

SOMERSETSHIRE SUPERSTITIONS.



NOTWITHSTANDING the progress of science, religion, and education, superstition still prevails in this and other countries to an extent scarcely credible. In every town, in every village and hamlet—yes, in almost every family circle—a belief in the supernatural still has a place. . . . Signs and omens are observed, faith in miracles has not died out, charms are not considered valueless, curses and evil wishes make a large proportion of our population tremble, dreams are still believed in. Indeed, nearly all, if not all, the various aspects and phases of superstition of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries are, to a certain extent, believed in, in the nineteenth.* Whether the superstitions of Somersetshire are to be accounted for by the fascinating legends—half historical, half Biblical—which hover round the beautiful ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, and round the poetical mysteries of King Arthur and his valiant Knights of the Round Table, it is impossible to say; certain it is that many curious customs and superstitions which have fallen into disuse in other parts of the country still linger in the county of Somerset, and among the simple folk who spend their lives in its pleasant villages. True it is that year by year the number becomes less, and it may interest some readers to chronicle a few which are still in use, and which in a few years may have become things of the past. Many of the old English customs connected with the seasons are still observed in Somersetshire: in some parts on Christmas Eve, after burning an ashen fagot, the whole family adjourns to the orchard, carrying a hot cake and a mug of cider or ale as an offering to the best apple-tree; reminding us of the Norwegian offering of cake and ale made at Christmas to propitiate the spirits of the Fiords.

A curious custom was, I have been told, observed at Christmas until recently at North Curry, in memory of King John. A feast was held, the chief dish being a huge mince pie, bearing a rude effigy of the king; two candles, each weighing one pound, were lighted, amid great ceremony, and whilst they burned, but no longer, the guests were allowed and encouraged to drink as much strong ale as they desired; as soon as the candles went out the feast terminated.

Another practice still in use is "opening the Bible." This is done at Christmas, or on New Year's Day, with great solemnity, after breakfast. The Holy Book is laid unopened on the table, and those who wish to consult it open it in succession at random and in perfect silence; the inquirer places his finger on any verse contained in the two open pages, but without seeing its contents. The verse is then read

* "Mysteries of All Nations," by James Grant.

aloud, and from it the assembly draw their conclusions or guidance for the coming year. On Shrove Tuesday pancakes, of course, as in many other parts of England, are still universally eaten, and in some places boys go round the villages singing—

"Tipperty-tipperty toe,
Give me a pancake and then I'll go"—

and if this request is not acceded to, a large stone is fastened to the handle of the door.

Easter and May Days have always been held as great festivals in Somersetshire. A beautiful custom is still kept up in some places on Easter Day; the whole village rises early, and, going to the top of the nearest hill, waits for the rising of the sun—this being believed to procure prosperity in their homes till Easter Day comes round again.

The first of May used to be celebrated with great honour in the old town of Minehead, but the custom has been discontinued for some years past. At an early hour the town was aroused by the beating of a great drum, whereupon the inhabitants, young and old, repaired to a cross-road just outside Minehead, and there danced round the hobby-horse; after which a procession was formed, and they started for Dunster Castle. Here they always received a good supply of ale and a donation of money, doubtless to carry on the festivities, which appear to have lasted for three days, most of the townspeople and the well-to-do tradesmen taking an active part in the proceedings; but the ancient custom is now only kept up by the children of Minehead.

Amongst many of the country people Maydew is believed to be a potent remedy in disease. I have heard of an old woman who always recommended for a weakly child that it should be drawn along the grass wet with Maydew three times running—on the 1st, the 2nd, and the 3rd of May—and that great benefit would be sure to follow. Young girls are also recommended to wash their faces in Maydew to improve and preserve their complexions. Swellings of various kinds may be cured by a similar application; but in such cases, if the patient be a man, the dew must be taken from the grave of the last young woman buried; if it be a woman, from the grave of the last young man!

Many relics of old religious customs still exist in this county (as they no doubt do in many others), though they are shorn of their original pomp and beauty.

Lighting candles in the chamber of death is a relic of Pre-Reformation times, as is also the "Passing Bell," or "Soul Bell," which is still rung in many villages. No doubt in days gone by it was rung to entreat the prayers of the listeners for the departing soul:—

"When the passing bell doth toll,
Lord have mercy on the soule!"

being a familiar old couplet.

