

FOLK-LORE.

August 12.

[862c] Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though by-the-bye it is more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore,—*the Lore of the People*)—that I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that [863a] field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop.

No one who has made the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c., of the olden time his study, but must have arrived at two conclusions:—the first, how much that is curious and interesting in these matters is now entirely lost—the second, how much may yet be rescued by timely exertion. What Hone endeavoured to do in his 'Every-Day Book,' &c., the *Athenæum*, by its wider circulation, may accomplish ten times more effectually—gather together the infinite number of minute facts, illustrative of the subject I have mentioned, which are scattered over the memories of its thousands of readers, and preserve them in its pages, until some James Grimm shall arise who shall do for the Mythology of the British Islands the good service which that profound antiquary and philologist has accomplished for the Mythology of Germany. The present century has scarcely produced a more remarkable book, imperfect as its learned author confesses it to be, than the second edition of the '*Deutsche Mythologie*:' and, what is it?—a mass of minute facts, many of which, when separately considered, appear trifling and insignificant,—but, when taken in connexion with the system into which his master-mind has woven them, assume a value that he who first recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them.

How many such facts would one word from you evoke, from the north and from the south—from John o' Groat's to the Land's End! How many readers would be glad to show their gratitude for the novelties which you, from week to week, communicate to them, by forwarding to you some record of old Time—some recollection of a now neglected custom—some fading legend, local tradition, or fragmentary ballad!

Nor would such communications be of service to the English antiquary alone. The connexion between the FOLK-LORE of England (remember I claim the honour of introducing the epithet Folk-Lore, as Disraeli does of introducing Father-Land, into the literature of this country) and that of Germany is so intimate that such

communications will probably serve to enrich some future edition of Grimm's Mythology.

Let me give you an instance of this connexion.—In one of the chapters of Grimm, he treats very fully of the parts which the Cuckoo plays in Popular Mythology—of the prophetic character with which it has been invested by the voice of the people; and gives many instances of the practice of deriving predictions from the number of times which its song is heard. He also records a popular notion, “that the Cuckoo never sings till he has thrice eaten his fill of cherries.” Now, I have lately been informed of a custom which formerly obtained among children in Yorkshire, that illustrates the fact of a connexion between the Cuckoo and the Cherry,—and that, too, in their prophetic attributes. A friend has communicated to me that children in Yorkshire were formerly (and may be still) accustomed to sing round a cherry-tree the following invocation:—

“Cuckoo, Cherry-tree,
Come down and tell me
How many years I have to live.”

Each child then shook the tree,—and the number of cherries which fell betokened the years of its future life. The Nursery Rhyme which I have quoted, is, I am aware, well known. But the manner in which it was applied is not recorded by Hone, Brande, or Ellis:—and is one of those facts, which, trifling in themselves, become of importance when they form links in a great chain—one of those facts which a word from the *Athenaeum* would gather in abundance for the use of future inquirers into that interesting branch of literary antiquities,—our Folk-Lore.

AMBROSE MERTON.

P.S.—It is only honest that I should tell you I have long been contemplating a work upon our ‘*Folk-Lore*’ (under *that title*, mind Messrs. A, B, and C,—so do not try to forestall me);—and I am personally interested in the success of the experiment which I have, in this letter, albeit imperfectly, urged you to undertake.

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