

ON THE POPULAR CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS OF  
LANCASHIRE.

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PART I.

The popular customs and superstitions of Lancashire appear to me to be worthy of a permanent notice. Many of them are very important in an ethnological point of view, and immediately place us *en rapport* with those nations whose inhabitants have either colonized or conquered this portion of our country. In treasuring up these records of the olden times, tradition has, in general, been faithful to her vocation. She has occasionally grafted portions of one traditional custom, ceremony, or superstition, upon another, as is the case with the remains of some of the most ancient pieces of statuary; but in the majority of cases enough has been left to enable us to determine with considerable certainty the probable origin of each. So far as regards the greater portion of our local folklore, we may safely assert that it is rapidly becoming obsolete, and many of the most curious relics must be sought in the undisturbed nooks and corners of the county. It is there where popular opinions are cherished and preserved, long after an improved education has driven them from more intelligent communities; and it is a remarkable fact that many of these, although composed of such flimsy materials, and dependent upon the fancies of the multitude for their very existence, have nevertheless survived shocks by which kingdoms have been overthrown, and have preserved their characteristic traits from the earliest times down to the present.

When we refer to the ancient Egyptians, and to the oldest history extant, we find some striking resemblances between their customs and our own. The rod of the magician was then as necessary to the practice of the art as it still is to the "Wizard of the North." The glory of the art of magic may be said to have departed, but *the use of the rod* remains as a connecting link between the harmless deceptions of the present, and that powerful instrument of the priesthood in times remote. The divining cup, as noticed in the case of Joseph and his brethren, supplies another instance

of this close connection. Both our wise men and maidens still whirl the tea-cup, in order that the disposition of the floating leaves may give them an intimation of their future destiny, or point out the direction in which an offending party must be sought. We have yet "wizards that do peep "and mutter," and who profess to foretell future events by looking "through "a glass darkly." The practice of "causing children to pass through the "fire to Moloch," so strongly reprobated by the prophet of old, may be cited as an instance in which Christianity has not yet been able to efface all traces of one of the oldest forms of heathen worship. Sir W. Betham has observed, in his *Gael and Cymbri*, pp. 222-4, that "we see at this day "fires lighted up in Ireland, on the eve of the summer solstice and the "equinoxes, to the Phœnician god Baal; and they are called *Baal-tune*, or "Baal's fire, though the *object* of veneration be forgotten." Such fires are still lighted in Lancashire, on Hallowe'en, under the names of Beltains or Teanlas; and even the *cakes* which the Jews are said to have made in honor of the Queen of Heaven, are yet to be found at this season amongst the inhabitants of the banks of the Ribble. These circumstances may appear the less strange when we reflect that this river is almost certainly the Belisama of the Romans; that it was especially dedicated to the Queen of Heaven, under the designation of Minerva Belisamæ; and that her worship was long prevalent amongst the inhabitants of Coccium, Rigodunum, and other stations in the north of Lancashire. Both the fires and the cakes, however, are now connected with superstitious notions respecting Purgatory, &c., but their origin and perpetuation will scarcely admit of doubt.

A belief in astrology and sacred numbers prevails to a considerable extent amongst all classes of our society. With many the stars still "fight in their courses," and our modern fortune-tellers are yet ready to "rule the planets," and predict good or ill fortune, on payment of the customary fee. That there is "luck in *odd* numbers" was known for a fact in Lancashire long before Mr. Lover immortalized the tradition. Our housewives always take care that their hens shall sit upon an *odd* number of eggs; we always bathe *three* times in the sea at Blackpool, Southport, and elsewhere; and our names are called over *three* times when our services are required in courts of law. *Three* times *three* is the orthodox number of cheers; and we still hold that the *seventh* son of a *seventh* son is destined to form an infallible physician. We inherit all

such popular notions as these in common with the German and Scandinavian nations ; but more especially with those of the Saxons and the Danes. Triads of leaders, or ships, constantly occur in their annals ; and punishments of *three* and *seven* years' duration form the burden of many of the Anglo-Saxon and Danish laws.

