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CORRESPONDENCE.

LENTEN CUSTOM IN THE SOUTH OF ITALY.

To the Editor of FOLK-LORE.

SIR,—Seven years ago, whilst I was at Castellamare (below Naples), I noticed in the old town that a cord was hanging from one side of the narrow street to the other, fastened to the upper part of the many-storied houses. From the middle of the cord hung a roughly-made puppet, about a foot long, dressed all in black, rather like a nun in general appearance, and from the skirts of the puppet came five or six hen's feathers, rather like feather legs in arrangement. I asked a peasant what was the meaning of the doll, and he said, with true Italian vagueness, "It is merely Lent." However, by means of questions, in my very limited Italian, I found that, at the expiration of every week throughout Lent, one feather leg was pulled off the puppet, and that it was finally destroyed on the last day of Lent. If I remember well, Mr. Story, the sculptor, refers to a similar custom in his *Saints and Superstitions*, which I have not got by me, but he does not mention the feather legs. Mr. Story wrote of the custom a good many years ago as being one which was fast dying out in Italy.

Could any folk-lorist explain why feathers should be used? Would there be any connection between them and the Easter hens and Easter eggs which are so much seen in Italy? The destruction of the black doll no doubt has the same meaning as the Easter customs mentioned in Mr. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, as being so widely spread, and, I suppose, typifies the destruction of Winter and Death?

LUCY E. BROADWOOD.

KEY MAGIC.

To the Editor of FOLK-LORE.

SIR,—The key, either in conjunction with the Bible or alone, played an important part in our East-Anglian divination ceremonies. But a use to which it was put is, I think, almost unique, namely, to influence wind and tide on behalf of a vessel coming into or leaving port.

The following is a brief account supplied by our friend and representative for Norfolk, Miss Matthews ; and it is the more interesting as it is corroborated by a friend at Lynn, who states in a letter to me that he well remembers seeing the action, but did not attach any value or interest to it at the time (not being a folk-lorist, perhaps). But since I told him of the information I had received he called it to mind ; but, though he has since been on the look-out at intervals for its recurrence, he has not been able to trace even an isolated instance of its survival at this date. If it does still exist he has not been fortunate enough to observe it. Possibly the decrease in the shipping may partly account for this ; or possibly it has been proved to be *ineffectual* in its results. But in any case it does not appear popular with the younger generation of seamen's wives, and will probably be, ere long, entirely forgotten. The following is the account supplied to Miss Matthews by a friend.

"At a time when there were no docks at Lynn, and all ships trading to the port moored in the harbour, I have seen groups of women, no doubt the wives and sweethearts of the sailors, assembled on the quay, watching for the arrival or departure of a ship, in the crew of which one or all might have an interest. Each carried in her hand a key, generally apparently the key of the house-door ; and if she was watching for a vessel expected 'up with the tide' she would, by inserting one finger in the bow of it,

and placing a finger of the other hand in the angle of the wards and the stem, continue turning the key towards herself until the vessel arrived, or until the tide turned and its coming was, for a time, hopeless. The object of the winding motion was to bring the vessel home. If, however, the person was watching the departure of a ship, the key would be turned in the same manner, but in the contrary direction, viz., from the holder, which act was supposed to invoke good luck for the vessel and the crew. I have little doubt that the custom is still (1891) observed, though now probably to only a very limited extent."

I should be glad if any member could give other examples of a similar custom elsewhere.

Great Yarmouth.

W. B. GERISH.

"THE SIN-EATER."

To the Editor of FOLK-LORE.

SIR,—In connection with Mr. Hartland's article on "The Sin-Eater" in FOLK-LORE for June 1892, the following occurrence at a funeral near Market Drayton in Shropshire may interest you.

The funeral took place on the first of this present month.

The minister of the chapel where the deceased woman had been a regular attendant held a short service in the cottage before the coffin was removed.

The lady, who gave me the particulars, arrived rather early, and found the bearers enjoying a good lunch in the only downstairs room. Shortly afterwards the coffin was brought down and placed on two chairs in the centre of the room, and the mourners having gathered round it the service proceeded. Directly the minister ended, the woman in charge of the arrangements poured out four glasses of wine and handed one to each bearer present across the coffin, with a biscuit called a "funeral biscuit".

One of the bearers being absent at the moment, the fourth glass of wine and biscuit were offered to the eldest son of the deceased woman, who, however, refused to take them, and was not obliged to do so.

The biscuits were ordinary sponge biscuits, usually called "sponge fingers" or "lady's fingers". They are, however, also known in the shops of Market Drayton as "funeral biscuits".

The minister, who had lately come from Pembrokeshire, remarked to my informant that he was sorry to see that pagan custom still observed. He had been able to put an end to it in the Pembrokeshire village where he had formerly been.

July 27, 1893.

GERTRUDE HOPE.