



The Monthly Chronicle

OF

NORTH-COUNTRY*LORE*AND*LEGEND

VOL. IV.—No. 43.

SEPTEMBER, 1890.

PRICE 6D.

A Cleveland Tragedy and a Cleveland Poet.

By the Late James Clephan.

IT is now considerably more than a century since the rumour of a dreadful murder found its way to the outer world from the then secluded north-eastern nook of Yorkshire. The crime by which David Clark had perished (in 1745) at Knaresborough was committed several years before; but his body slept in St. Robert's Cave, and Eugene Aram had not yet "set out from Lynn with gyves upon his wrists." Some five years prior to that fatal march of 1753, the Cleveland tragedy had fallen out, and was followed by swift retribution. The deed done on the Nidd, commemorated by the late Lord Lytton and Thomas Hood, has a place that will never be lost in English literature, and is everywhere familiar to the human mind. The threefold horror of the year 1753, although it became the burden of a drama, is far less known.

Ingleby Greenhow, lying among the Yorkshire Hills in wooded and watered loveliness, was enrolled by the Conqueror in Domesday Book. Dromonby, and Great and Little Broughton, closely neighbouring hamlets, share its antiquity and its picturesque setting; and the market town of Stokesley, at the confluence of the Tame and the Leven, is not far away. Here, 'mid the soft shadows of the surrounding slopes, when Easter was drawing nigh, desolation overtook a happy family, by the hand of one who was bound by sacred ties to shield it from harm. Thomas Harper, a substantial farmer, dwelt at Ingleby with a son and daughter, and had also under his roof a maid-servant. A married daughter

lived with her husband at Great Broughton; and they had one child. It was a custom of the country to have on the table, on Good Friday, as Lenten fare, a plumcake of goodly dimensions, to the enjoyment of which friends and neighbours were invited. The Harpers had their cake prepared, and several of their acquaintances were summoned. Fortunately, however, as it turned out, only one guest came, who partook sparingly. The maid, distrusting the taste, advised that it be not eaten: she thought it contained something amiss. But her master made light of her fancy; and at six o'clock in the evening he died. His daughter Anne survived no more than three hours: his son William, by six in the morning, was also dead. Such was the domestic destruction of Friday and Saturday, April 20 and 21, 1753.

An inquest was held on the latter day, and a verdict of "Wilful Murder" was returned; but the crime was fastened upon no one. If suspicions were entertained, the circumstances supplied no certain clue to the culprit. Conjecture was clouded and cautious. Easter Sunday came, and was passing away, when the son-in-law, William Smith, disappeared. His flight was at once construed into evidence of guilt; and instant measures were taken for his apprehension. A reward was offered in the newspapers. He was described in the advertisement as of middle stature, swarthy in complexion, sullen of countenance, and down-looking; his age about 22. The coat he commonly wore was brown; and his wig was of the same colour. Ten guineas would be given,

by Mr. Lawson, of Stokesley, to whomsoever brought the fugitive to justice. Remorse of conscience, however, and not the constable, delivered him into custody. No pursuer overtook him. Voluntarily he came home; and on Friday, the 4th of May, a fortnight after the murder, he was found near the door of his father in Broughton, at one o'clock in the morning.

At Great Ayton, on the same day, the prisoner underwent examination before a Bench of Magistrates. Mr. Beckwith was one of them; Mr. Scottowe another; and many a reader will call to mind that at this time the father of James Cook, the great circumnavigator, was Mr. Scottowe's farm-bailiff, and lived in a house he had built for himself in the village, with his initials and those of his wife Grace carved over the door. In the presence of the county justices Smith was silent. He held his tongue as to the death of his relatives, whose deplorable fate had set so many tongues in motion. He was remanded, and committed to the keeping of Henry and Samuel Hebburn and John and James Watson. At Stokesley, to which town he was forthwith conveyed, he confessed in the night that he had mixed arsenic in the flour of which the cake was made. He also stated that he had put arsenic, six weeks before, among the oatmeal used by the family in thickening their broth. Next day, May 5, he was again brought before the justices, and now repeated his acknowledgments, and said, further, that his intention had been to go to Ireland; but his mind misgave him at Liverpool, and he resolved to come back to his father's. On Sunday, the 6th, he was committed to York Castle for trial at the assizes.

