

ART. XXII.—*Some East Cumberland Superstitions.* By
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Read at Carlisle July 23rd, 1885.

MATERIAL relics of the past, such as old stones and old documents, have to be preserved with a kind of religious care, or they run a great risk of being destroyed. But there is another class of memorials of past and passing life, which are much more shifting and evanescent than any stone or document, which must change or disappear as time goes on, and of which almost the only possible record is by pen and ink. In this age of railways*, newspapers, and primary education, superstition, however deep-rooted and sometimes beautiful, is bound to die, even though it die hard; and so it is with readiness that I obey the command of our editor and jot down some few specimens of local superstitions, which I have experienced or heard of during my few years' residence in the border district of East Cumberland. Perhaps my doing so may lead to other contributions from various parts of our archæological area.

While other superstitions are rapidly dying out, the belief in charming is still vigorous, and its decline is evidenced by the increase in the number, not so much of those who refuse to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely, as of those trimmers who resort to him, or her, but blush to have it known.

So far as I know, the charmer is not accustomed to give charms or amulets, as in some other parts of Great Britain, nor does he try to minister to a mind diseased,

* Railways, however, do not in this way always work the miracles expected of them. The Newcastle and Carlisle Line was one of the first made, and charmers are still existing and thriving within easy hearing of its throbs of civilization.

but

but only to cure bodily ailments, and these medical, not surgical. Erysipelas and ringworm (sometimes caught from the calves) are the maladies most commonly treated, but not these alone. A girl, ill with jaundice, was cured by the same recourse being had to the "wise woman" as Fabian recommended in the case of Malvolio. A boy, suffering from toothache, was taken to an old blacksmith, who prodded the decayed tooth with a rusty nail; blindfolded the boy; led him into a wood, and, taking the bandage off his eyes, made him hammer the nail into a young oak; blindfolded him again, and led him out, making him promise not to try and find the tree or tell anyone of it. And that tooth never ached any more. But the charm is usually worked by means of a stone which, just after sunset, is rubbed over the part affected, while the operator mutters some spell in a voice too low and rapid to be distinctly heard, though it is said to end, as a rule, with an invocation of the Trinity. "Can it sic an ill thing, when it ha God's name in't?" The stone is often handed down from charmer to charmer, but it is sometimes supposed to lose its virtue after a certain number of cures, and then the old one is got rid of, and a new one is dug up, with certain solemn but hidden rites. The charmer may not receive payment at the time, but, if the charm is effectual, it is allowable to offer him a present afterwards. The charm may have to be repeated two or three times. The patient must have faith. In the daily relations of life the charmers are treated like any ordinary persons. They may be old or young (of discreet age), men or women. It is held, but here authorities are at variance, that a man may give his power, or of his power, to a woman, and a woman to a man, but not to a person of the same sex. A woman, now living, had the power given her, but for years did not believe in her possessing it, indeed laughed at the whole thing. At last she was persuaded

persuaded to try, succeeded, and now has a flourishing practice. It is often the case that a charmer and a medical man may have the same patient under them, and then of course one gets credit for the good done by the other ; but, if a cure is not effected, it is not the charmer that usually bears the blame. The belief in malevolent supernatural agency seems almost entirely to have *died out of these parts. Not very long ago, however, the fairies were looked upon as, in some cases, rather malicious "little men". Allingham's word of praise

Wee folk, *good* folk,
Trooping all together.

would not always have been appropriate. There is a tale of how, in Bewcastle, a man, not the better for liquor, was seized by the fairies when coming home late from market, dragged off his horse and across country to the side of a hill, into which he would have been forced had not he happened to have in his pocket a leaf of an old Bible. The chief haunt of these fairies was Elliotstownholm in Lanercost, on the banks of the White Line. They used to ride little horses, and their feet, jingling in their silver stirrups, have been heard by people still living. They smoked, too, and their little pipes were sometimes picked up. Also, a generation ago, little men had not quite ceased their pranks on a piece of ground by the Quarry Beck, between Lanercost Abbey and Brampton. And it is, or has been, the custom in many houses, to put a pinch of salt in the fire when the milk is being churned, so that the fairies may not prevent the butter coming. But, in all fairness be it said, they are sometimes more tender-hearted, and even now at Bewcastle "There is a stone in the castle wall, to which if you whisper your desires in love matters,

