

PEEPS THROUGH LOOPHOLES AT MEN,
MANNERS, AND CUSTOMS.

BY CUTHBERT BEDD.

"'Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat,
To peep at such a world; to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd."

COWPER.

V.—GOING A-MAYING.

MAY has come, and folks are going a-Maying in various ways, and after very opposite fashions. The Maying of the town is altogether another thing to the Maying of the country. In "the season" of the former, the bursting bloom of Nature is counterfeited by the May fashions of the milliners; and all the brilliant colours that begin to show themselves in woods, fields, and gardens, are out-rainbowed in hue by the silks and satins, muslins and velvets of Kensington and Belgravia.

May in Mayfair, in the height of the season, is a scene of brilliance and fashion that is an outward sign of the wealth and nobility of Great Britain; and the roll of the thousand carriages and the clatter of the thousand horses in the Row and the Mile, and the fluttering of ten thousand bright ribbons and dresses in West-end drawing-rooms, may be accepted as a remembrancer of the trade of the country, which is sustained in so large a degree by the demand for those articles of luxury which are a necessity to the season of May in Mayfair. Court receptions, drawing-rooms, and levées make themselves felt very far down in the social scale, and contribute to the livelihood of industrious workers in almost every part of the Queen's dominions; and the return of her Majesty to a prominent position in these useful and necessary, though wearisome, ceremonials of state, has not only gladdened the hearts of many of her loyal subjects, but has revived the trade of London, which had greatly languished since the days of her sad bereavement.

Another notable feature of London at this season is the bustle of the "May Meetings," which, as means to an end, are of very considerable importance, and greatly affect the yearly revenues of the chief religious and charitable societies. The interest in such institutions is aroused, sustained, and increased by the vast gatherings held at Exeter Hall and elsewhere during the month of May. The contact of Christian men in such meetings as these seems to kindle in their hearts a sacred fire whose brightness and warmth will be felt far and wide. It will cast its light on the dark places of cruelty and ignorance, and cheer the poor and destitute with works of philanthropy and benevolence.

The majority of those who attend these May Meetings will find their way to the Art galleries in the near neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square, or perhaps will content themselves with going a-Maying to the Exhibition of the Royal Academy, there to crowd round the pictures of the year. May ushers in the artists' harvest, when the fruits of their busy year are garnered; on May-day the Royal Academy opens its portals; and, in the present year, 1868, it is numbered among those centenarians for whom the "Quarterly" has been fighting a battle; for it has attained its one hundredth year. Painting and Music are sister arts, and May is the month for the nightingale, both in town and country—though in the concert-room or opera-house, the warbled notes of the nightingale, whether Swedish or Italian, are so far from being "unpremeditated," like to those of the real Philomela, that they are only produced through the medium of other notes of a pecuniary and banking value. And if the nightingale of the woods and groves sings

"jug-jug-jug-jug-teren," as Lilly, Queen Elizabeth's poet, says that she does, or merely "oree, osee," as Chaucer reported, or indulges in that twenty-four lines of distracted letters with which Bechstein endeavoured phonetically to represent her unapproachable melody, it is at least quite as intelligible as much that is heard from the lips of wingless singing bipeds. Milton has a sonnet to the nightingale, warbling at eve, with

"Liquid notes that close the eye of day,
While the jolly hours lead on propitious May;"

And Cowper, not only in his Address to the nightingale that he heard on New Year's day, but also in his lines "To Catharina," and in a passage in "The Task," showed that he considered the song of the bird as cheering, exhilarating, and most musical; but not "most melancholy," the epithet of Milton, which stirred the poetic indignation of Coleridge, and inspired him with his well-known "Ode to the Nightingale."

The nightingale takes us a-Maying into the country; and, although we live in an age that is too utilitarian and matter-of-fact to permit the careful cultivation and popular recognition of poetical and old-world customs, yet the observance of May-day is not altogether a thing of the past. In many sequestered nooks and corners of the land there are people to be found who lovingly cling to old customs, and to whom folk-lore is a living reality, and not a dead letter to be exhumed for the interest of a curious minority.