A full proportion of the popular stories which are perpetuated in our nurseries most probably date their existence amongst us from some amalgamation of races ; or, it may be, from the intercourse attendant upon trade and commerce. The Phœnicians, no doubt, would import a portion of their oriental folklore to the southern Britons ; the Roman legions would leave traces of their prolific mythology amongst the Brigantes and the Sistuntii ; and the Saxons and the Danes would add their rugged northern modifications to the common stock. The "Hunchback" is common to both England and Arabia ; the "man in the moon" has found his way into the popular literature of almost every nation with which we are acquainted ; "Cinderella and her slipper" is "The little golden shoe" of the ancient Scandinavians, and was equally familiar to the Greeks and Romans ; "Jack and the bean stalk" is told in Sweden and Norway as of "The boy who stole the giant's treasure" ; whilst our renowned "Jack the giant killer" figures in Norway, Lapland, Persia and India, as the amusing story of "The herd boy and the giant." The labors of Tom Hickathrift are evidently a distorted version of those of Hercules ; and these again agree in the main with the journey of Thor to Utgard, and the more classical travels of Ulysses. In Greece the clash of the elements during a thunderstorm was attributed to the chariot wheels of Jove ; the Scandinavians ascribed the sounds to the ponderous waggon of the mighty Thor ; our Lancashire nurses *Christianise* the phenomenon by assuring their young companions, poetically enough, that thunder "is the noise which God makes when passing across the heavens." The notion that the gods were wont to communicate knowledge of future events to certain favored individuals appears to have had a wide range in ancient times ; and this curiosity regarding futurity has exerted a powerful influence over the minds of men in every stage of civilization. Hence arose the consulting of oracles and the practice of divination amongst the ancients, and to the same principles we must attribute the credulity which at present exists with respect to the "*wise men*" who are to be found in almost every town and village in Lancashire. The means adopted by

some of the oracles when responses were required, strangely remind us of the modern feats of ventriloquism; others can be well illustrated by what we now know of mesmerism and its kindred agencies; whilst these and clairvoyance will account for many of those where the agents are said by Eustathius to have spoken out of their bellies, or breasts, from oak trees, or been "cast into trances in which they lay like men dead or asleep, "deprived of all sense and motion; but after some time returning to themselves, gave strange relations of what they had seen and heard."

The ancient Greeks and Romans regarded dreams as so many warnings; they prayed to Mercury to vouchsafe to them a night of good dreams. In this county we still hold the same opinions; but our country maidens, having christianised the subject, now invoke St. Agnes and a multitude of other saints to be similarly propitious. There are many other points of resemblance between the folklore of Lancashire and that of the ancients. Long or short life, health or disease, good luck or bad, are yet predicted by burning a lock of human hair; and the fire is frequently poked with much anxiety when testing the disposition of an absent lover. Many persons may be found who never put on the *left* shoe first; and the appearance of a *single* magpie has disconcerted many a stout Lancashire farmer when setting out on a journey of business or pleasure. In the matter of sneezing we are just as superstitious as when the Romans left us. They exclaimed "may Jove protect you" when any one sneezed in their presence, and an anxious "God bless you" is the common ejaculation amongst our aged mothers. To the same sources we may probably attribute the apprehensions which many Lancashire people entertain with respect to spilling the salt; sudden silence, or fear; lucky and unlucky days; the presence of thirteen at dinner; raising ghosts; stopping blood by charms; spitting upon, or drawing blood from persons in order to avert danger; the evil eye; and a multitude of other minor superstitions. We possess much of all this in common with the Saxons and the Danes, but the original source of the greater portion is probably that of our earliest conquerors.