There he lay prisoner over the summer, awaiting the coming of the judges; and in the *Gentleman's Magazine* we find, under the date of York, August 14, a record of his trial, conviction, and execution, viz.:—"Yesterday, William Smith, of Great Broughton, farmer, was convicted before Mr. Sergeant Eyre, for poisoning his father-in-law, Thomas Harper, and his son and daughter. The witnesses fully proved the prisoner guilty; and he was executed this day, and his body given to be dissected. He absolutely denied the fact, though upon his first apprehension he had readily confessed all the circumstances of it."

His doom was pronounced under the then new statute, 25 George II., cap. 37, (1752), "An Act for better preventing the horrid crime of murder." "Whereas the horrid crime of murder," says the preamble, "has of late been more frequently perpetrated than formerly, and particularly in and near the metropolis of this kingdom, contrary to the known humanity and natural genius of the British nation; and whereas it is thereby become necessary that some further terror and peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment of death now by law inflicted on such as shall be guilty of the said heinous offence, &c." Sentence, therefore, to be

pronounced immediately after conviction; "in which sentence shall be expressed, not only the usual judgment of death, but also the time appointed hereby for the execution thereof, and the marks of infamy hereby directed for such offenders, in order to impress just horror on the mind of the offender, and on the minds of such as shall be present, of the heinous crime of murder." Execution to take place the next day but one after conviction. The judge to have power to appoint the body to be hung in chains. "In no case whatsoever the body of any murderer shall be suffered to be buried, unless after such body shall have been dissected and anatomized as aforesaid; and every judge or justice shall and is hereby required to direct the same to be disposed of as aforesaid, to be anatomized, or to be hung in chains, in the some manner as is now practised for the most notorious offences."

It is an instructive commentary on the expectations of the lawmakers of the reign of George the Second, who devised "some further terror and peculiar mark of infamy" for "better preventing the horrid crime of murder," that within ten days of the Cleveland tragedy Anne Williams was burnt at a stake near Gloucester for poisoning her husband, and that within eight days of Smith's execution at York seven malefactors, three of them murderers, were hanged at Tyburn. So vain is the experiment of deterring from crime by terror and severity. Time brought the legislation of 1752 to nothing; and now, when one "moral lesson" after another has had its day, not only are dissection and the gibbet unknown to our criminal code, but even public executions have ceased to be; a statute having been made in 1868—(31 and 32 Vict., cap. 24)—"to provide for carrying out capital punishments within prisons." And, moreover, the penalty of death, once inflicted for offences small and great, is now confined to the one great crime of murder.

The crime of the Broughton farmer became the subject of a drama, from which it would appear that his unhappy wife had married, unequally and unworthily, against her father's will. Harper is made to say of his unmarried daughter—

This child's obedience makes a large amends
For what another disobedient daughter did.
Ah, Rufina! thou'st wrecked a father's peace.

One or two other facts may be gathered from the poet's pen, to eke out the scant particulars we have been enabled to glean from the publications of the day. The maid-servant is represented, for example, as having seen the son-in-law in suspicious nearness to the store of flour from which the cake was made; and where reference is made, in Act V., to the recovery of the visitor—a "courteous lady" having "interposed her aid," and "relieved the swain"—a foot-note names this Good Samaritan as "Lady F—," meaning, doubtless, Lady Foulis, wife of Sir William Foulis, Bart., the Lord of the Manor. A

"sage physician" had been called in, whose good offices were not in vain.

The dramatist was Thomas Pierson, a native of Stokesley, where his first publication appeared in 1783, viz. :—"Roseberry Topping," printed by N. Taylerson. His next, a volume of "Miscellanies," was printed at Stockton, by Robert Christopher, in 1786, and contained (with "A Poem on the Late Peace" and "A Poem in Praise of Stockton") his tragedy of "The Treacherous Son-in-Law."