The Maypole! Washington Irving, in a delightful passage in the "Sketch Book," has recorded the fancies that were awakened by the mere sight of one at Chester, although it was nothing but a bare pole. And as for the phrase "going a-Maying," it sounds so pleasing, pretty, poetic, pastoral, and picturesque, that quite an alliterative crop of early May p's might be forced, as epithets wherewith to grace the banquet of delights that Nature so bountifully provides in "the merry month of May." For going a-Maying is suggestive of the sweet burst of bud and blossom; the tender mist of green that overspreads the woods; the forest carpet of primroses, violets, hyacinths, and anemones; the bright tassels of the birch and the opening fans of the chestnut leaves; the kine-dappled meadows, sprinkled with cowslips and gemmed with buttercups; the snowy bloom of the cherry, plum, and blackthorn; the kingcups and the golden broom, on first seeing which Linnæus fell upon his knees and thanked God for having created so glorious a sight; the cuckoo, telling "his name to all the hills;" the delicious trills of the nightingale, and the universal charm of songbirds. Of a multitude of things, in short, that are pleasant, and fragrant, and beautiful, does the phrase "going a-Maying" remind us; though not of the "May" itself, for the hawthorn does not bloom in time to grace the May-day festival. Going a-Maying has the ring of poetry in its very sound; and the memory that is stored with poetic passages in praise of May, can feast on some of the sweetest bits of our choicest poets. Chaucer, "the father of English poetry," makes great mention of the attractions of May; so that even to "the blissful place" he could assign no higher charm than by saying, "There green and lusty May shall e'er endure;" and, in "The Knight's Tale," we see Arcite and Theseus going a-Maying to the grove, and from thence procuring their hawthorn garlands. Then we have Herrick going a-Maying with his Corinna; and we listen to Spenser and Milton chanting their hymns of praise to "fair May," "flowery May," "beauteous May," "bounteous May," and, perchance, we try to emulate Archdeacon Wrangham in translating Buchanan's Latin Ode to May-day; and we hear Ben

Jonson's "Salutation to Maia;" and see Dryden's gentle Emilia, "more fresh than May herself," going forth

"Before the day,
To do th' observance due to sprightly May."

Then from Thomson, Wordsworth, and modern poets, we pass through the peasant Clare's too-much-neglected verse, to the laureate's "May Queen," who, although artists persist in depicting her as a little child, was evidently a grown-up young woman, not without vanity and a spice of flirtation, and who was expecting soon to be the wife of that Robin who was, doubtless, one of the many partners with whom she

"Danced about the Maypole and in the hazel copse,
Till Charles' Wain came out above the tall white chimney tops."

The description of the "Lady of the May," given by Browne, in his "Britannia's Pastorals," coincides with Strutt's account of going a-Maying, which was conducted in such a fashion that it very deservedly, in 1585, obtained reprobation in Stubbes' "Anatomie of Abuses;" and the palace-porter's man, in Shakespeare's "Henry VIII," complained that the blowing of the horns, and the tumult of the men and maidens as they went to the wood to break branches from the trees, made it impossible to sleep on May-day morning.

