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CORRESPONDENCE.

THE DANCING-TOWERS OF ITALY.

(*Ante*, p. 243.)

May not these towers be akin to the dressed and ornamented poles used in different parts of Europe to celebrate May-tide and summer festivals? I have not my notes at hand, but I think it could be shown that the whirling of the towers is analogous to people suspended from ropes swinging round about a pole. If I remember rightly, in ancient Mexico ropes were tightly wound round tall poles, and when they were set free the man hanging at the end of each cord naturally gyrated as he descended to the ground. Something very like this is also known in Russia. The old May-pole rites have died out here (Kirtan in Lindsey), but the school-girls, incited by their teachers, have of late years taken to going from house to house carrying a small pole, round which they dance and sing. The long ribbons hanging from it, the ends of which are held by the dancers and which are interwoven in the course of the dancing, may represent ropes once used for swinging.

MABEL PEACOCK.

I was at Buxton on May Day, 1895, 1896, and 1897, and on each occasion I saw children (girls) dancing round a May-pole. They came from Burbage, Fairfield, and other villages in the neighbourhood, and carried a pole decorated with ribbons, which they set on the ground and danced round, holding the ribbons till they were twisted and plaited close round the pole and then

unplaited again by reversing the dance. I do not know how the pole was kept upright. I think there were some grown-up people with them—men. Some musical instrument was played, but I do not remember what. They performed two or three times in different parts of the town. It was usual to give all the school-children a holiday on May Day.

ALICE OLDKNOW.

Kensington.

This performance is not uncommon in North Staffordshire, but the pole is usually planted firmly in the ground, not carried about. I saw it first at Talk o' th' Hill in 1878 or 1879, on the occasion of a village fête; but I have never been able to trace it properly. I think, however, it is indigenous there, though it has now become common in other parts of England, introduced, as Miss Peacock says, by school-teachers and others.

CHARLOTTE S. BURNE.

A CORRECTION.

I ask for space to correct an oversight in my article on *The European Sky-God*, No. III. It was towards the close of 1902, not 1903, as printed on page 288 (line 5 from bottom), that Dr. Frazer told me of his revised theory as to the *rex Nemorensis*. That communication preceded my further investigations into the subject, some of which were published in 1903. The date of the conversation is therefore not altogether unimportant.

ARTHUR BERNARD COOK.

THE LEGEND OF MERLIN: A POSTSCRIPT.

(*Ante*, p. 427.)

What Miss Weston brings forward does not touch the question which I am discussing. She offers no evidence of the secular

learning of the monks, nor does she show the pre-existence of local legends and traditions which such monks might have brought with them into the cloister and utilised afterwards in their poetical compositions. It is utterly immaterial from my point of view whether the names of supposed authors are genuine or pseudonyms; nor does it affect the case at all whether Merlin was a local bard or only a madman. Such a fact, if accepted, would only strengthen my theory, for I hold that whenever a legend gets localised there must be some peg to hang the story on. I never doubted the possibility of the existence of a Merlin half-savage, half-man; but that Merlin has entirely disappeared in the literary form in which he is presented, and has been transformed beyond recognition.

M. GASTER.

BURIAL IN EFFIGY.

The following seems a curious adaptation of Mock Burial to the purpose of Riding the Stang.

In the petition for divorce of Louis Higman, a miner, on May 15th, 1905, Richard Jacob, a builder, living at Bugle, Cornwall, gave evidence that the conduct of the respondent and co-respondent (a jeweller), caused great scandal in the village, and "they were buried in effigy in September, 1898." The co-respondent supplied the beer on the occasion. Witness was among the crowd. There was a "clergyman" at the funeral, (explained by counsel to mean a person dressed like a clergyman); a "choir," "mourners," and an "undertaker." The "burial" took place in a field at the back of the house where the parties were living; it was private property.

Counsel read a local newspaper account of the proceedings, which stated that "The whole proceedings were carried out with the greatest decorum, and although there was an enormous attendance there was no sign of rowdiness, but solemn silence was maintained, the only voices heard, beside the lamentations of the 'mourners,' being those of the 'clergymen' and the 'choir' and those who chose to join in the 'service.' The police were present, but their

services were not required.”—(Abridged from the *Morning Post*, May 16, 1905.)

M. PEACOCK.

A similar incident is reported in the *Daily Telegraph* of Thursday, August 10th, 1905, on the authority of a telegraphic report from “our correspondent” at Colchester, where, at the camp of the Essex Volunteer Brigade, the officers of one battalion conducted, on the previous evening, the mock burial of an unpopular senior officer.

“After dinner some thirty officers turned out, attired in long black cloaks, and each carrying a lighted lantern. In front was borne a deck-chair, covered with a Union Jack, and supposed to bear the corpse of the officer referred to. The procession passed round the officers’ lines, and a mock interment was conducted, after which the assembled officers sang a song, and indulged in quadrilles and a cake-walk, the proceedings closing with the National Anthem.”

