KINSHIP BELIEFS & CUSTOMS IN LANCASHIRE

THE study of folk-lore and of primitive customs, whose survivals have come down to us either in written word or oral tradition, presents a wide and valuable field of inquiry to the patient investigator intent on reconstructing the life of the common people of these islands. What the chronicles of property civilisation, whether local records or national documents, have purposely or in ignorance overlooked may be checked by a careful examination of comparative legends and popular customs.

South Lancashire, although to-day at the very centre of the classic region of capitalist production and circulation, was, prior to the introduction of machinery and the construction of canals and railways, an almost trackless wilderness beyond the bounds of agrarian or commercial activity. It was a march-land on the perimeter of civilised existence. The main stream of traffic went north and south up the eastern slope and plain beyond the Pennines. Lancashire faced an empty sea, devoid of commerce and far from the trade routes of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. There are only two cities in Lancashire and both are comparatively modern. Manchester had no parliamentary representation prior to 1832, and, at the time of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1834, was governed as a manorial village. Liverpool had no dock, and no trade to warrant one, before 1709. For another 30 years cotton came to East Lancashire by carrier's cart from London. Amongst the earlier place-names of the district there is only one, Padgate, on a probable well-beaten track across the waste of Chat Moss, that conveys the idea of going and coming, of intercourse and trade. Hence, we are not surprised to discover that witchcraft, goblins, boggarts, and curious apparitions received frank recognition and respect until comparatively recently, or that holidays, "wakes" and May Day festivals died hard in the Mersey Ribble valleys.

Now what can we learn from these survivals and the attitudes of mind which they disclosed? Have they anything to tell us concerning the environment and the economic and political debasement of our class?

Let us take, first of all, the "boggarts" which poor weavers saw on Saturday nights when returning full of ale and light of pocket to their homes in the hills or across the moss. The "boggarts" and "feeorin" were seen to flit across the sedgy wastes, to appear at wall-tops or gate-ways in the darkling night. The former word derives from "bar-gheist" or gate-ghost. The latter were equivalent to fairies, and both were akin to Puck or Hob and the "wee men." They haunted Harpurhey and Blackley, whilst on Droylesden Moor, betwixt Manchester and Ashton-under-Lyne, they were varied with "great big dhogs, wi' great glarin' een, as big as tay cups." These were the degenerate descendants of the were-wolves, or man-wolves, into which wicked men could transform themselves. Once on a time, ages before, the heroes and the gods of the North had taken these shapes to avenge themselves on their

foes or to escape from battle, or had assumed the totem-guise of their common ancestor.

In the Forest of Pendle and at Leigh, in the 17th and 18th centuries, witches were fully credited. They kept wild orgies on Rivington Pike or Pendle Hill, riding out and home on a broom-stick. Near Todmorden, on All Hallows Eve, the Spectral Huntsman hunted a milk-white doe; whilst, on dark, windy nights his hounds, the "Gabriel ratchets," went baying for the dead across the sky. At Burnley, the "hound of death," the "Skriker," with eyes "as large as saucers," used to appear, and it was there, too, that pigs had in a single night removed the parish church from one site to another. Goblin builders had taken the stones of Rochdale parish church from the banks of the Roach, and had deposited them on a more suitable spot, whilst "Old Scrat" long continued to take a lift on carts homeward bound, terrorising the drivers.

The Spectral Huntsman was All Father Odin, the one-eyed giant who rode the White Horse, to see which was death. The witches, now become hags, had been stalwart, clear-eyed, ruddy-skinned valkyries, corpse-choosers, swan-maidens, riding the clouds with All Father. "Gabriel's ratchets" were wild swans who went unseen in search of the dead or the dying, like the white wolves who howled a generation ago in the forests of Sweden. The pigs—unclean beasts—were, probably, the Christian's degradations of the golden boar, sacred to All Father, who was slain and eaten each night in Valhalla and was made whole each morning for the next repast.