*It is different in North Devon where the "white witches," usually men, would have no professional existence, as sellers of charms and antidotes, were it not for the influence on human beings and cattle of the evil-disposed witches, usually women.

you

you will surely get what you want from the fairies." Boggles, too, are sometimes not very amiable. They are very common. There must be few parishes without one or two. But the belief, even in boggles, has much waned, and there are not a few who laugh at them, and try to account for them.

Three winters ago the north of this parish was troubled by a strange boggle which, contrary to the habits of its class, trotted about here and there in places many miles apart, raising unearthly cries. The more timid were afraid to venture out of their houses after sunset, and the hair of one upland farmer, who heard the cry, so stood on end that his hat was "fair lifted off his head." It is now believed that it was a badger which had got out of the Naworth woods. A boggle is known to haunt a narrow lane with steep banks between the Irthing and Birkhirst. A man I know was passing up this lane in pale moonlight, and, though of a sceptical turn as to such things, was well nigh converted to a sudden belief, when he observed a remarkable human animal standing at the upper end of it, "a most delicate monster" (as Stephano might have said,) for it had sometimes one, sometimes two heads, and its distorted body swayed from side to side, and put out feelers like a cuttle fish. It was with a great effort that he nerved himself to walk up to it, but he was much relieved, and his scepticism was more than re-established, when he found it was "just a woman a'hiding a'hint a man."

But let it not be supposed that boggles are always of this poor, explicable kind. Not such was the woman in white in Askerton Park who "on one occasion stopped a rider, laying hold of the bridle, so that both horse and rider were powerless to proceed till a promise had been given which, if divulged, would result in the death of the rider. She then vanished."

But

But, at nearly the same place, this, or a companion, appeared in a very different shape to a farmer's wife, for, as she herself told me, it ran up the whip "for all the world like a duck."

This may have been the same boggle that is said to have "always" ridden behind Mr. Maughan, the late rector of Bewcastle, when coming home this way, as far as the Kirk Beck, the boundary of the parish. The same clergyman is said to have gone one night into the church and to have "seen a figure looking at him from the gallery, which with a scream vanished."

I have heard of no recent instance of exorcism in the case of an unpleasant and obstinate ghost, but an old man, now dead, dimly told me of the High Stone Moss boggle, seven years there and for seven years before at Scaleby Castle, and how "they had some sort of a priest till't," but it was of no use, for the boggle "had t'scriptures as fast as he had."

Many superstitions beliefs, beside that in ghost boggles, cluster round the deathbed. Sometimes, as in other parts of England, the hives are gently tapped and the bees told of a death, or they will fly away, and, for the same reason, they are fed with crumbs from the funeral feast. The shadow of a person recently dead is seen passing across his friend's window. The belief in dead-lights is itself not yet quite dead. Not long ago it would seem to have been the general belief that, on the death of any person, his spirit, with the form and colour of a faint flame, passed along the "burial road" to the church, and up it to where the coffin would rest, and thence to the grave, where it occasionally, perhaps in the case of a good* person, afterwards re-appeared. Once, in Bewcastle, the horse drawing

* The late Mr. Hawker, the well-known vicar of Morwenstow, in North Cornwall, used often to see dead-lights above the graves of sailors, whose bodies had been washed on to the shore of that dangerous coast, but this was supposed to indicate that they had led bad lives, and so their spirits were too perturbed to rest.

a hearse stopped short in the road, and refused to advance a step in spite of all blows and coaxing. Then someone told how he had seen the dead-light leave the road at that spot, and take a short cut across the fields. There was nothing for it but to take the coffin out of the hearse, and carry it across the fields to where the eye-witness stated that the dead-light had rejoined the road. Thither the horse quietly proceeded, and, the coffin having again been placed on the hearse, quietly drew it to the church.

