WAKEMAN'S WANDERINGS.

Curious Cornish Customs.

BODMIN, Cornwall,
February 4, 1891.

Everywhere behind the coasts of Cornwall are footsteps of the giants; relics of pagan life, remains of Cyclopean buildings in huge monoliths, cromlech and cairn; a noble field for the student of antiquity; while the student of men will find in studying this region a race of sturdy folk, old as the Phoenicians, almost as noble as those of Connaught, proud of their Arthurian blood, strong in noble toil, grudging of innovation, loyal in life and friendships, and holding with heart-strength to the fidelities and all legends, forgivable superstitions and customs which link their work-a-day lives to the dimmed pages days into which a loyal and loving Cornish fancy may soar.

They are Celtic-Celtic, the purest and best during known to the sea-swept shores of the British Isles. They are silvers, the startliest and most manly in all the world that bring riches from the earth's depths. They are peasant farmers, who have wrung from British landlordism, through tremendous independence, something like shining honor and ample comfort. They are the Celtic Cousins, whose united cast, as in the old ballad,

"And will they scorn Trelawney, Pol and Pen,
And shall Trelawney die?
There twenty thousand Cornish men
Will know the reason why!"

have more than once modified the purposes of English parliament and have moved the policies of English kings.

Their superstitions are innumerable and unfashionable; though, so far as I can judge, they do no more harm or shake Cornish religious zeal and loyalty. They neither hinder nor detract from devout lives. But, as nearly as I can define them, they are a transplanted and not unwelcome heredity of pagan-like myths to which a simple and far from intellectual people cling as a priceless proof of their own extreme antiquity.

Out of this half-fairy, half blackcraft, mythology of Cornwall have come numberless curious Cornish customs, which the bloughboy, all the world over, sees, all the newspapers, and indeed all the vigorous Wesleyan Methodism of England, have so far been unable to "tap" or shake into a seven-tenth in any marked degree. Miners will pound a stubborn stone to splinters from their gothas never at "prayer-meeting," and then in their thereafter go on tipping to their all-night's labor in the "shift," from 3,000 to 5,000 feet "celine grass," being to give offend by honest noise. This fear has fastened boots to the "pasties," or "knackers," those elves of the mines whom they secretly believe control their good or ill luck at all mine labors. Fishermen of Whitesand, Marazion, Penzance or ancient St. Ives, will experience and exhibit equal spiritual and physical elation at prayer or chee-meeting, and, at the turn of the tide the same night, as they leave death along a lee shore in the howling Atlantic, celebrate over a companion overboard, who night by even whistling a bar of "How Sam is all Beneath the Shield" beign the malevolent and jealous of every tuba-too and fury of the sea. So, to the peasant-farmers will hasten back from church service to engage in the pagan sacrifice by fire of a bull-calf that their herds may be relieved from "fairy-stroke" and the various and vagarious powers of witches. While villagers of all faiths and works will wake with nine times around a churchyard at midnight to have certainty of everyday evidence of the devil; and all on all occasions lift their hats once to a crooked magpie than a bewitched person, to guard against the possibility of illness.

These superstitions are but a hint of the thousands that exist among Cornish people. From time immemorial, "a man must take the new year in" is all inclusive; that is, good luck will only come to woman where a man or boy has first entered the house on New Year's day; and the Cornish women will so manage matters, the simplest and most general method being to employ boys to send their door-steps. The American custom of "watching the Old Year out and the New Year in," has almost a prototype among Cornish folk in "wakening" all night for the arrival of May-Day. Immediately after midnight it is ushered in with a great uproar of songs, general hilarity, and an especial profusion of all manner of noisy musical instruments. One of the most rigidly preserved of Cornish customs is that in the mother of a newly-christened child must bestow a gift, of peculiar value to her immediate neighbor, upon the first person who may meet upon the road, after the ceremony of christening. At Lewan and other western towns of Cornwall and contains of uproarious boys on Shrove Tuesday, parade through the streets singing at dusk with stones tied to strong cords, the meantime demanding, "Give us a pancake, and we'll away!" "Give us a pancake, and we'll away!" "Give us a pancake, or we'll throw you down!" "Give us a pancake, or we'll throw you down!" Pancakes or batpennies are invariably bestowed. Apples are "thrown" by some on July 25, St. James' day, and by others at Christmas-time. A panful of cider containing broken roasted apples is carried into the orchard. Each member of the family then takes a cup of the cider, drinks a portion, and emptying the remainder upon the tree and the shouts of company, "gives health" to the tree with,

"Health to the good maid's health!
Health to her good, prosperous health,
Health to her good, prosperous health,
Prosperous health, health to it."

This nature-worship, which had so prominent a part in the customs of ancient Europe, is in many other ways kept permanently alive in Cornwall. The general May-day festivities do not essentially differ from those in other parts of England. But the often fires of Baal still burn brightly along the entire Cornish coast, on the eve of June 24. These self-summer fire-festivals, remote, corrupted by long usage, are undoubtedly of Druidic origin, and bear every evidence of furnishing a feeling relic of the pagan Irish Baal-fire, of whose extraordinary celebration at Tailten (now Telltown), near Tara, before the introduction of Christianity in Erin, there are preserved the most exact and fascinating records. All the mysterious features of those orgies, such as the fire ordeal for the cure of disease, and leaping through the high flames to preserve from sickness during the succeeding year, have been eliminated, but not so long before those yet living have forgotten them. The scenes now witnessed at Penzance and other West Cornwall towns, are chiefly interesting from a certain wave in which the huge bonfires always compel among the peasantry and the seaman; torch-dancing, sometimes almost reaching a species of frenzy, which may always be observed. Analogous to this, an singularly native of the preservation of mediaval ages, are the Twelve-Ale fees, which always flame time the dying shows of Mount's Bay, above Marazion and Penzance, and are challenged by reviving spirits wrestling the redoubtable head of sunny St. Michael's Mount.

