

Proverbs,

ADAGES AND POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS,

STILL PRESERVED

IN THE PARISH OF IRSTEAD.

COMMUNICATED BY

THE REVEREND JOHN GUNN,

Rector of the Parish.

AFTER the luminous and comprehensive dissertation upon the Superstitions, Old Customs, Saws, and Proverbs of East Anglia, subjoined by Mr. Forby to his *Vocabulary*, a fear may be justly entertained lest any attempt to add to his labours should be considered unnecessary, if not presumptuous.

But it must be observed that what is now offered to our Society is, if not of a different description, yet altogether upon a different scale. The traditions of a single Parish, retained in the memory of a single individual, are all that I tender; yet even these may deserve to be recorded. It is not only that, as the earth is composed of atoms and the sea of drops, so likewise, in matters of a most dissimilar nature, a whole can only be formed by the collection of detailed minutiae; but what is here attempted to be preserved is of a nature peculiarly liable to be lost. And it is singular that very few of the Proverbs, &c., derived from Mrs. Lubbock, (which for brevity's sake I will call "her Sayings,") are in Mr. Forby's East Anglian Collection,—a smaller proportion than is to be found in other Collections made in distant

places. I venture therefore to send them ; in the hope that, although they be only the dicta of an old washerwoman, they may contribute to the amusement of the Members of our Society.

They have been faithfully committed to writing from time to time, just as they fell from her mouth, as nearly as possible in her own racy language ; and, though now known to few besides herself, they are strictly traditional, having been handed down from generation to generation. When asked how she came by them, she replied that she learned them, when a child, of her father, who was very fond of old proverbs.

From their traditional origin, and still more from their being founded on observation, and from the universality of the subjects they apply to, it was reasonable to suppose that they were not confined to this neighbourhood, but circulated in other places. And such, as already hinted, is the case : their range is in many instances very wide ; for not only are several of them,—among others, that relating to the moulting of the cock and hen,—embodied among the *Adages and Proverbs* corrected and arranged by Mr. Ainslabie Denham, privately printed at Newcastle ; but, what would less be anticipated, some of the sayings of the Irstead washerwoman are to be seen in a foreign publication, entitled *L'Année de l'Ancienne Belgique*, par le Docteur Goremans.*

The prophecy of the man with three thumbs, Mr. Ewing recognised as one of Nixon's ; with this variation, that he should hold the horses of three kings in the battle, (for which the singular conformation of hand is clearly designed,) instead of one only, as mentioned by Mrs. Lubbock.

The prophecies attributed to Mother Shipton are most widely diffused. Yorkshire is reputed to have been her native county ; but there is scarcely a place in which her

* For this interesting information I am indebted to Miss Gurney, of Northrepps Cottage. The work was published at Brussels, 1842.

vaticinations are not known ; and generally they have reference, as is the case with those about Bromholm Priory, &c., to the immediate locality in which they are current. Mother Shipton, if indeed she had a real existence, must either have been gifted with ubiquity and superhuman powers of locomotion ; or else she may be considered “ a very Hercules of sayings ;” for her name has served as a hook to hang them on ; just as that of the demigod formed a nucleus for the collection of marvellous exploits.

Some, also, of Mrs. Lubbock’s proverbs are printed by Fuller and Ray. The propriety of republishing these may be questioned ; but I hope the Society will agree with the following remarks of Sir Francis Palgrave, in a letter to Mr. Dawson Turner :—“ Mrs. Lubbock makes her saws Norfolk, because she is Norfolk ; and it would be a thousand pities to lose them. Never mind that spirit of refinement which would reject them. If they are similar to any already published, that makes no difference. They are historical monuments of the subsistence of an ancient Ethos with a single individual.”

It has been suggested to me, that it would be desirable to add, by way of introduction, some particulars of her history. It is comprised in the Parish Register-Books of births, marriages, and deaths, where,

“ To be born and die,
Of rich and poor makes all the history.”