Divination by means of the works of Homer and Virgil was not uncommon amongst the ancients; the earlier Christians made use of the Psalter or New Testament for such purposes. In Lancashire the Bible and a key are resorted to, both for deciding doubts respecting a lover, and also to aid in detecting a thief. Appropriate verses are selected, according

to the nature of the case, and the key is tied upon them inside the book, the whole apparatus is then suspended from the *fourth* finger of each hand, a set form of words is pronounced, and the Bible turns round, or remains stationary, according as the lover is faithful or false, or the person suspected is innocent or guilty of the imputed crime. Divination by water affords another striking parallel. The ancients decided questions in dispute by means of a tumbler of water, into which they lowered a ring suspended by a thread, and having prayed to the gods to decide the question in dispute, the ring of its own accord would strike the tumbler a certain number of times. Our "Lancashire witches" adopt the same means, and follow the christianised formula, with a wedding ring suspended by a hair, whenever the time before marriage, the number of a family, or even the length of life, becomes a matter of anxiety.

Most nations, in all ages, have been accustomed to deck the graves of their dead with appropriate flowers, much as we do at present. The last words of the dying have, from the earliest times, been considered of prophetic import; and according to Theocritus, some one of those present endeavoured to receive into his mouth the last breath of a dying parent or friend, "*as fancying the soul to pass out with it and enter into their own bodies.*" Few would expect to find this singular custom still existing in Lancashire; and yet such is the fact. Witchcraft can boast her votaries in this county even up to the present date, and she numbers this practice amongst her rites and ceremonies. Not many years ago there resided in the neighbourhood of Burnley a female, whose malevolent practices were supposed to render themselves manifest by the injuries she inflicted on her neighbours' cattle; and many a lucky-stone, many a stout horse-shoe and rusty sickle, may now be found behind the doors, or hung from the beams in the cow-houses and stables, belonging to the farmers in that locality, which date their suspension from the time when this good old lady held the country side in awe. Not one of her neighbours ever dared to offend her openly; and if she at any time preferred a request it was granted at all hazards, regardless of inconvenience and expense. If in some thoughtless moment any one spoke slightly either of her or her powers, a corresponding penalty was threatened as soon as it reached her ears, and the loss of cattle, personal health, or a general "run of bad luck" soon led the offending party to think seriously of making peace with his powerful tormentor. As time wore on she herself sickened and died; but before

she could "shuffle off this mortal coil" she must needs *transfer her familiar spirit* to some trusty successor. An intimate acquaintance from a neighbouring township was consequently sent for in all haste, and on her arrival was immediately closeted with her dying friend. What passed between them has never fully transpired, but it is confidently affirmed that at the close of the interview this associate *received the witch's last breath into her mouth, and with it the familiar spirit*. The dreaded woman thus ceased to exist, but her powers for good or evil were transferred to her companion; and on passing along the road from Burnley to Blackburn we can point out a farm house at no great distance, with whose thrifty matron no neighbouring farmer will yet dare to quarrel.

A very large portion of the Lancashire folklore is identical in many respects with that which prevailed amongst the sturdy warriors who founded the Heptarchy, or ruled Northumbria. During the Saxon and Danish periods their heathendom had a real existence. Its practices were maintained by an array of priests and altars, with a prescribed ritual and ceremonies; public worship was performed and oblations offered with all the pomp and power of a church establishment. The remnants of this ancient creed are now presented to us in the form of popular superstitions, in legends and nursery tales, which have survived all attempts to eradicate them from the minds of the people. Christ, his apostles, and the saints, have supplanted the old mythological conceptions; but many popular stories and impious incantations which now involve these sacred names were formerly told of some northern hero, or perhaps invoked the power of Satan himself. The great festival in honor of Eostre may be instanced as having been transferred to the Christian celebration of the resurrection of our Lord; whilst the lighting of fires on St. John's eve, and the bringing in of the boar's head at Christmas, serve to remind us that the worship of Freja is not extinct. When Christianity became the national religion, the rooted prejudices of the people were evidently respected by our early missionaries, and hence the curious admixture of the sacred and the profane, which everywhere presents itself in our local popular forms of expression for the pretended cure of various diseases. The powers and attributes of Woden and Freja are attributed to Jesus, Peter, or Mary; but in all other respects the spells and incantations remain the same.