In the more modern and wholly quaint and innocent customs of Cornwall's few pleasant inoculations may be cited. The festivities of ancient St. Ives are an incorrigible lot. Should you visit the town at the height of pilchard-fishing, and enter the dark cellars where hundreds of women and girls are engaged in "nilking," or salting the fish, scores of grinning Amazons will rush at you, and the first one will invite your shoes generously with the odorous fish-oil which has drained from the piles of curing fish. This is called "salping the shoe," and at least you are flattered with tribute of a bear's grease, unknown for lack of the "fair maids that dance and sing and make the place," is, in the pilchard fishery, your subsequent "dustings" by those grinning wenches will certainly not you a new suit of clothing. The same custom, save that the dashing is done with "mother's clay," prevails within the shoes where a stranger is expected to pay something for his initiation into the weird mysteries.

Cornwall is not biased in being an exception to other regions in the matter or shrewish wives, and Cornish shrews are the most eloquent of all women in their profession and exuberance of bitter invective, curses and spiteful mechanisms. In many parts of Cornwall where the "woman that cow'ed" Jack or Jan has become sufficiently notorious to a social, the neighbors organize what they call a "skeag cotland," proceed to the house of the termagant, and scatter wheat-chaff upon her sidewalk. This is her usually stifling, but it is proven insufficient to bridle her tongue, then "riding the skeag" is resorted to. This consists of constructing an effigy of the scold, mounting it on a dead horse or pole, and exhibiting it in front of the woman's cottage to the legitimate accompaniment of bells and horns.

The delightful custom of "harvest-home" supers, which unfortunately is dying out among American farmers, is universal in Cornwall. There is also a custom of very ancient origin of celebrating the finishing of work in any extensive undertaking, especially in completing the labor of thrashing or "shocking," the sheaves of grain into "arthmows." The custom is called "saving the neck," and consists in viewing a small sheaf of the best land of grain three times in the air, among the harvesters, who thereupon give a long drawn out "hooray!" "The neck" finally changing the shout to "We yes! we yes!"—meaning we have the harvesting of this field. This is followed by a good deal of lubricous thing (serious jollity, to which the tips of Cornwall pay tribute in proportion to their lack of physical prowess. The cheerful all-demonstrative Cornish "carward" feast from a cheery harvest custom of long standing. The parson's grain is all gathered by voluntary offerings of labor, every person whom he employs in any capacity during the year—the tillerer, painter, carpenter, cobbler, sexton, and all his own servants—come together when desired and gather the "parson's" crops. Their only reward consists in a rousing supper at his house, where his wife, daughters, and all female members of his household, hospitably serve those who harvested them.

Two other curious and interesting customs should not be omitted. These are the annual "Furry-day" of Helston and "Thing Sunday," with its attendant festivities, at Clowance Park, in Crewn parish. The origin of the Cornish Furry Day is unquestionably long in the "Floralia" annually celebrated by Romans on the fourth of the calends of May; it is annually celebrated throughout Cornwall by little-some and neighborly parties, and adjoins from the time immemorial, as festivity peculiar to that place, on the eighth day of May, long before daylight happy groups of lads and lasses start in every direction for the country lanes and hedges singing:

"Rise up early in the morning as early as day, O,
And fetch in the flowers of the merry, merry month of May,
The flowers and the May, O,
The flowers and the May, O,
And we will go to the woods and fetch the May, O."

or a dozen other lines of similar import, the refrain of which is,

"Oh, the merry, merry month of May
The merry, merry month of May
We are out a-maying."

And indeed do they. At every farmhouse the rare most profuse of fine merry-makers in the day is hung along of "blume blossoms upon the latch," for such for centuries have been entitled to a portion of bread and cream. The blossoms of the "blume," a kind of cherry are gathered everywhere, with all glorious buds and blooms of spring. Blended with these the floral tribute return to Helston, when the festivals of the day really begin. The old town is fairly embedded in spring blossoms and garlands. This completed, it closes into a universal carnival of dancing. Every door in Helston is thrown open to the passing throngs. Arm in arm, and usually four-hand, the people dance, to a merry quickstep time and accompanied by May-day songs, pass in the front door of houses and thence from rear to front of other houses, and from down a dark weave serpentine threads of season, cider and song through and through the old Cornish town.

"Taking Ralay" in Clowan parish is not only a precursor of Mazard Fair at Penzance, but also of numerous life-long joyous and pathetic incidents. In Clowance Park, on the noted St. Aubyn's estate, is a magnificent mall, bordered with some of the noblest beech trees in England. On the afternoon of the Sunday two weeks before Mazard Fair—which derives its name from a mazard-cherry fair annually held at Penzance in the latter part of June, on tons of this luscious fruit are thrown off by the farmers of the surrounding country—ten thousand Cornish youths and maidens may always be found assembling in Clowance Park. They sometimes come from a distance of a hundred and twenty miles. Certain young men meet here to choose their "partners" or "mazards" for Mazard Fair; and here the blushing lassies come to be "taken," that is, pledged for Mazard Fair day. Many an exultant or broken heart returns home that night, according as the secretly-cherished hope, or sinking from bitter disappointment, Mazard-Day comes. The Cornish ballad, "Mazard Fair,