Education she had none ; but, as is usual, her memory and imagination have been exercised the more on that account. In the year 1813 she was left a widow, with several children ; and she has since maintained herself by carrying on the humble occupation already mentioned. That employment she still continues, in her eightieth year ; declaring that she would “ rather die in a ditch than go into the workhouse ;” and such is her spirit of independence, that she manifested

some unwillingness to receive even out-door relief, till compelled by the severe winter of 1846, which, she observed, made her *sick* for crumbs, like the birds. Her very retentive memory she preserves, at her advanced age. She is "full of wise saws and modern instances;" and can repeat numerous anecdotes and poems of considerable length, with good emphasis, as well as great accuracy. Her intellect is still vigorous and powerful. I will not, however, add more by way of preface; but will beg leave to append in a postscript a few remarks, which the perusal of her Sayings suggests.

SAINTS' DAYS, &c.

Candlemas.

"Candlemas Day, the good housewife's goose lay,
Valentine Day,* yours and mine may."

"If Candlemas Day be fair and clear,
The shepherd would rather see his wife on a bier."

"As far as the sun shines into the cottage on Candlemas Day,
So far will the snow blow in, afore Old May."

"The farmer should have on Candlemas Day
Half his turnips and half his hay."

"You should, on Candlemas Day,
Throw candle and candlestick away."

"At least," says Mrs. Lubbock, "all good housewives do;
for 'tis a shame to burn a candle after Candlemas Day."

"At Candlemas
The cold comes to us."

"When Candlemas Day is come and gone,
The snow won't lie on a hot stone."

* "Valentine's Day," (Mrs. Lubbock says,) "used in old times, and ought still, to be held on the 13th, and not on the 14th of February."

St. Matthias' Day.

“If the bushes hang of a drop before sunrise, it will be a dropping season. If the bushes be dry, we may look for a dry summer. In 1845, the bushes hung of a drop; and it was a very rainy summer. In 1846, the bushes were quite dry; and the summer was unusually so.”*

“St. Matthias' Day is called the Farmer's Day.”

“So many frosts in March,
So many frosts in May.”

Saint Mark's Eve.

“The Brakes now drop their seed at midnight. The top rolls up quite close, and the seed falls.”

She maintains that there are three plants which never flower,—the Brake, the smooth Burdock, and the rank Nettle.

Robert Staff, who formerly kept the Maid's Head Inn at Stalham, opposite to the church, told Mrs. Lubbock that he and two other men had been able to tell who were going to die or to be married in the course of the year. They watched the church porch, opposite to the house, on St. Mark's Eve. Those who were to die went into the church singly, and stayed there; and those who were to be married went in in couples, and came out again; and this Staff had seen. Mrs. Lubbock has often heard him say so; but he would never tell anybody who were to die or to be married, “for he did not watch with that intent.”

Thus we read in *L'Année de l'Ancienne Belgique*,—“On dit que celui qui va, la nuit de St. Marc, sur le portail d'une église, entre minuit et une heure, voit les esprits de ceux qui, en son endroit, devront mourir pendant l'année.”

* This rule has held true, to her knowledge, for the last twenty-five years.

Good Friday.

“If work be done on that day, it will be so unlucky that it will all have to be done over again.”

Christmas Day.

“On Christmas Eve, at midnight, the cows and cattle rise and turn to the east; and the horses in the stable, as far as their halters will permit them. A horse will always rise with his forepart first; a cow with her hindpart first. On Christmas Eve the horse will, on rising, stay some time on his knees, and move his head about, and blow over the manger.” (Here she imitated the movement of the horse’s head to and fro, and the noise the animal makes on the occasion.)

She says that Mr. Robert Edrich, of Irstead, farmer, once when she was present, on observing this reverent demeanour of his horses, exclaimed, “Ah! they have more wit than we.”

She laments that the change from the old to the new style, and “the want of the former days being observed at the present time, makes the old ones wear out.”

When she lived with Mr. Bourne at Briggate, about 1781, her master kept new Christmas Day, according to the law of the land; but on old Christmas Day, nobody ever worked; and the labouring men, women, and children, had a dinner given them.

