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A
HISTORY OF DEVONSHIRE

WITH
SKETCHES OF ITS LEADING WORTHIES

BY

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[335]

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DIALECT AND FOLK-LORE.

West-Country English has a very peculiar interest in its historical relations. It was not merely in the spirit of enthusiasm that Charles Kingsley, himself by accident of birth a Devonshire man, exclaimed, 'Glorious West-Country! you must not despise their accent, for it is the remains of a nobler and purer dialect than our own.' Devonshire speech, in fact—as one of its greatest living masters, Mr. F. T. Elworthy, has shown—is 'the true classic English.' 'We all know that the English of Alfred's time, or, as it is called, the Anglo-Saxon, is the groundwork upon which our modern English has been built up. But Alfred's own variety was in his day the polite, the courtly, the only recognised literary—in fact, the standard form of speech; and Alfred was, as we all know, a West-Country man, speaking in West-Country, most likely Devonshire style.' Cædmon and Beda had long passed away, and until the year 1100 the language of Alfred remained the only written English.

From about 1100 to the beginning of the fourteenth century Southern English still held a prominent position in the vernacular literature of the country, though several writers in the Midland dialect from time to time arose. In the fourteenth century, however, a change came. Wycliffe and Chaucer, writing in their own Midland dialect, not

[336]

only reasserted 'the dignity of the despised language of the common people,' but made the form of English in which they wrote 'the recognised model of the English language.' There was no writer of Southern English to assert its claims to recognition at this critical period. The book language, which they modelled and partially created by the help of the printing press, quickly supplanted all the other forms. 'From that time forward the language of our great Saxon King was only represented by the spoken

words of our West-Country forefathers. . . . Thus . . . the modern courtly dialect, now considered to be the correct English, is the descendant of what, in Alfred's time, was, by the then educated classes, held as much below the recognised standard, as our West-Country talk is now reckoned by dwellers in Park Lane and Belgravia.' Only once since those days has the good broad Saxon dialect of Devon been held in court favour: and that was in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, whose greatest heroes spake with the tongue of their fathers, and were not ashamed; and who made its rugged sounds dear to all who valued stoutness of heart and unquenchable courage of soul, and specially to the 'Great Eliza' herself. Even then, however, the dialect had its share of ridicule, as the vain efforts of Shakspeare and his fellow-dramatists to reproduce it on the stage show. It is amusing to note how they thus—Shakspeare and Jonson more especially—created a false rustic dialect which has continued to the present day upon the stage, but is known nowhere else.

There is a very interesting monument of the old Devonshire speech of the fourteenth century, in the English translation of 'Sir Ferumbras,' printed by the Early English Text Society in 1879. This poem was undoubtedly written by a Devonshire man in his own native tongue, though, in some way or other, he had become well acquainted with the use of Northern forms.

[337]

Throughout the work there are found the marks which still 'bewray the speech' of the true Devonian, whose language has not been reduced to the dull dead-level of the village school, with its artificial and unhistoric proprieties. Mr. Elworthy amusingly points out that 'Sir Ferumbras' shows it to have been as true five centuries ago as now, in popular proverbial parlance, that in Devon 'Everything is *he* except a Tom-cat, and that's a *she*.'

In a scientific point of view the chief feature of 'Sir Ferumbras' is, however, the manner in which it has enabled Dr. Murray to solve the vexed problem of the Devonshire 'min or mun = them,' which is one of the most notable peculiarities of the dialect, and which, while thoroughly familiar in Devon, is unknown, except in the mouth of Devonshire folk, beyond its borders. This 'min' is really derived from a word

which appears in the poem as *hymen*, *hymyn*, *hemen*, a third person plural dative and accusative, specialized from the singular by an added 'en.' The need of this arose from the fact that while in the Northern and Midland dialects in the fourteenth century the dative and accusative singular was *hem*, as now, and the plural *hem* and *heom*, in the West *hem* stood for both numbers, and was pluralized by the 'en,' as in German added to *ihr* to form a plural accusative.

The true native dialect is most marked at the present day in the Dartmoor district, in the remoter localities of the North and West, and in the heart of the South Hams. The dialect of the East of the county is not so distinctive, from the more frequent admixture of Somerset and Dorset variations, though these counties generally share with Devon the possession of the old West Saxon speech. Along the line of the Tamar Cornish influence is manifest. This is most marked in Plymouth and Devonport, which are sometimes called the 'Cornish-man's London,' and which have drawn large numbers, chiefly of the working classes, from that county. Here

[338]

also the existence of an Irish quarter has had some effect. The popular speech of Exeter is almost purely Devonian, and there are many parishes in which the customary talk of the villagers would be nearly, if not quite, unintelligible to those who are only familiar with modern and polite, but are ignorant of ancient and historic, English.