On the whole, we may congratulate ourselves that the sport of going a-Maying has fallen into the hands of village school children. We may have lost the "stage-plays," of which Stowe tells us—the Robin Hood and Maid Marian, whose *morion*, or head-piece, together with her whole attire, was paid for by the parish, of which accounts are yet to be found in the ancient books of churchwardens. We may have lost her successor, Malkin or Mawkin, the clown dressed up in woman's clothes, who afterwards still further degenerated to the Jack-in-the-Green; but it does not require a great amount of stoicism to reconcile us to the loss. We may be quite content with reading in the pages of the Old Chronicle, Hall, of Henry VIII going a-Maying to Shooter's Hill, and of Queen Elizabeth doing the same at Sir Richard Buckley's, at Lewisham; but we may prefer to look upon that picture of our present sovereign as the Queen of that May-day ceremony of 1851. Nor need we grieve that we cannot see Chaucer's May-pole, that "great shaft of Cornhill" (from which the Church of Andrew Under-shaft took its name), whose last appearance was on "the Evil May-day" of 1517, when the tragedy of the "London Apprentices" cast a gloom over the May-day sports, from which they were many years in recovering; thirty-two years after which date, that tall shaft was cut up and burnt by the hearers of the curate of St. Katherine, Sir Stephen, who had denounced it as an idol; and as such was it destroyed on the Sunday afternoon, by Sir Stephen's hearers, "after they had well dined, to make themselves strong," as Stowe says, not without sarcasm. Its companion, that famous "tall May-pole" that once "o'erlook'd the Strand," and was celebrated by Beaumont and Fletcher, and by Pope, had a better fate; for although it had fallen in 1644, in obedience to law, it had been replaced in 1661, there to remain, though shattered, till 1717, when Newton removed it to Wanstead to support Huyon's great telescope. We can part with these May-poles, and we can walk through Brook Street, May-fair, without caring to see that brook and that field where was wont to be held the May-fair to which gossiping Pepys went in 1660—those fairs, "whose greatest crime was harmless, honest mirth," according to the cavalier's testimony. We have outlived these, as we have out-

lived the chimney-sweeps' May-day, of which Herace Smith and Charles Lamb have told us; and their predecessors, the milkmaids, with their "garland of polished plate," of which we have an account in "The Tatler." Enough for us are the village school-children with their May "garland;" and even they are only to be found here and there, and in certain counties; and in another generation their pretty and innocent custom may have become extinct. Let us glance at it before it leave us, first quoting some lines by the poet of "The Christian Year:"—

"Come, ye little revellers gay,
Learners in the school of May,
Bring me here the richest crown,
Wreathed this morn on breezy down,
Or in nook of copse-wood green,
Or by river's rushy screen,
Or in sunny meadows wide,
Gemmed with cowslips in their pride;
Or perchance, high prized o'er all,
From beneath the southern wall,
From the choicest garden-bed,
Mid bright smiles of infants bred,
Each a lily of his own
Offering, or a rose half-blown.

"Bring me now a crown as gay,
Wreathed and woven yesterday.
Where are now those forms so fair?
Withered, drooping, wan, and bare,
Feeling nought of earth or sky,
Shower or dew, beheld they lie,
Vernal airs no more to know;
They are gone—and ye must go;
Go where all that ever bloomed,
In its hour must lie entombed.
They are gone; their light is o'er:
Ye must go; but ye once in-re
Hope, in joy, to be new born,
Lovelier than May's gleaming morn.

"Hearken, children of the May,
Now in your glad hour and gay,
Ye whom all good angels greet
With their treasures blithe and sweet:
None of all the wreaths ye prize,
But was nursed by weeping skies.
Keen March winds, soft April showers,
Braced the roots, embalmed the flowers.
So if e'er that second Spring
Her green robe o'er you shall fling,
Stern self-mastery, tearful prayer,
Must the way of bliss prepare,
How should else earth's flowerets prove
Meet for those pure crowns above?"

The children in the illustration on the next page* were drawn from life, last year, in Huntingdonshire, where "going a-Maying" after this fashion is very generally observed. Their "garland" was made in the traditional pyramidal shape, and was composed of cowslips, hyacinths, wood-anemones, orchids, crab-blossom, gilliflowers, periwinkles, primroses, laurestinus, and topped with the crown-imperial. Dolls were placed on the garland, the chief doll (though they knew it not) being the representative of the goddess Flora, in the festival of the Roman *floralia*. From the base of the garland, which was carried by means of a stick thrust through it, were hung ribbons and pieces of gay-coloured stuffs. The children took their garland to the houses of the various farmers and residents, and sang their May-day song—a curious medley, in which religion figures after the manner of the old times, and is introduced with the appearance of levity, yet so as quaintly to suggest how simple piety may be connected with the enjoyment of any

