Curious Customs of the Lake District.

THE natives of "canny auld Cumberland" are, as a rule, very proud of the customs and ceremonies peculiar to the "playground of England." The progress of the iron and coal trades and other industries, the annually increasing influx of visitors from other parts of the kingdom, and the spread of education, have each had a considerable effect in giving a death blow to some of the quaintest observances. The inhabitants of Cumberland and Westmorland are rather conservative in regard to their customs, and to this cause, doubtless, may be due the fact that old-time usages yet linger in some places. These ceremonies, even, are rapidly becoming rare, the rising generation not following them with the same gusto and pleasure as was the wont of their forefathers.

As may be imagined, the three greatest events which can occur in the human life—birth, marriage, and death—come in for a large share of notice, and it may be asserted that each of these epochs is marked in a manner which obtains nowhere else. There is still one custom which has a wide following, and it promises to live the longest of all. The poorest make an effort to procure a goodly supply of "rum-butter" whenever a birth is about to take place in a family. The ingredients are easily obtainable, and, moreover, are cheap. A pound or two of moist sugar—the quantity entirely depending on the weight of sweet-butter wanted—has enough rum poured upon it to suit the particular taste of the maker, and then an equal weight of fresh melted butter is mixed in the bowl with it. After being vigorously stirred the mixture is poured into the "sweet-butter basin." This article is to be found in almost every family which has existed in the Lake District for any considerable number of years, the piece of china being looked upon in many cases as an heirloom. As soon as the "interesting event" is safely over, the rum-butter is brought out, the medical man as a rule being the first person invited to partake of the contents of the bowl, thickly spread on a piece of wheat or oat cake. The latter article of food, unfortunately, is rapidly going out of fashion, and a good, thick "butter-shag" is deemed more serviceable, though the elder folk still cling to the "haver-breed."

At present, at any rate, there does not seem much likelihood of this usage falling out of practice, the rum-butter to some tastes being very pleasant. Other customs are known only in name, having been handed down by writers who long ago flourished in the district. At Christmas time there are still what are known as "little do's," and one, which the writer has particularly in mind, has existed in Keswick, in connection with one of the leading hotels, for about a century. The "little do" is fast becoming simply a tea and dance, but at the origin it was a very different affair. The custom seems to have arisen from what were termed "old wife do's," which were always held at the end of a month from the time of a birth. Nearly every married woman in the village—or, if in a town, every "old wife" within a prescribed limit—was invited as a matter of etiquette to join with the mother in her rejoicing that she was again in good health. The congratulations were backed up by the gift of a pound of butter, a pound of sugar, or a shilling from each person invited; the central item in the festival being the drinking of tea and emptying the rum-butter dish, card playing and other diversions occasionally following when the "men-folk" joined their spouses.

A custom which is now never practised used to be observed at every "old wife do," this being termed "stealing the sweet-butter." In describing the mode of operation, an old author states that a number of young men in the neighbourhood assembled in the evening near the house where the festivities were to take place. Having waited outside the house until the table was spread, and the women all seated round it, two or three of the boldest youths rushed in and seized the basin, or attempted to seize it, and carry it off to their companions. As many of the guests were prepared to make a desperate fight for the dish, it was frequently no easy matter to secure the prize and get out again. Indeed, it was no uncommon thing to see some of the invaders denuded of their coat-tails, or perhaps some more important part of their habilaments. When they succeeded in getting the basin of sweet-butter, a basket of oat bread was handed out to them, and they went to some neighbour's house to eat it, after which each put a few coppers into the empty basin, and returned the dish to the owners. One other custom which has fallen out of use should be noticed before leaving the "old wife do's." This was known as "jumping the can," and it would certainly be impossible for many ladies of the present day to perform the little feat when wearing the garments which fashion prescribes. A large milking pail was placed in the middle of the floor, and in it was stuck a birch broom without the handle. Over this each woman was expected to jump. It was no great height, and those who were young and active went over easily enough, but there were others who did not succeed so well, and that constituted the fun of the thing.

