

## SKETCHES OF SOCIETY.

### *On the Prejudices and superstitious Ideas of the Peasants of that part of Livonia called Lettland (Lettonia.)*

(In a Letter from Count Bray, Minister from the King of Bavaria at St. Petersburg.)

At the return of spring, the Lettonian peasant takes care not to expose himself to hear the cuckoo for the first time, either when he is fasting or has no money in his pocket. If this should happen to him, he would believe himself in danger of famine and want for the rest of the year. This is what he calls being bewitched by the cuckoo; he therefore is very guarded to have money about him, and to eat something very early in the morning before he leaves his house. He has the same fears, and takes the same precautions, on the first arrival of the lapwing.

When a hare or a fox crosses his path, he considers it as a bad omen; but if it is a wolf, the omen is favourable.

When the Lettonian peasant has taken his fowling piece, and on going out of his house the first person he meets is a woman or a girl, it is a bad sign, and he will have no sport; he therefore returns, and does not proceed till, on going out again, the first he meets is a man or a boy. If he goes out fishing alone, he does not communicate his intention to anybody, as that would bring him ill luck. It is only when he wants an assistant that another person, besides the latter, may be informed of it without doing any harm. If he is angling, and having laid his line on the ground somebody treads upon it, he is convinced that he shall never catch any thing with that line.

The peasant does not allow any person to admire or praise any thing he possesses, especially his flocks, his poultry, his corn, &c.; he is convinced that every thing so praised will perish.

If his cattle are affected by any disease, he does not fail to attribute it to the witchcraft and malevolence of some neighbour: he then takes care to perfume his stables with assa-fetida.

Their hives are usually placed on the largest trees in the forest, or they make holes in those trees where the bees have settled of themselves. They always take a companion to gather the honey, and they divide the honey and wax with the most scrupulous equality, being convinced that the slightest fraud would cause the bees to emigrate or to die.

They ascribe a particular virtue to all plants gathered on Midsummer Eve, for which reason they carefully preserve them, to give to their cattle in case of sickness. Before Midsummer they pluck up all the grass which they give to their cattle in the stable: they are persuaded that if it were cut with a scythe it would make the cows lose their milk. After Midsummer Eve they use the scythe without fear or scruple. On this same Eve, which is more important to them than the holiday itself, no family neglects to bring from the garden and the fields a stock of pot-herbs for the winter.

When they happen to find in a field ripe ears of corn crossed in a particular manner, or united in bunches, they ascribe it to the malevolence of some envious person, who has endeavoured to draw some sorcery upon their crop. The reaper takes care not to touch such bewitched ears, and passes without cutting them.

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A great number of the peasants, unfortunately, still entertain the superstitious notion that fire kindled by lightning is not to be extinguished. When such an accident happens they are discouraged, and do hardly any thing to check the progress of the flames.

A funeral must never pass through a tilled field, not even in winter, though it might considerably shorten the way. The peasant is fully persuaded that a field through which a funeral has passed becomes barren.

Except on extraordinary occasions, no funerals are allowed on Mondays and Fridays.

A peasant who is in search of a wife, never goes, except on a Thursday or Sunday, into the house where he expects to make his choice. The bride and bridegroom are not to give their bare hand to any body, on the day of their marriage, except to each other at the altar; otherwise they are threatened with poverty during the whole course of their union. It is also a very bad sign if, when the bride returns from church, she finds any body on the threshold of her door.

When a young girl finds a leaf of trefoil divided into four instead of three parts, it is a sign that she will be married within the year; at all events she carefully preserves this leaf till her wedding-day.

If on the 1st of February the sun shines only so long as is necessary to saddle a horse, they expect fine weather for hay-making.

On Christmas Eve the countrymen are accustomed to drive about a great deal in sledges: they think that this will cause their hemp to be more abundant, and higher: they do not fail to visit the alehouse, and to drink heartily, the same evening, being convinced that this is a way to make them look well till the following Christmas.

In summers when flies are abundant, they expect an ample crop of buck wheat; and if the *prunus padus* is thickly covered with blossoms, they expect a very rainy summer.

The Lettonians never destroy crickets by fire, being persuaded that those which escape will destroy their linen and clothes.

When a peasant loses his way in a wood after sunset, he avoids calling any person to show him the way, being convinced that in that case the evil spirit of the forest would cause him to plunge still deeper into its recesses.

When the peasants intend to build a house, they carefully observe what species of ant first appears on the spot, or seems to be common in the neighbourhood: if it is the common large ant (*formica rufa*, Linn.) or the black ant, they build without difficulty; but if it is the little red ant (*formica rubra*, Linn.) they choose another place.

(The Superstitions of the Esthonians in our next.)

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#### AN OLD SAILOR.

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#### POPULAR PREJUDICES AND SUPERSTITIOUS IDEAS PECULIAR TO THE ESTHONIANS.

THE Esthoniains participate in most of the prejudices entertained by the Lettonians, but they have also long retained recollections and customs connected with paganism. They have a great veneration for particular places, especially certain fountains or springs, which they regard as sacred.

