

A Derbyshire Brawl in the 15th Century.

By HENRY KIRKE.



IN the year of grace 1428—three years before Jeanne d'Arc was cruelly done to death in the market place of Rouen—an unseemly and murderous deed was done in the High Peak of Derbyshire. Such deeds of blood could not have been uncommon in an age which was one of violence and bloodshed, when private wars were ordinary occurrences, when gangs of ruffians held the roads, and murders were open and organised, when even the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge “arrayed themselves in habiliments of war,” and exercised a reign of terror and blackmail over the neighbouring counties. There are, however, some traits about the narrative of this particular brawl which are unusual, and which give rise to certain speculations—not without wonder.

The story as set forth in a MS. in the British Museum, catalogued as Add. MSS. 28,111, is as follows:—

“8th Henry VI. (1429-30) Robert Eyre, of Padley, in Co. Derby, gentleman, was indicted before John Dunbaben, one of the King's Coroners for the said county of Derby, for the murder of William Woodrove, of Hope, in the said county, gentleman, and on his trial before Peter Pole and Gerard Maynel, the King's Justices assigned to deliver his gaol at Derby of the said Robert Eyre on Monday next after the feast of St. George the Martyr, 8 H 6, the following circumstances appeared:—

“On the Sabbath day next after the feast of the Holy Cross on the 7th year of the reign of the King, the said Robert and

William were riding friendly together from the town of Chesterfield to the town of Holme, when a quarrel arose between them, and some opprobrious words passed, and the said Robert wishing to put an end to the quarrel said to the said William: 'Friend, you well know that we are kinsmen, and called honest men, and therefore it is disgraceful for us to fight, and for the whole country to hear us quarrel.' On which the said William got off his horse, drew his sword, and struck the said Robert on the back part of his head, and would have killed him but for a large red handkerchief which was tyed several times round his head; and the said Robert being in fear of death retreated to a hedge, and when he could get no further, in order to save his life, he drew his sword to defend himself, and struck the said William on the head, of which wound he languished without speaking till the second day, and then died

"The jury found the said Robert Not Guilty of the death of the said William, but said upon their oaths that one Peter Swordman, of Brecknock, in Wales, labourer at Holme aforesaid, the day and year aforesaid the said William feloniously did kill.

"Thereupon the said Robert was thereof quit, and the said Peter Swordman taken.

"Names of the jury between the
King and the said Robert Eyre.

- " Henry Langford, of Chesterfield, Esq. ;
- " Roger Wolley, of Derby ;
- " John Stokkeley, of Derby ;
- " William Bate, of Sallowe ;
- " John Elton, of Ashbourne ;
- " William Orme, of Derby ;
- " John Tytchet, of Chesterfield ;
- " Thomas Calcroft, of Chesterfield ;
- " John Taillour, of Chesterfield ;
- " John Carre, of Chesterfield ;
- " John Forthe, of Calbrook ;
- " John Halok, of Calbrook ;
- " John Coteler, of Chesterfield ;

“ John Strelley, of Derby ;

“ Richard Cadman, of Hertyndon.

“ Sheriff : John Cokfield.

“ Coroners : John Dunbaben,

Thomas Bradshawe.”

There is no clue in the MS. to the lost history from whence this story was rescued. It has the aspect of truth, and its perusal excites reflections, in the legal mind especially.

In the first place, it is singular that such an occurrence should have been noticed at all. A crowner's quest must be held ; but why refer the case to the Criminal Sessions? If all the fights, personal or otherwise, which led to fatal results had been sent on for trial, the King's Justices would have been the hardest-worked men in England. Quarrels of all kinds were common ; all men went abroad armed, ready to slay or be slain on the slightest provocation. The times were troublous : it was on the eve of the Wars of the Roses, when faction ran high, North arrayed against South, and the champions of the rival parties ready to close in the death grapple.

Again, the verdict of the Jury strikes one as peculiar. The evidence is clear and probable. A ride home, probably after a convivial entertainment and much wine bibbing, an altercation by the way ending in a personal encounter which terminated fatally for the aggressor. One would have thought that the Coroner's jury would have settled the matter at once on such evidence.

As far as the record shows, similar facts were adduced before the King's Justices, and the verdict given was in accordance with the evidence, were it not for the extraordinary rider added by the jury, who found a verdict of “ Not Guilty,” but added that, although they found Robert Eyre was guiltless of the murder, one Peter Swordman was the guilty man. Of this Peter Swordman there is not a word in the evidence.

Robert Eyre was a member of a distinguished Derbyshire family. He had fought at the battle of Agincourt under the banners of his father, Nicholas Eyre, of Hope. He had married Joan Padley, sole daughter and heiress of Robert de

Padley,* and through her he had become one of the largest landowners in the Hope Valley. He rebuilt the church at Hathersage, in which he and his wife lie buried. He died on the 20th of March, 1459, and his wife followed him to the grave in 1463. The Woodroves or Woodruffes were a family of some note at Hope, and no doubt allied to the Eyres, as stated in the narrative.

But who was Peter Swordman? He is described as a Welshman, native of Brecknock, and labourer at Holme, but there is nothing in the narrative to show that he was in Eyre's retinue, or took any part in the fatal affray. Swordman is not a Welsh name. Is it a generic title? Was he Peter, a swordman in Eyre's company? Perhaps he had no existence at all—was only a fictitious character, like the "John Doe" and "Richard Roe" of later legal lore.

A man had been killed in a brawl: someone must have killed him. The Jury find Robert Eyre not guilty, but, to satisfy the claims of justice, declare that Peter Swordman is guilty, and a bench warrant is issued for his arrest. He was only a labourer, a foreigner from Brecknock, one of the hated Welsh. "Thereupon the said Robert was thereof quit, and the said Peter Swordman was taken." So ends this veracious chronicle. It would be interesting to know what became of Peter Swordman. Perhaps, as Betsey Prig said of Mrs. Harris: "I don't believe there's no sich a person."

* Of this marriage the Author of *The Old Halls, Manors and Families of Derbyshire* says, Vol. I., p. 184:—"She [Joan Padley] had plighted her Troth with Robert Eyre, third son of Nicholas Eyre, lord of Highlow. Now Sir Nicholas was under the ban of the Church for some dark deed (tradition says it was murder), and Joan's father had forbidden the union of the young people." Does not Mr. Kirke's story, possibly, throw light on the dark deed of tradition?—ED.