Take a piece of yew-wood, cut a notch at one end and keep the knife, held by the left hand, in it, the other end resting on the ground, while you kneel on the left knee; rest your right elbow on your right knee, keeping the right eye firmly closed with your right hand; gaze steadfastly with your left eye on the dead-light as it passes, and you will see the person whose spirit it is; but you must, too, take the consequences. Within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, a dare-devil young poaching fellow determined to try this hazardous experiment, tried it as a dead-light came down Banks, was successful, but was "fair frightened," and so injured his left eye that he squinted ever afterwards. However, as my old patriarch naively added, "some said it were gotten in a fray wi' the watchers."

The yew* is often put to superstitious uses. A queer old fellow used to live in this district, so superstitious that he would retreat into a ditch to prevent his shadow being trodden on. He used to cut pieces of yew into strange shapes and give them to his friends as a protection against six evils, of which the old dame, my informant, could remember only one, and surely she may have been mistaken in that, "an Oxford scholar."

It is still considered very unlucky for a corpse to be lifted from a house where there is an unbaptised child,

* A medical friend of mine in North Devon once, in the moonlight, found a father and mother drawing their child, tied by his feet head downwards, with a rope, up and down through a cleft yew tree, in order to cure him of some illness or other.

perhaps

perhaps especially in the case of a mother who has died in consequence of child-birth.

This belief may serve as a link between burial and baptism. A south country clergyman was doing duty for a friend near the Border and was proceeding to baptise a *family of children, taking up the youngest first, when he was stopped by an old woman plucking his surplice, and crying out "ye mauna christen a lass afore a lad." The clergyman, thinking the interruption unseemly, would have gone on, but all present joined in the old woman's protest, and he yielded, but asked the reason. "Why, he'll hanna whiskos." This was in Northumberland, but the same belief is held by many in East Cumberland, with the corresponding, but still more awful doctrine, that what the lad is thus unfairly deprived of the intruding lass will have.

It is unlucky to be married where a grave is open, or for a couple, just married, to be leaving the church as it is striking twelve.

Here, as over the border, it is unlucky that the first person to enter the house on New Year's Day should be other than a dark man, and notably dark-complexioned men have sometimes made a good thing of it by receiving presents on making an early New Year's call. And it is, or has been held unlucky to take anything out of the house on New Year's Day, until something has been brought in, or even to take anything out at all.

As, perhaps, an instance of a superstition of recent growth, and, if so, showing how fit the soil has been, the Popping Stone at Gilsland, where Sir Walter Scott proposed to Miss Carpenter,

* It used to be a common practice to wait until there were a "good few" children to be baptised and then to bring them all together to the church, or more commonly, to ask the priest to come to the house and to have a christening party. A good deal of whisky, especially in the days of smuggling, was got through on such occasions, and it is still reported that the hand of a certain "Abbey Priest," used always to shake when he took up the child, and did not get steady until he had had his second glass. This was many years ago.

Is now much rounded and only half its original size, owing to persons chipping off bits to take away with them, as these pieces are said to have great efficacy when placed under the pillows of the unmarried of the fair sex, causing them to dream of their future partners. *Jenkinson's Guide to Carlisle, Gilsland and the Roman Wall*, p. 68.

Tid, Mid, and Miseray,
Carlin, Pome, and Pace-Egg Day.*

Thus are the Sundays in Lent and Easter-Day, kept in rhythmical memory by some of the children in Northumberland and Cumberland. One Sunday is not named, "Pome and Pace-egg Day" need no explanation. On Passion Sunday the boys bring carline peas, which they throw or blow at one another, and afterwards pick up, fry and eat.

Has "car" any connection with caro? Or, like the Caroline thistle, does it point back only to the times of Stuart loyalty? "Miseray" probably represents the "miserere mei" of the 51st Psalm. "Mid" Lent Sunday may well have been shifted from its proper place by the exigency of the rhyme. But what is Tid†?

* *Note by the Editor.* The more usual version is

Tid Mid Miseray
Carlin Palm and Pace Egg Day.

† A corruption of "Te Deum?" So suggests a friend.