The curfew bell is still rung in some villages,

though the custom is becoming very rare. Making a grave on the north side of the churchyard is avoided. There is a difference of opinion as to the origin of this objection, some thinking that it has arisen from the fact that on the south side the sunshine will fall warmly on the grave; others, that it is connected with the old custom of praying for the souls of the departed.

To get the left hand of the bishop at confirmation is considered to be very unlucky, and people are often earnestly warned to avoid it when their children are about to be confirmed.

A strong feeling of belief in holy water still exists in the neighbourhood of Bath, and also near Shepton Mallet; and doctors have been heard to say that they can do no more for the sick person, but recommending the friends to go and ask the priest for some holy water as a last resource. The Ven. Dr. Coombes was often asked by Protestants for holy water, and one farmer requested him to supply some to exorcise his cattle, which he said had been bewitched, and desired the doctor to make it *strong*, "as the devil is very strong among the beasts."

If a hen crows it is a most unlucky sign, and betokens a death in the family; if, therefore, an unlucky hen is heard to crow, the omen is averted by chopping off its head!

In setting a hen, care should be taken to place in the nest an uneven number of eggs, otherwise the brood of chickens will not thrive.

Always take off your hat to a magpie, or at any rate bow respectfully to him, or evil will surely follow.

Hold a robin in veneration; to kill one is most unlucky. This bird is said to tap three times at the window before the death of any member of the family.

Never transplant your parsley; nothing can be more unlucky, unless perhaps to break a looking-glass, which is, if anything, a little worse.

Do not omit to "tell the bees" in case of death. An instance of this old custom occurred not long ago near Bath. A gentleman and his coachman died within a few days of each other. Both were bee-keepers. The gentleman's widow lamented to the coachman's daughter that since her husband's death the hives were empty, and the bees had disappeared; she could not think what had become of them. "Of course, ma'am, you told the bees of the master's death?" said the girl. The lady, who had never heard of the custom, asked what she meant. Whereupon the girl explained that immediately a death takes place the bees must be told, or they will not remain. "I went at once, when my father died, and rapped three times on the back of the hive and told them, and, you see, my bees have not gone." I am told that this custom is strictly adhered to in many of the Somersetshire villages.

Belief in witchcraft is still common in many parts of Somersetshire. Not long ago a farmer near Ilchester lost several of his cattle by disease. The veterinary surgeon who was consulted considered the rest of the herd to be in a fair way of recovery, but

the farmer was not satisfied. He insisted that the cattle had been "over-looked," and he went and consulted a "wise woman" who lived in a neighbouring town. She recommended the following treatment, which the farmer carefully carried out. The last bullock which had died was encircled with fagots and the carcase was burnt, solemn incantations being said over the burning pile. The remaining cattle recovered, and the farmer and the villagers attributed their recovery, not to the advice of the veterinary surgeon, but to the ceremonial inculcated by the "wise woman."

Another case of a very similar nature occurred in the same district. A farmer lost two fine cows through some mysterious illness. He drove many miles to consult a "wise woman," who decided that the cows had been bewitched, and recommended him to find a horse with three nails in the near hind shoe, to pull out the middle nail, and with it to scratch the witch severely, else the rest of the cows would die. The farmer rode far and wide to find the desired horse with the necessary number of nails, but, fortunately for the witch, one could not be found. He at last consulted the vicar, who suggested his sending for the veterinary surgeon and having a post-mortem to see what the cows had died of. This course had never occurred to the farmer, but, as he could not scratch the witch, he sent for the vet., who speedily decided that the cows had died from eating a large quantity of green vetches.

The prophecies of Mother Shipton are nowhere more widely believed in than in the county of Somerset. Not long ago a report was in circulation that a great catastrophe had been predicted by this old sage. She had prophesied that Ham Hill, one of the great stone quarries of Somerset, would be swallowed up on Good Friday. This catastrophe was to be the consequence of a tremendous earthquake, which would be felt all over the country. Some of the inhabitants left the neighbourhood to escape the impending evil; others removed their crockery and breakable possessions to prevent their being thrown to the ground; others, again, ceased cultivating their gardens. Great alarm was felt, and Good Friday was looked forward to with universal anxiety. And yet, when the day came and went without any disaster at all, even that did little to dispel the faith in Mother Shipton; the calculator had made a blunder about the date, and it was not her fault; and many Somersetshire folk are still waiting, expecting to suffer from the prophesied catastrophe.

