned, the roaring in the large chimney was tremendous. As the fire slowly catches, and consumes the withies, the sticks fly off, and kindle into a sudden blaze, and as each one after the other gives way, all present stand up and shout with might and main; "the loving cup" of cider is handed round, and each drinks his fill. They then resume their seats, sing songs, and crack jokes, till the bursting of another band, and the kindling of a fresh blaze demands renewed shouts, and another pull at the cider flagon. The merriment is allowed to go on till nearly midnight, before which hour the worthy giver of the feast likes to have her house clear, that the "Holy Day" may begin in peace. The legend attached to this custom is peculiar; it is said, that at the birth of our Saviour, the winter was so very severe (in Judæa be it remembered!) that fire-wood was scarce, and that they were compelled in the stable, where the mother and child lay, to burn the green boughs of the ash-tree; and that ever since, the event has been commemorated on Christmas Eve, by the burning of "the ashen faggot." This custom is kept up religiously in all the farm-houses around, and is one of the principal festivals of the year.