* An account of the parish, and a photograph of the church, will be found in "Historical and Architectural Notes of the Parish Churches in and around Peterborough." By the Rev. W. D. Sweeting. Illustrated with photographs by Mr. W. Ball, of Peterborough.

festival. The whole ballad is too characteristic to be lost. I took down the words, and found that they had been taught by mother to daughter, for three or four generations; and they were these:—

“ Here comes us poor Mayers all,
 And thus we do begin,
 To lead our lives in righteousness,
 For fear we should die in sin.
 To die in sin is a dreadful thing,
 To die in sin we mourn;
 It would have been better for our poor souls
 If we had never been born.
 We have been rambling through the night,
 And part of the next day;
 And now we have returned back again,
 We have brought you a branch of May.
 A branch of May, it looks so gay,
 Before your door does stand;
 It's only a sprout, but it's well budded out
 By the work of the Almighty hand.
 Awake, awake, my pretty fair maids,
 And take your May-bush in,
 Or it will be gone before to-morrow morn,
 And you'll say that we brought you none.
 Awake, awake, my pretty fair maids,
 Out of your drowsy dream,
 And step into your dairies all,
 And fetch us a cup of cream.
 If it's only a cup of your sweet cream,
 Or a mug of your brown beer;
 If we should live to tarry in the town
 We'll call another year.
 Repent, repent, you wicked men,
 Repent before you die;
 There's no repentance to be had
 When in the grave you lie.
 The life of man it is but a span,
 It flourishes like a flower;
 To-day we are, to-morrow we're gone,
 We're gone all in one hour.
 Now take a Bible in your hand,
 And read a chapter through;
 And, when the day of judgment comes,
 The Lord will think of you.
 Good morrow, lords and ladies,
 It is the first of May;
 We hope you'll view the garland,
 For it looks so very gay.
 The nightingale she sings by night,
 The cuckoo she sings by day;
 So, fare-ye-well, we must be gone,
 We wish you a happy May!”

Orton Waterville, Huntingdonshire, three miles south-west of Peterborough, a living in the gift of Pembroke College, Cambridge. The May garland in this village is got up with considerable care, and forms an item in the annual Church Missionary Report, the money collected in the “going a-Maying” being presented by the school-girls to the Church Missionary Society. Thus, in the £44 3s. 3d. sent to the Society from this parish, as its contribution for 1867, one item is “May Garland 10s. 1½d.” Another item is “Sale of flowers £13 3s.” This large sum was procured from the sale of garden and wild flowers, sold chiefly in penny bunches, made up every week with much artistic skill, and sold by ready and cheerful agents, the market-woman, the postman, the rector's daughter, etc. “The flowers,” says the rector, the Rev. John Mills, in a communication published in “The Church Missionary Gleaner,” for January, 1868, “The flowers are collected, not from one garden only, but from many, both in the villages and outside. And it is exceedingly pleasant to see the children coming in, in troops almost, in the merry spring time, with joyous faces bringing in their bunches of violets and primroses and orchises, collected in the fields and woods about. They each receive a little printed card, with a picture on it (a Missionary subject generally), which provides them with a fresh thought for that week, and these cards they usually put up in their cottage rooms. And who shall say what good and blessed results may come from this simple means of enlisting the sympathies of the young, and keeping up their interest in such a loving and loveable employment.” Of the origin of the “May Garland,” at Orton Waterville, Mr. Mills gave an account in “The Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor,” for 1858, page 175. Perhaps this instance of the “May Garland” may be unique; it is certainly suggestive, and commends itself as worthy of imitation in some, at least, of those twelve thousand villages in which, as the Rev. J. C. Ryle tells us in “Work to be Done,” the missionary cause is never pleaded or supported. Orton Waterville shows us how “going a-Maying” may be made pleasant, agreeable, and instructive to all concerned, and, at the same time, subservient to a good and great cause.

The church shown in the illustration is that of



MAYING.