The "Biographia Dramatica"—(we quote the edition of 1812)—makes a note of the author's works, and states that he "was formerly a blacksmith, a watchmaker, a schoolmaster, &c., at Stokesley in Cleveland. He afterwards had a little place in the custom-house at Stockton, where he died the 8th of August, 1791." His tragedy "was performed at Stokesley under the author's inspection." His "Roseberry Topping" was reprinted at Stockton, in 1847, by Jennett and Co., under the editorship of John Walker Ord, the historian of Cleveland, who prefixed a kindly notice of the writer, in which he says :—"The style of his composition is throughout vigorous, manly, and unaffected; the versification copious, harmonious, and correct; whilst a healthful imagination and playful fancy render the poem at once elevating and attractive." Among the engraved illustrations of the little volume is one of "Ingleby Greenhow Church"; and from the adjoining pages we make the following extract :—

Fond Muse, come forward ! pass the sylvan glade
To Dromonby, and Kirby's site survey ;
At Broughton call ; from thence to Greenhow glide,
Observe its clime, its full extent, and soil.
This corner of the county, obscure nook
Of York's North Riding, cautiously describe.

"Obscure nook," indeed, "this corner of the county" was, when Pierson wrote his poem on that picturesque mount, "Roseberry's rude rock, the height of Topping." He discourses, in 1783, of the pathless desert, the imperious glen, the wilderness, the broken road :—

More to the south, rich Bilsdale lengthened lies,
A fertile vale, with sloping mountains graced.
The moor's ascent—(that craggy ridge o'ergrown
With weeds, wild fern, coarse brake, black heath, and
moss)—
Supplies the hamlet with its fuel brown.
Carlton high hill, or Kirby peak, the height
Of Broughton brow, here obvious meet the eye.
Those hills, like posterns, lead to caverns dire,
To dreary deserts, bogs, and broken roads,
Impervious glens, pits fathomless and foul ;
O'er precipice, morass, by Westerdale,
By Castleton, the pathless desert leads ;
To Farndale Gill the wilderness extends,
From thence to Whitby or to Scarborough spreads.

Smollett has told us how it fared with him, prior to 1771, in an excursion over the country described by Pierson. Leaving Scarborough betimes, he set out over the moors by way of Whitby. Not reckoning of the roads, he purposed sleeping on the Tees; but, "crossing a deep gutter made by a torrent, the coach was so hard strained that one of the irons which connect the frame

snapped, and the leather sling on the same side cracked in the middle." The nearest blacksmith had to be called in; and Guisbrough, not Stockton, was the novelist's resting place for the night.

The iron ore of the district was slumbering in its ancient bed. The sounds of the busy world beyond were faint or inaudible in the ears of the inhabitants. The snort of the iron horse was unknown. There was no postman's knock. Cowper, longing for "a lodge in some vast wilderness, some boundless contiguity of shade," would have found among the shadows of Roseberry the calm retreat for which he sighed. The "folio of four pages," with its news of the world, would not have broken upon his solitude. Silent and serene might have been his hermitage.

But a century has been added to the account of time; and not the Criminal Code alone, but the whole aspect of England, is changed since the days of Cowper and Smollett. A revolution has come over Cleveland and the world in the years that have run their course from the time when Pierson wrote of Roseberry; and the contrast is made apparent by the features that are absent from his picture. The far-stretching wires and rails have no note in the poet's song. He depicts the outspread canvas of "a fleet of sailing ships" on the ocean, and throws in the "smaller vessels" that glide along the Tees. But no steam-ship is on the waters, no locomotive engine on the land; and the populous borough of Middlesbrough is without mention in the North Yorkshire poem. When Pierson had pen in hand, the parish by the river had but a solitary household; and its population is now numbered by teeming tens of thousands !

Camden's Account of the Northern Counties.



WILLIAM CAMDEN, "the father of English topographers," was born in the Old Bailey, London, on the 22nd May, 1551. His father followed the occupation formerly known as that of a painter-stainer, but is believed to have died whilst the historian was yet a child. The son was admitted into Christ's Hospital within a few years after the establishment of that institution. He was subsequently placed in St. Paul's School, whence he removed to Oxford, where he appears to have studied in more than one college. He left the university at the age of twenty, and was appointed under-master of Westminster School. It was during the time he held this position that his principal works were written. They brought him fame, and the friendship and correspondence of the learned of his day. He, though a layman, was made the prebend of Ilfracombe, and in 1592 the head-mastership of Westminster School was conferred upon him. He was also