“Once,” she says, “she recollects there being much argument about which was the real Christmas Day,—the old or the new; and in order to settle the point, some men at Forster’s public-house in Horning, where they were holding a purse-club dinner, on the former of these days, agreed to decide which it was, by observing the flowering of the Rosemary. Three of them went out and gathered a bunch at eleven o’clock at night. It was then in bud. They threw

it upon the table in another room, and did not look at it until after midnight, when they went in, and found the blooms just dropping off." The Rosemary, she has heard her mother say, used to flower on old Christmas Day.

The Weather, &c.

"When a *sundog* comes on the South side of the sun, there will be fair weather; when on the North side, there will be foul. The sun then fares to be right muddled, and crammed down by the dog."*

"Saturday's new and Sunday's full
Never was good, and never *wull*."

"If you see the old moon with the new, there will be stormy weather."

"If it rains on a Sunday before Mass,
It rains all the week, more or less."

"If it rains on a Sunday before the church doors are open, it will rain all the week, more or less; or else we shall have three rainy Sundays."

"If it rains the first Thursday after the moon comes in, it will rain, more or less, all the while the moon lasts; especially on Thursdays."

"If there be bad weather, and the sun does not shine all the week, it will always show forth some time on the Saturday."

"This will not be," said Mrs. Lubbock, in October, 1846, "a hard winter; because it has been a good year only for the squirrel and the hedgehog: no hips nor haws; nothing but acorns."

"If Noah's ark *show* many days together, there will be foul weather. It *shew* last February, forty days; and, after that, the weather was very bad, wet, and stormy."

* The Dog consists of two black spots, which, Mrs. Lubbock says, can be seen with the naked eye; but it hurts her's to look at them.

“On three nights of the year, it never lightens” (*i.e.* clears up) “anywhere; and if a man could know those nights, he would not turn a dog out.”

Mrs. Lubbock is in the habit of making inquiries about the signs of the weather and of the times; and the other day, as her own sight would not allow her to ascertain the fact, she asked a person whether there were any ash-keys; adding, that when they failed, there would be a change in the Government, and great disturbances; and that there had not been a failure of them for sixty years. (N.B. There are very few this year, 1848.)

She inquired also of Mr. Edrich, if his cock had moulted, and requested him to make out whether the cock or the hen moulted first; with reference to which she repeated the following lines:

“If the hen moult before the cock,
We get a winter as hard as a rock.
If the cock moult before the hen,
We get a winter like a spring.”

“We shall have a severe winter,” she said, October 19th, 1848, “because the swallow and the martin took such pains to learn their young ones to fly. They are going a long journey, to get away from the cold that is coming. ’Tis singular that they should know this; but they do.”

“The weather will be fine,” she says, “while the rooks play pitch-halfpenny.” “Nonsense! Mrs. Lubbock,” a person observed, “they have not a halfpenny among them.” “’Tis all the same,” (she rejoined): “’tis their intrust;” (*interest, i.e. gain.*) “They were flying in flocks, and some of them would stoop down and pick up worms, imitating the action of a boy playing pitch-halfpenny; and this picking up the worms is their interest.”

In August, 1846, she prophesied there would be a severe winter and deep snow, because of the large “snow banks” (*i.e.* white fleecy clouds) “which hung about the sky.” In

1845, she knew there would be a failure in some crop, "because the evening star *rode so low*. The leading star (*i. e.* the last star in the Bear's Tail) was above it all the summer." She feared the failure would have been in the wheat, till she saw the *man's face* in it; and then she was comfortable, and did not think of any other crop; but afterwards she found that the potatoes were blighted. She is of opinion that the potatoe-blight was caused by lightning, because the turf burnt so *sulphurously*. "The lightning," she says, "carries a burr round the moon, and makes the *roke* rise in the marshes, and smell strong."

On one occasion, when a complaint was made to her that the linen which she sent home, after washing it, was damp; or, from the sensation it caused the wearer, rather clammy; she maintained, she was "sure it was wholesome; for she put plenty of salt in, to keep the thunder out." There is reason to believe, from some hints which she let fall as to "bad things being about," that the salt was employed by her to avert foul spirits, as well as to counteract the ill effects of the atmosphere. This anecdote might, therefore, with propriety, have been placed under the head which next follows.