One is glad to read that “more is likely to be heard” of this case of degenerate survival.

CHARLOTTE S. BURNE.

THE MOCK MAYOR OF HEADINGTON.

When I was a boy at Headington, in Oxfordshire, a custom existed on the Wednesday of Whitsun-week, or, as it was called, “Whit-Wednesday,” of chairing round the village, a man selected for the purpose—generally some drunken ne’er-do-well. A chair was made, I believe, from three or four hurdles, and covered with evergreens, with, I think, the addition of a few flowers. The hero of the day, who was jocularly described as the “Mayor of Headington,” his face whitened with chalk, and picked out with red raddle, was set therein, after the manner of a Jack-in-the-box, and borne on the shoulders of four men through the village, preceded by the band, and accompanied by the banners of the village club. A halt was made at each public-house, where the “Mayor” made a speech (I remember one of Lord Palmerston’s being read on one

occasion), and he and his bearers were treated to beer. As they were generally in a state of "doubtful ebriety" at the beginning of the function, I think the poor fellow often came to grief at the finish.

Was not this a degraded remains of the "Whitsun Lord?" I remember the custom from 1846 to 52 or 53. I am not certain whether it was kept up in the latter year. It has now gone to the limbo of forgotten things, as have the village club and the Whitsuntide merry-making, which are replaced by the "Manchester Unity of Oddfellows" and Bank Holiday respectively.

W. HENRY JEWITT.

Another *locale* of this not very uncommon custom was Embleton, in Northumberland. Mrs. Creighton gives the following account of its extinction in the year 1875: "An unpleasant custom prevailed on one of the days of the village feast [the week after Trinity Sunday], of getting hold of some tramp or wandering labourer and dubbing him the mayor of the village. He was first made thoroughly drunk and then put on a trolley and pushed round the village by a crowd of men and boys, who demanded, and generally received, money for drink at all the houses. The first year [of Creighton's incumbency] they even rolled him down to the vicarage. The vicar happened to be away that day; but he determined to put an end to the performance another year, and told the policeman that if either the 'mayor' or those who pushed him about got drunk over the performance he was to summon them for being drunk and disorderly. I believe they used still to drag the man about, but there was an end of the public exhibition of drunkenness."—*Life of Mandell Creighton, Bishop of London*, Vol. I., p. 171.

CHARLOTTE S. BURNE.

A SWISS CHARM.

I spent a short time this summer in the Val de Morgins (on the Savoy border of the Canton de Valais). The peasants of

Morgins are devout Roman Catholics, and, in addition to other sacred or secular emblems, the cross or crucifix, large or small, adorns nearly every chalet, being erected, painted, carved, or incised on the woodwork of the houses. I noticed that a cross (a *Latin* cross) was often carved or hung over the principal door of the chalet.

In most cases there also was nailed on to the outside of the house, and most usually over the chief entrance, a cross rudely formed of two dried whips of the goat's beard spiræa (*spiræa aruncus*), which is one of the handsomest wild plants of the mountain woods. Mixed with this were dried sprays of *astrantia major*, also a common Alpine flower. The crosses were formed simply by two little bunches of the plants, about eight or nine inches to a foot long, laid across each other and fastened by a whip of grass in the middle, making the arms of equal length. As the composition of these roughly-made crosses seemed to vary little I guessed that they might be used as charms, and asked an old peasant woman their meaning. She said, "We of Morgins make these crosses every year on the Eve of St. John. They are made from the flower that we call St. John's Beard" (*barbe de Saint Jean*), "and with it we put some of the flower, I cannot now remember what its name is, but it is the flower" (*astrantia major*) "which has crimson stains upon it, because it is said that Christ's blood dropped upon it. On St. John's Day we take these crosses to church, where the priest blesses them. We then nail them on to the outside of our chalets, and they protect the house from lightning, fire, storm, and such calamities. In time of severe thunder-storm or danger from fire, the people will take a whip of the cross and burn it to avert the misfortune." When I said that these pretty old customs should be remembered, she added, "Yes, it is good that these pious things should continue, and that youth should learn them, for one *must* teach children *something*." From a Morgins peasant man I learned the same concerning these crosses.

I was only a few days at Morgins, so had not time to make more than superficial enquiries and observations, but in none of the valleys immediately adjoining could I see these charms

on the chalets; and as far as I could judge they seem to be peculiar to the Val de Morgins.

The *astrantia major* is called "master-wort" in some botanical books. Is this name connected with the legend told to me at Morgins? The likeness of the spiræa flower to a lock of hair suggests the interesting question whether it was once nailed up as a substitute for real hair, such as is hung on trees as a propitiatory sacrifice to the wood-fiend in New Zealand and Malabar, or in Slavonic countries as a "representative sacrifice," according to Dr. Tylor. I should be grateful to any reader who could supply information from the folk-lore of plants bearing upon both the *astrantia* or the *spiræa*, or could throw any light upon these flower-crosses.

LUCY E. BROADWOOD.