The wedding customs peculiar to the district might be reckoned by the dozen, but few special ones now survive. In the olden days, before the advent of railways, ten or twelve couples of young people often went to church at once on a matrimonial mission, and as the distance was sometimes several miles, they had to go on horseback. At that time the roads were unsuitable for light carriages, and travelling, even on horseback, was far from safe. The horses were put up at the public-house nearest the church; and, after

the marriage knot had been securely tied, the party returned to the public-house to drink the healths of the bride and bridegroom. This usually took some time, and it was not unfrequently the case that the males got slightly elevated by the quantity of home-brewed ale and whisky which they imbibed. The horses having been again mounted, a signal was given, and all raced home, the bride giving a ribbon to the winner. The majority of the animals were rough and heavy farm horses, with a gait the reverse of pleasant, and, as most of them carried two persons, "spills" were very common. The feasting, drinking, dancing, and merrymaking was resumed, and then came the last act of the wedding observances. The bride having retired, all the young women entered the room, and stood at the foot of the bed. The bride sat up with her back towards them, and threw her left stocking over her shoulder, and the girl who chanced to be hit by it was supposed to be the next whose turn it would be to get married.

Funeral customs are much more numerous than either of the other kinds. There is one which, while known in other parts of England, is steadfastly believed in in the North-West. From time immemorial it has been the rule in the country districts to have "corpse roads" from every hamlet to the parish church. So strict were the people about keeping to these roads that in time of flood a funeral party has been known to wade knee deep through the water, rather than deviate a few yards to the right or left. On the afternoon before a funeral, all the married women within the prescribed limit already mentioned—which is locally known as a "Laating"—were invited to go to what was termed the "winding," which meant the placing of the body in the coffin. This, of course, could easily be done in a few minutes by two or three person, but it served as a pretext for a tea drinking and gossip. The parties on the funeral days were usually very large, two persons being invited from each family in the "Laating," besides the relatives of the family. The visitors were all expected to partake of dinner, the viands usually being more substantial than elegant. Besides the eatables there was a full supply of ale and spirits, with tobacco for those who wished to smoke. About three o'clock, which was the usual time for "lifting" the corpse, the coffin was taken outside the door and placed on the bier. The mourners stood near, and four verses of the sixteenth Psalm were sung. The way in which this was done rendered it a somewhat slow and monotonous proceeding. A line at once was given out, in a peculiar sing-song tone, by the clerk or sexton, and was then sung by a few of those present. The next step was termed "lifting" the corpse, and four men raised the bier shoulder high. Hearses were at that time unknown, and the men walked away towards the church, followed by the mourners and others who had been invited. As the distance was often two or three miles, the bearers were relieved by fresh relays of men at certain places on the route. The ceremony over, and the body left in its last resting-place, as many of the attendants as chose went back to the house, where each was presented with a small loaf of bread to take home. This was called "arvel" bread, and was originally given only to the poor, but afterwards came to be offered to all alike.

There are hamlets in the Lake District a good ten miles from the nearest graveyard, and in those sparsely populated and healthy places a funeral is a rare occurrence. Not long ago the writer had occasion to attend the obsequies of a well-known dalesman. From the hillside farms for miles around came the Herdwick breeders, and many of them waited at the nearest public-house (two miles away) for the coming of the hearse and its followers, and then in their market carts went after the more fashionable vehicles. The hill out of Buttermere was taken at a smart walk, but as soon as the last of the houses was left behind whip was given to the horses in the hearse. Off they went, at the top of their speed, and every animal in the long procession had to follow suit. Rein was scarcely drawn for a moment till Lorton was reached, the half-dozen miles from Buttermere being covered in about three-quarters of an hour, and that along a road the roughness of which can only be appreciated by those who have been unfortunate enough to be driven over it, in a heavy, springless cart, at a quick trot. The burial concluded, everybody adjourned to a public-house close to the church gates, and quickly the scene was changed from mourning to feasting. Open house was kept for the time being, all being welcome to eat and drink to the top of their bent. After an hour and a half had been thus spent, the party separated, the dales-folk to canter back over the same rough road to their secluded homes, there to have a fireside "crack" over the "Royal" and other showyard victories achieved by the old agriculturist, who had won sufficient prize cards to completely cover the walls and ceilings of his best sitting-room, and as many articles of silver as would have sufficed to stock a shop in a very respectable manner. PIP.

The Tyne Conservancy Contest

IT was not until the Municipal Corporations Act had passed that the bed of the Tyne was attacked by a dredger; nor was it until the Tyne Improvement Act had been added to the statute-book that any great impression was made on the depth of water. From the year 1838, when dredging began, to the close of the year 1850, in which the conservancy of the river was transferred by the Legislature from the exclusive care of the Corporation of Newcastle to the hands of a board representing all the