Jack o' Lantern and Evil Spirits.

"Before the Irstead Enclosure in 1810, Jack o' Lantern was frequently seen here on a roky night, and almost always at a place called Heard's Holde, in Alder Carr Fen Broad, on the Neatishead side, where a man of that name, who was guilty of some unmentionable crimes, was drowned. I have often seen it there, rising up and falling, and twistering about, and then up again. It looked exactly like a candle in a lantern."

She evidently connected the "*ignis fatuus*" in that spot with the unhappy man's spirit, as if it were still hovering about; and Jack o' Lantern was, in her apprehension, endued

with volition and intelligence; for she affirms, that "if any one were walking along the road with a lantern, at the time when he appeared, and did not put out the light immediately, Jack would come against it and dash it to pieces; and that a gentleman, who made a mock of him and called him Will of the Wisp, was riding on horseback one evening in the adjoining parish of Horning, when he came at him and knocked him off his horse."

She remembers, when a child, hearing her father say, that "he was returning home from a large" (largess) "money-spending at the finishing of harvest, in company with an old man, who whistled and jeered at Jack; but *he* followed them all the way home, and when they entered the house he torched up at the windows."

"The Neatishead people were desirous to lay Heard's spirit, so annoyed were they by it; for it came at certain times and to certain places which he frequented when alive. Three gentlemen" (she could not tell who or what they were, she supposed they were learned) "attempted to lay the ghost, by reading verses of Scripture. But he always kept a verse ahead of them. And they could do nothing, till a boy brought a couple of pigeons, and laid them down before him. He looked at them and lost his verse; and then they bound his spirit."

"— Finch, of Neatishead, was walking in the road after dark, and saw a dog, which he thought was Dick Allard's, that had snapped and snarled at him several times. Thinks he, 'you have upset me two or three times; I will upset you now. You will not turn out of the road for me; and I will not turn out of the road for you.' Along came the dog, straight in the middle of the road, and Finch kicked at him; and his foot went through him, as through a sheet of paper: he could compare it to nothing else. He was quite astounded, and nearly fell backwards from the force of the kick."

Mrs. Lubbock has heard that the spirits of the dead haunt the places where treasures were hid by them when in the body; and that those of the Roman Catholics still frequent the spots where their remains were disturbed, and their graves and monuments destroyed.

The Cuckoo.

There will be a fine harvest this year," (1847,) she says, "because the cuckoo, on the last week before he left, was topping the oaks, a chattering and a cuckooing about. That is a sure sign of good; and I like to see him do so: when bad is coming, he sings low among the bushes, and can scarcely get his cuckoo out. In the last week before he leaves, he always tells all that will happen in the course of the year, till he comes again,—all the shipwrecks, storms, accidents, and everything."

"If any one be about to die suddenly, or to lose a relation, he will light upon touchwood, or a rotten bough, and *cuckoo*. He foretold Mr. Ward's fire at Irstead, in 1844." Mrs. Lubbock at that time knew there would be a fire somewhere, and looked for it; but she did not know where it was to take place, till after the event.

"The cuckoo," she adds, "is always here three months, to a day. He stands to the very day, and sings all the while. The first of April is the proper time for his coming; and when he comes then, there is sure to be a good and an early harvest. If he does not come till May, then the harvest is into October. If he sings long after Midsummer, there will be a Michaelmas harvest." (*i. e.* one that lasts till Michaelmas.)

"If any one hears the cuckoo's first note, when in bed, there is sure to be illness or death to him or one of his family."

At the suggestion of a member of our Society, some questions were put to Mrs. Lubbock about crowing hens and howling dogs ; and the following answers and remarks were elicited.

The Crowing Hen.

Q. "Do you know any old sayings about a crowing hen?"

A. "Oh! yes:—

"Them that ever mind the world to win,
Must have a black cat, a howling dog, and a crowing hen."

Q. "Is a crowing hen a sign that a death will take place in the family?"*

A. "No, I never heard that it was. My own hen crows: I don't like to hear her, and I throw something at her when she does; for I think the cock ought to crow, and not the hen: but I don't know that there is any harm in it."

The Howling Dog.

