A Children's Game and the Lyke Wake
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A CHILDREN'S GAME AND THE LYKE WAKE.

1. On Jan. 20 and Feb. 24 of the present year, two letters of mine appeared in the Literary Supplement of the Times. Their immediate purpose was to deal with traces of the Lyke Wake in Shakespeare's tragedies. I began from a game which I used to play as a very small boy, and from the words that were spoken in the game. Out of these letters, a considerable correspondence arose. From many quarters, persons to whom grateful acknowledgments are due, wrote sending similar rhymes and furnishing other evidence in agreement with the childish tradition. I have before me some twenty versions of an old ballad which seems to go back to the Lyke Wake, and a version of a ballad in the Robin Hood cycle. At the request of the Editor I have put together a short summary of my material, and have added some comments which suggest themselves.

2. And first as to the game. The players—young boys and girls, I myself was not more than nine—assembled in winter evenings in a dark place or passage. One of our number lay supine on the ground. The company then joined hands and went round in a ring reciting and not singing—this is important—reciting a dirge. The verses rose to a climax with the words, "and the worms crept out and the worms crept in." At this point the dead person came to life, and amid general shrieks, seized upon a chance member of the ring, who in turn lay dead. I have not been able to find an exact parallel to the game. It seems to imitate the Lyke Wake with the addition of the raising of the dead man. The scientific character of this magazine must excuse my quoting a partial, though gruesome, parallel. At some Irish wakes, so the story goes, the neighbours come in and drink beer round the corpse. They end by throwing bottles at him and challenging him to drink as though he could be brought to life. The Dance of Death itself, for which the reader may be referred to a fine description in the twenty-seventh chapter of John Inglesant, may be regarded as arising from a similar origin, but not as identical with our game. The ballad about which something is said below is probably related to the Dance of Death. Our first result, then, is that these ballads were related to a dramatic game representing a funeral.
3. The words of the dirge offer a difficulty. I remember the refrain: "um ha laid in his (or her) grave." These are found in a rhyme about the death of Robin Hood still recited at Sutton-in-Ashfield within the old limits of Sherwood Forest. But the rhyme does not contain the words about the worms quoted above. When I began this inquiry, an informant told me that his nurse used to recite to him when he was a child:

And from his eyes and mouth and chin
The worms crept out and the worms crept in.

And then grabbing the child's arm, she said, "And you'll be like that when you're dead." It was a comment upon the last case, that some twenty correspondents sent me various versions of a ballad about Death and the Gay Lady. All of these depended upon oral tradition except one which appeared in a volume published by E. F. Rimbault, *Nursery Rhymes*. Curiously enough, no other version exactly corresponds to Rimbault's. In fact, no two are exactly alike. The version that follows is probably the oldest. It was current at Oxford about a hundred years ago.

There was a lady skin and bone,
Never was such a lady known.
This lady one fine summer's day
Went forth to church her prayers to say.

When she got to the churchyard gate,
She sat her down and there did wait.
When she got to the church door,
She sat her down a little more.

When she got the church within
The bells did ring, the psalms did sing.
When she got into her pew,
She looked round and took her view.

She looked up, she looked down,
And saw a dead man on the ground.
And from his nose unto his chin
They all crept out, they all crept in.
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This lady to the parson said
Shall I be so when I am dead?
Oh, yes, dear lady, you are so
Whether you are dead or no.

Some versions substitute for the lovely tenth line, “The parson prayed against pride and sin,” obviously a puritan touch replacing the reference to the tolling of the bell and the singing of the choir. Another version has: “The parson prayed and clerk did sing,” and reminds us of the villages where the clerk had a good note. We can thus trace the history of the ballad from Catholic to Puritan usage. For that it dated back to Catholic times is rendered probable by the wide distribution of the ballad, and also by its use in medicine.

4. The versions have come from most parts of England, and from Ireland as far as West Kerry. The reciter in that case was illiterate: an old Irish nurse who could neither read nor write. But she was equally fluent in Irish and English and was a storehouse of old ballads and stories. In her rhyme the dead man is on the ground and the lady speaks to the sexton, without apparently entering the church. When the sexton says to the lady, “you will be so when you are dead,” the case is almost like that of Hamlet with the grave-digger. This enables us to distinguish two elements in the later ballad: the sight of the dead and the visit to the church. The presence of the dead in the church is not easy to understand. On the other hand, the lady coming across death, is like the forty-fifth figure in Holbein’s Imagines Mortis. It looks as if some ‘maker’ of the complete ballad had put his materials together rather clumsily from various sources, and that he took the lady to church for the sake of edification—a characteristic ballad touch.

5. An American correspondent says that similar rhymes about the Lyke Wake are current in parts of the United States. He then quotes the lines which he heard as a child in Virginia in the early seventies. I have myself distant relations in Western Virginia and it is quite possible that they also may have continued in the old tradition.

6. In Dorset, so a lady informs me, the rhyme about death
and the lady used to be employed as a cure for hiccoughs. "The patient was held by the eye of the reciter, who said the rhyme very quietly and impressively until it came to the last word 'Oh,' which was suddenly shouted, and so startled the patient that the hiccoughs vanished at once." The medicinal value of the incantation is echoed also in its use to amuse and even to soothe children. Children loved it, says one.

7. The materials which have turned up from so many quarters on the apparently slight suggestions of the present, show that at the back of our minds there is still the popular tradition of which Mr. Hardy has been the spokesman for Dorset. The resurrection of the dead, for instance. But it is no year spirit, no wood king, that is challenged to rise, but just everyman or anyman. Along with the general agreement of the tradition in substance there is great variety in form. In the one case the shriek of the lady, in both cases the occurrence of the lines about the corruption of the body are among the few permanent elements. On the whole it may be said that a tradition may be widespread and venerable but that it will not be uniform. Hence, when it is committed to writing the permanent form will represent but one out of many possibilities, and not of necessity the best of them.

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