There is yet another custom which is widely believed in and frequently practised in Somerset, which cannot be called a superstition in quite the same sense as the other instances named, although many deny that it is anything else. I allude to the use of the divining-rod for finding water. The operators are called dowzers, or jowsers. They carry a rod or wand, of willow, shaped like a small pair of tongs, and on the performer holding the prongs and turning the undivided part to the ground, the wand becomes agitated, and by this indicates the spot where water will be

found. Whatever this power may be, it is often discovered quite accidentally, and no one who possesses it seems able to give any explanation of its presence.

I could give numberless cases in which water, hitherto unsuspected, has been found by a dowser. One of the most interesting is that of the village of Sparkford, Somerset, which occurred about five years ago. For 200 years this village had suffered from a lack of good water. Wells had been frequently dry, but no spring could be found; and the whole parish suffered greatly from drought. At last the squire heard of a dowser of good repute, and sent for him to try his craft. After a careful examination, he declared that he had found a spring of water, but at too great a distance from the surface to be available. He then made a circuit round the village, trying for water with his willow wand from time to time, till at length he came to a spot close to the roadside, and here he discovered a spring, which he said would be found at not more than nine feet from the surface. The well was dug. The water was there, and a splendid spring it was; and to this day Sparkford rejoices, thanks to the dowser and his willow wand, in an abundant supply of good water.

Another case occurred lately near Bristol. A manufacturer, requiring a larger supply of water for his mill, commenced digging a well in what seemed to be a suitable spot; but the supply, although good at first, soon failed, and he was uncertain whether to continue the well to a greater depth or to abandon it altogether. By the advice of some friends he sent for a dowser, who, after trying the surrounding ground with his wand, strongly advised the continuation of the well. Water, he said, and plenty of it, would be found some twelve feet lower down; and the sequel proved that he was right.

The Rev. H. P. Knapton gives the following

account of the divining-rod:—"The dowser is as commonly used along the Polden Hills for getting water as the turncock would be in London. On the occasion when the rod was used, it was at the house of a country gentleman. There were present three Cambridge graduates in honours, and three ladies of the family, well educated and highly intelligent. The dowse was brought to the garden in which a new well was required. The rod was used by him in the manner already described, and water was quickly found. Of those present, two found the rod move in their hands; the other four felt no influence. This dowser is never known to fail. He is a very respectable carpenter—a religious man, inclined to Methodism." Many more instances of divining could be given, but these are sufficient to show that it is one of the many well-known customs still extant in Somersetshire.

Some of these old customs, and even some of the superstitions, are very quaint and interesting, as being relics of a bygone age, when education was at a low ebb, and the masses of the people remained ignorant and credulous. May we not hope and believe that with the gradual but steady spread of education in our schools—giving, as it cannot fail to do, to the rising generation, more taste for reading, opening and enlarging the mind, and lessening year by year the ignorance that still exists in many parts of the country, those old customs alone which are innocent and pleasing may be retained, and whatever is harmful, tending to bigotry and injustice to others, as in the case of witchcraft, may completely pass away? M. B. C.

N.B.—For many of the facts narrated I am indebted to Mr. Poole's little book on the "Legends and Superstitions of Somersetshire," and to Mr. Grant's "Mysteries of All Nations."

WHAT HAPPENED AT RIDGEWAY-ON-SEA.

PART THE FIRST.

"Constant love is moderate ever,
And through life it will persevere."—ANON.



Unkind fate had determined that Captain Haste should not accompany his wife and little girls to the sea. It was not the first time that fate—in the guise of importunate friends—had prevented his joining in this annual summer outing. These friends would

at this inconvenient season urge him to fulfil some almost forgotten engagement. He had promised to shoot on a Scotch moor or cruise round the coast in a brother-officer's yacht, and "how on earth was he to get out of it?"

There was certainly a fatality against his visiting the seaside in August. To do him justice, he bore the deprivation heroically; nor did young Mrs. Haste repine, but she smiled rather wickedly as she said "how sorry she was for his disappointment; how she hoped he might come to them for the last week of the visit, but that she feared, from what he said, it would be quite impossible."

"I will leave it open, Edith," he answered, and then, catching her eye, he broke out into constrained laughter, in which she joined very heartily.

"Ah, Harry! you are not a good actor," she said; "you don't take me in: don't fancy it. Seaside lodgings and seaside lodging cooking are no trial to me, but you would rather face a cannon-ball than face Ridgeway-on-Sea. I forgive you; you shall not be victimised. You shall go to Scotland; and, now I