With reference to the howling dog, she says, "Pull off your left-foot shoe, and turn it; and it will quiet him. I always used to do so when I was at service. I hated to hear the dogs howl. There was no tax then, and the farmers kept a heap of them."

Q. "Did you quiet them by turning the shoe?"

A. "Yes! They won't howl three times after. I am much troubled," (she added,) "by the Rev. Mr. Dix's dog, howling in the night, across the water, in the parish of Neatishead."

Q. "What do you do when you are in bed, and have no shoe on?"

* Such is a prevalent notion in many parts of England. In Ireland, a friend informs me, a crowing hen is doomed to instant death, as ominous of evil.

A. "I turn the shoe upside down, by the bed's side; and that stops the dog."

The gentle reader must here presume, (as Mrs. Lubbock's veracity is unimpeachable,) either that dogs are so quieted, or that she herself is composed to sleep before the third howl; or else that her faith in the remedy is so strong as to render her insensible to its failure.

Thrift.

The other day, on my settling an account with her, and paying her the balance of a few pence, she observed that she well remembered hearing her father say,

"If youth could know what age do crave,
Sights of pennies youth would save."

On another occasion, she remarked,

"They that wive
Between sickle and scythe
Shall never thrive."

"John Knight and Elizabeth Palmer, were married about forty years ago, in the harvest-time. He came into the harvest-field on that day; and they never thrived."

The Prophecies of Mother Shipton, and of Mother Bunch, her sister, (who was born on St. Anthony's Day,) as remembered and repeated by Mrs. Lubbock.

"They prophesied from the beginning of the world, what should hold to the end."

"Mrs. Shipton foretold that the time should come when ships should go without sails, and carriages without horses; and the sun should shine upon hills that never see the sun

before." All which is fulfilled, Mrs. Lubbock thinks, by steamers, railways, and cuttings through hills, which let in upon them the light of the sun.

"Mrs. Shipton also foretold that we should know the summer from the winter only by the green leaves: it should be so cold."

Again,—

"That Chischick Church should be a barn,
And Bromholm Priory a farm;

"And, about threescore years ago, the barn, which was formerly (Chischick, *i.e.*) Keswick Church, was pulled down. Bromholm Priory is now a farm."

"That the Roman Catholics shall have this country again, and make England a nice place once more. But, as for these folks, they neither know how to build a church nor yet a steeple."

"That England shall be won and lost three times in one day; and *that*, principally, through an embargo to be laid upon vessels."

"That there is to come a man who shall have three thumbs on one hand, who is to hold the king's horse in the battle. He is to be born in London, and to be a miller by business. The battle is to be fought at Rackheath-Stone Hill, on the Norwich road. Ravens shall carry the blood away, it will be so clotted."

"That the men are to be killed; so that one man shall be left to seven women. And the daughters shall come home, and say to their mothers, 'Lawk, mother, I have seen a man!' The women shall have to finish the harvest."

"That the town of Yarmouth shall become a nettle-bush. That the bridges shall be pulled up; and small vessels sail to Irstead and Barton Broads."

"That blessed are they that live near Potter Heigham, and double-blessed them that live in it." (That parish seems destined to be the scene of some great and glorious events.)

Fairies.

“There used,” Mrs. Lubbocks says, “to be Fairies in old times. There are no such things now.”

“In the parish of Dilham there is a deep hole, called ‘Seagar-ma-hole.’ This was held to be a Fairies’ Bay. A church, which stood upon the spot, is said to have been sunk in it; and several oxen, which ventured upon it when the rushes began to grow over its surface, were swallowed up.”

Historical.

“King John cleared the crown of leather money. First, he used it when there was not money enough to carry on business with; and then he cried it down when he had got a supply of proper money. The people considered him rather silly; but he had sense enough to do that.” She remembers, when a child, playing with King John’s leather money. It was stamped, like gingerbread; and of the shape of gun-wadding.

“A saying about King John was, that he had two apples; and he ate one, and kept the other for himself.”