These gods, valkyries, hounds and boar were parts of the pantheon of the divine beings who guarded the customs and clan-life of the kin before the trusteeship of the chieftain was completely transformed into absolute right, sanctioned in the interests of morality and civilisation by the priests Rome lent as guardians of authority to the kings and nobles who, as J. R. Green makes clear, were the actual patrons and enthusiasts of Christianity in England. These clerics denounced all inclination to continue the religious ceremonial arising out of the clan customs, and all deference to the old gods and the old ways, as "Black Magic," as a danger to mankind. They degraded Brunhild to be a crone. They made the swan-maidens into witches and "hounds of hell." They transformed "Skratr" into "Old Scrat" who claimed lazy serfs as his own. They deposed "Hold Nikor," the Northmen's guardian deity of the sea, from his god-head to the contemptuous status of "Old Nick," the cursed one; and, not succeeding in banishing him from memory, blessed him with holy water and christened him St. Nicholas. Reformed in name and character, he again became, at Liverpool, the patron of seafarers and in his church the pious privateers and slave traders of that prosperous port prayed for further favours. The boar of Odin, splendid with its golden bristles, was made out to be a mere filthy pig whose sacrilegious snout routed up the foundations of a Christian edifice.

The mere continuance of these superstitions, in however debased a form, points plainly enough to the reluctance with which the dispossessed kinsmen abandoned the ceremonial sanctions of their blood relations and the social order erected thereon. What we know of the prevalence of witch-hunting in the Middle Ages, and again in the century following upon the first great appropriation of the common lands, suggests to us that, despairing of any return to the good old days whether by open revolt or a change of fortune, the peasantry tried black magic, and by secret signs and ancient ritual sought to conjure up means to injure their oppressors. Just as the Friendly Society of Iron Founders met by night in fields outside Bolton during the stringent enforcement of the Combination Laws, so may the helpless serfs have met in conclave in clough and on moor. What so likely either as that the feudal lords, both secular and spiritual, should denounce their assemblies as sinful communion with fiends?

So much for the super-natural elements above named. There were other Lancashire beliefs expressing themselves in custom that call for our attention. One of these has left its traces even to the present day in the rush-bearings at Rochdale, the crowning of the May Queen at Knutsford, the remnants of morris dancing, and a few solitary painted poles, as at Failsworth, as well as the well-dressings at Buxton not so far away. This was the erection of the Tree of Life, the symbol of the ever-new

fertility of the village community, of the family group, which was practised by men and maidens in the springtide. The rite was pagan in its origin and no swinging censer or priestly benediction could make either flower-strewn fountains or flower-garlanded tree-trunks other than the emblems of kinship and of common life.

The holidays were, for the main part, adopted festivals of old-time gods and goddesses. In the same way, the monoliths—with or without cross-bars—in Lancashire, Cheshire and Peakland churchyards *may* have been erected by Paulinus and his band of missionaries, but they were not the first upright and graven stones to stand erect on those mounds or to fit into those stone sockets. Nor did the folk-moot learn first to come together at the tolling of the church bell. It came to the mound and the monolith at Winwick or at Whalley long before the church was built near to that familiar spot.

The "Wakes" and "Fairings" were not always days given over to jaunts to Blackpool. They were the occasion of meetings of the people of the country-side for inter-change of goods, for intercourse and festival. They derived from pilgrimages to sacred wells or dedicated shrines once full of significance to inter-related families who thus commemorated by games—as among the North American Indians and the Greeks—by plays, and by "churchings" their essential unity of life.

Too many holidays were not regarded with favour by the "output" enthusiasts of private property civilisation. The sap of life in human veins was less hallowed in their eyes than glittering coin in rapid circulation. Before the "spirit of improvement" that robbed us of our wastes and greens—of which Lancashire had so many till Stanleys and other county gentry found better use for them—the sports and holidays had to make way. They robbed us of our lands and our leisure, reclaimed the meres and cleared the mosses, and gave us Platt Bridge and Widnes instead. They tore down the may-poles and gave us the commercialised football and racing paraphernalia of the horse-owning Hultons. They ridded our minds of boggarts, and taught us to read and believe in Bottomley. Great, indeed, is Progress under private enterprise and private property.

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