The Keltic element is seen in the nomenclature of the county, but not in any special sense in common speech. It occurs chiefly in the names of the rivers, which supply indications also of the existence of different Keltic dialects. All the larger rivers have Keltic names; so have those of the middle class; and it is only when we come to the smaller streams that the Saxon can be traced. Minor affluents had no distinctive name in early Keltic times, nor would they receive any until the county was more thickly populated. The most remarkable river group is that which contains the Tamar, Tavy, Taw, Torridge, and Teign—all unquestionably related and all based upon one root-word for water, *ta* or *tau*, with varying suffixes for the purpose of definition. Thus Tamar is *Ta-maur*, the 'big water;' Tavy, *Ta-vean*, the 'little water.' In the Exe and the Axe we have the Gaelic *uisg*, again 'water'; and in Avon, *afon*, one of the commonest

Kymric words for a river. Dart is the same name as Derwent, derivable from the old Kornu-Keltic *Dwr-gwyn*, the 'white river' or water. *Dwr* also appears in the Derle and the Deer, and probably in Otter, as *ydwr* = 'the water.' These are merely suggestive hints, for the subject is far too wide to be treated in detail here. A few Saxon names may, however, be mentioned. Lyn = *hlynn*, a 'stream.' In Lyd we have *hlyd* — 'loud.' Yeo is the Saxon *ea* — 'water.' A point of considerable importance as indicative of the varied character and origin of the Teutonic immigration, is the fact of the grouping of such common names for small streams, as brook, burn, beck, bourn, lake, water, and fleet. This is seen remarkably, as Mr. C. Spence

[339]

Bate has shown, in connection with the Dartmoor river basins, distinguishing those of adjoining streams from each other in a singularly definite and constant manner.

The folk-lore of Devon would take a volume to itself. With one exception it is thoroughly Teutonic. This exception is the Devonshire Pixy, who is not quite the northern Elf, but still less the southern Fairy. Cornish tradition is peculiar in its tales of giants, but these are unknown in Devon save through modern importation, while the Pixies are in large part common property. They are now said to be the souls of unbaptized children, but seem to represent the defeated Kelts, in some vague fashion. Similar stories are told of them as are current of the Brownie and the Elf; so that while the foundation is probably Keltic, the superstructure is Saxon—as with many of the local weather and other rhymes—and of the widest national type. One of the most prevalent phases of the 'Pixy cult' still extant is the practice of turning garments inside out as a remedy against being 'Pixy-led' after nightfall.

The 'Wish Hounds' of Dartmoor, and the 'Yeth Hounds' of North Devon, are the 'Gabriel Hounds' of Durham and Yorkshire; 'the 'Wild Hunt' of Germany; the 'Yule Host' of Iceland; the 'Hunt Macabe' in parts of France; while there is evidence of the later importation of this wild fancy into Cornwall in the form it assumes about Polperro, of the 'Devil and his Dandy Dogs.'

Whately's statement that 'the vulgar in most parts of Christendom are continually serving the gods of their heathen ancestors,' is literally true in the West. Living animals

have been burnt alive in sacrifice within memory to avert the loss of other stock. The burial of three puppies 'brandise-wise' in a field is supposed to rid it of weeds. Throughout the rural districts of Devon witchcraft is an article of current faith, and the toad is thrown into the flames as an emissary of the evil one.

[340]

There are still to be found those who believe that the sun dances on Easter morning; those who, when they see the new moon, half in jest and half in earnest, wish and courtesy, and turn the money in their pockets; and those, too, who would not dare to insult the moon by pointing at her, for fear of some terrible revenge on the part of the offended luminary. The ship-carrying in honour of the crescent moon, adapted from paganism into Christian custom, which formed the central feature of the Corpus Christi pageant in mediaeval Plymouth, has continued to the present day as a May-day 'garland.' A tradition that the mines on Dartmoor were worked when wolves and winged serpents dwelt in the valleys, may be connected with serpent worship, or may allude to the inroads of Norsemen in their 'sea-snakes.' To a Teutonic origin are to be traced a number of superstitions connected with the ash, the most vital of which is the passage of a ruptured child through a split ash sapling, the parts of which are then brought together again.

A very curious illustration of the growth of comparatively modern folk-lore is supplied by the remarkable set of legends which have been associated with the name of Sir Francis Drake. It is said that he brought the Plymouth Leat into that town by 'art magic,' compelling a Dartmoor spring to follow his horse's tail as he galloped ahead; that he made fire-ships for the destruction of the Armada by throwing chips of wood from Plymouth Hoe into Plymouth Sound; that he 'shot the gulf' which divided this upper world from the antipodes by a pistol; that he threw a boy overboard because cleverer than himself; that he fired a cannon ball through the earth to prevent his wife committing bigamy; that he rises to his revels if you beat his old drum; and that he offered to make Tavistock a magical seaport!