The superstitious infirmities, to which, apparently, Mrs. Lubbock is subject, may possibly lead some persons to question whether she is possessed of the degree of intellect for which I have given her credit. In answer, it may be observed, that such notions as she appears to entertain continue prevalent in East Norfolk to a greater extent than is generally supposed. Among other things, the number of horse-shoes still attached to doors and wells, and almost invariably to fishing-boats, attest the correctness of this state-

ment. I say *East Norfolk*, because that is the limited field of my observation; but probably it is the same in other parts of England; for Mr. Joseph Hunter, in the course of an interesting discussion of such topics, at the late meeting of the Archæological Institute at Norwich, informed me that, in an excursion made by some antiquaries in the environs of London, no fewer than thirty-six horseshoes were counted in one day.

In this neighbourhood, my own experience enables me to state that the popular belief in spirits and witches is far from extinct.

To mention a few instances in proof of this assertion. The marvellous account of a carriage drawn by headless horses at the seat of the Fastolfs, Caistor Castle, is not yet utterly discarded. Near Northrepps, I am credibly informed, that a sound, sea-worthy fishing-boat was lately burnt, "stick and stem," solely because it was held to be bewitched. A complaint was recently lodged before the bench of magistrates at Cromer, by a poor woman who was employed in carrying a letter-bag along the coast, against some boys who pelted her with stones, and were not satisfied till they had "drawn blood," as they said, "from the old witch." This was alleged to be necessary, in order to free those whom she had bewitched from her spell, and to prevent her doing further mischief. Applications have often been made to me for advice, by persons feeling themselves aggrieved by the imputation of sorcery. In one instance, a labourer asked me what steps he should take to protect his wife from being called a witch. I persuaded him to let her treat the matter with contempt, and he resolved to do so; but, a few days after, he came to me in great agitation of mind, and declared that he could bear it no longer, for the people called his children "devilings." I have also known a farmer to complain of an old woman's having an evil eye, and of her having fatally

bewitched some of his horses and pigs, as they passed her on the road.

The ordinary form which spirits are said to assume in East Norfolk, is that of the Phantom-Dog, stated by Mrs. Lubbock to be a headless dog, with saucer eyes, who is said to pass nightly over Coltishall Bridge; while another, "Old Shuck" by name, travels between Beeston and Overstrand, the terror of the neighbourhood. A lane in the latter parish is called, after him, "Shuck's Lane." Such is the usual form in which spirits are embodied; but they occasionally appear in other shapes; and I have heard a person say, that he had seen what he was unable to describe—"a very ugly picture."

I mention these particulars, to show that my venerable washerwoman is by no means solitary in her opinions on such subjects.

Her observations of the signs of the weather are usually to be relied upon; and, in some instances, they have been singularly verified. The approach of the terrific hail-storm in 1843 was foreseen by her; and she previously gathered some of her children and grandchildren together, and they remained in her cottage during the night.

Her upright carriage and general air, might suggest a portrait of "Norna of the Fitful Head;" and her long-stored observations realize that honoured state described by Milton,

"When old experience doth attain
To something like prophetic strain."

But her venerable lore is not without its inconveniences and drawbacks. It has exposed her to the suspicion of witchcraft; and also to annoyances of a practical nature. As she has given out that she can tell when storms are coming, by the rattling of her window-shutters, roguish boys, on passing, not unfrequently give them a shake; and thus she is deprived of that repose, which is usually allowed to the decline

of life and of personal attraction ; for it cannot be said in her case, as in that of the neglected Lydia, that

“Parcius junctas quatiant fenestras
Ictibus crebris juvenes protervi.”

These remarks, and the statements with which they are accompanied, may be regarded as trifling, and unworthy of a place in the Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society: the writer can vouch only for their accuracy.

But, again, can the recording of the sayings of Mrs. Lubbock be considered useless? Be it remembered that, frivolous and superstitious as they may appear, they in reality exhibit phases of the human mind, which are as much within the province of philosophical inquiry as the deductions of exact science. And similar prophecies to those which she details, though they may seem to be absurd, have, in times past, even operated as engines of revolutionary changes ; as exemplified in the “Confession of Richard Bishop and Robert Seaman,” printed in Vol. I., p. 209, of the “*Original Papers*” of this Society.