Our forefathers appear to have possessed a full proportion of those stern characteristics which have ever marked the Northumbrian population.

Whatever opinions they had acquired they were prepared to hold them firmly; nor did they give up their most heathenish practices without a struggle. Both the "law and the testimony" had to be called into requisition as occasion required; and even the terrors of these did not at once suffice. In one of the Anglo-Saxon *Penitentiaries*, quoted by Mr. Wright in his *Essays*, we find a penalty imposed upon those women who use "any witchcraft to their children, or who draw them through the earth at the meeting of roads, because that is great heathenishness." A Saxon *Homily*, preserved in the public library at Cambridge, states that divinations were used, "through the devil's teaching," in taking a wife, in going a journey, in brewing, when beginning any undertaking, when any person or animal is born, and when children begin to pine away or be unhealthy. The same *Homily* also speaks of divination by fowls, by sneezing, by horses, by dogs howling, and concludes by declaring that "he is no Christian who does these things." In a Latin *Penitentialia*, now in the British Museum, we find allusions to incantations for taking away stores of milk, honey, or other things belonging to another, and converting them to our own use. He who rides with Diana and obeys her commands, he who prepares *three* knives in company in order to predestine happiness to those born there, he who makes inquiry into the future on the first day of January, or begins a work on that day in order to secure prosperity during the whole of the year, is pointed out for reprobation; whilst hiding charms in grass, or on a tree, or in a path, for the preservation of cattle, placing children in a furnace, or on the roof of a house, and using characters for curing disease, or charms for collecting medicinal herbs, are enumerated for the purpose of pointing out the penances to be undergone by those found guilty of "such heinous sins." Nearly all these instances may be said to belong to the transition state of our folklore, and relate at once both to the ancient and the modern portions of our subject. We have seen that much the same practices were used by the Greeks and Romans; and it is a curious fact that many of the more important are still in vogue amongst the peasantry of Lancashire. Many persons will still shudder with apprehension if a dog howl during the sickness of a friend: dragging a child across the earth at a "four lane ends" is yet practised for the cure of hooping cough: fern seed is still said to be gathered on the Holy Bible, and is believed to be able to render those invisible who will dare to take it. We still have prejudices respecting the first day of the new year

black haired visitors are most welcome on the morning of that day ; charms for the protection of families and cattle are yet to be found ; and herbs for the use of man and beast are still collected when their " proper planets are " ruling " in the heavens. More copies of Culpepper's *Herbal* and Sibly's *Astrology* are sold in Lancashire than all other works on the same subjects put together, and this principally on account of the planetary influence with which each disease and its antidote are connected. Old Moore's *Almanac*, however, is now sadly at a discount, because it lacks the table of the " Moon's signs " ; the farmers are consequently at a loss to know which will be healthy cattle, and hence they prefer a spurious edition which supplies the grave omission.

Within the last few months I have procured several lucky stones for the protection of cattle, from the " shippons " of those who, in other respects, are not counted behind the age ; and I might have supplied myself with an ample stock of horse-shoes and rusty sickles from the same sources. However, during the last forty years the inhabitants of Lancashire have made rapid progress both in numbers and intelligence. They have had the " school-master abroad " amongst them, and have consequently divested themselves of many of the grosser superstitions which formed a portion of the popular faith of their immediate predecessors ; but there is yet a dense sub-stratum of popular opinions existing in those localities which have escaped the renovating influences of the spindle or the rail. As time progresses many of these will become further modified, or perhaps totally disappear ; and hence it may be desirable to secure a permanent record of the customs and superstitions of the county. In attempting this I have put down little more than my own *personal* experience. Throughout life I have had ample opportunities for studying the " weak side " of our " Lancashire Witches," and while I hope to be pardoned for thus disclosing their secrets, I shall be happy to find that my labors are acceptable to this Society.

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