A brook, called in the Esthonian language *Wöhlanda*, which has its source in a grove near a high hill, was, even in the last century, the object of a worship truly idolatrous. Its pure and limpid source was surrounded by a sacred grove,—it was exactly like a *lucus* of the Romans. The veneration of the people for this spring, and the sacred wood which surrounded it, was extreme. The axe was never permitted to approach it, and no sacrilegious hand was to trouble the water of the fountain. This spring, successively increased by the junction of others in the neighbourhood, formed a considerable stream, the cool and pure water of which abounding in fish, crossed numerous districts, and was called *Poha jogge*, or the Sacred Stream. The country was threatened with sterility and all the inclemency of the seasons, if the water of the sacred stream was profaned, or if it was checked or disturbed in its course. On the contrary, if its source was cleaned, and its bed cleared from all obstacles and impurities, they could depend on a fine season and abundant harvests. The proprietor of an estate through which the *Poha jogge* flowed, having attempted to make use of the water by throwing a dam across, and building a mill, the peasants of the country rose in a body, and with dreadful cries demolished this sacrilegious building. The government was obliged to use force to prevent more serious excesses. A woman having bathed in it, her body swelled in a dreadful manner, and she did not recover her health until she had appeased the irritated nymph by offering sacrifices.

If the people wished to be informed respecting the abundance of the harvest, they placed three fishermen's baskets in the stream. If they found in the middle basket fish without scales, it was an unlucky sign; if the fish had scales, the omen was good. When it was

unfavourable, they endeavoured to appease the divinity by sacrifices. They sacrificed an ox; and when fresh trials led them to imagine that the divinity was still hostile, forgetting the strongest sentiments of nature, they even sacrificed a child!

The Esthoniains have long retained, and have still a great veneration for thunder. They considered it as the protector of their houses, and consecrated to it offerings and victims. These striking remains of paganism were very observable so late as the last century.

Most of these purely pagan customs have disappeared, some of them have assumed the forms of Christianity; but the superstition remains, having only changed its emblems. In order to escape the vigilance of the police, the peasants conceal these unlawful practices under the cover of the night.

Midsummer-day is particularly honoured by the Esthonian peasants, but Midsummer-eve more so. The chapels consecrated to Saint John the Baptist are held in particular veneration. Less than a century ago, a clergyman in a certain district of Esthonia discovered one of these pagan practices in the garb of Christianity. The peasants of this district resorted to a place where there were large stones placed upright and others lying down. The tradition ran, that it was a whole nuptial procession which had been thus petrified; that the bride and bridegroom and their relations were changed into large stones, but the company into small ones. They danced and made invocations round the large stones for rain, and round the little ones for dry weather.

There was another chapel dedicated to St. John, round which barren women were to run three times, perfectly naked, uttering certain words in order to become fruitful. To cure the peasants of this ridiculous superstition, the lord of the district had this chapel destroyed by his own people, one of whom happening to fall ill suddenly, and dying a few days after the transaction, the peasantry, from that time to the present, have preserved a sacred regard for the spot on which the chapel stood.

Some Esthoniains still believe in the existence of malevolent beings, with human countenances and fishes' teeth, whom they call in German, *Neck*. These beings pursue particularly young children whom they find on the banks of the rivers, and devour them. Many Esthoniains hold, that before the deluge beasts could talk; that the devil created wolves, and in general every thing that is hurtful.

The Esthoniains have even now a great variety of superstitious notions and practices relative to Marriage: for instance—Most of them settle and conclude marriages at the time of new moon, because they believe that then all sorts of blessings will come upon the young couple; among others, that their beauty and health will be preserved the longer. - - - A young peasant going to ride to the house of her whom he intends to marry, takes care not to mount a mare: the consequence of this would be, that all his children would be daughters. - - - As soon as a young woman is affianced, a red thread is tied round her body. When the marriage is completed, she must swell herself up so as to break this thread. This is a sure preventive against evil in cases of maternity. For the same reason, as soon as the bridegroom is seen coming on horseback, they are eager to loosen the girth of his horse, - - - In some places the young couple,

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P8/14(2)

When the clergyman comes to visit a sick person, they remark whether his horse holds his head up, or the contrary; in the latter case they despair of the recovery of the patient. --- A funeral must never pass through a field, even if it is fallow. --- Many of the peasantry place near the deceased a brush, money, needle and thread, as so many necessary instruments to employ him in his long journey from this world to the other. --- On returning from a funeral, the hearse is not immediately brought under cover, but left for a time in the open air, that other members of the same family may not soon die. --- In some places food is put on the floor in a separate room, that the deceased may help himself. --- Others, holding a broom in their hands, evoke the souls of their deceased friends, and invite them to a feast; and when they suppose the defunct to have eaten sufficiently, the broom is broken in token of their dismissal, at the same time desiring them not to tread upon the rye as they go away.

They have very particular ideas respecting the resurrection of the dead; some do not believe in it at all. --- As they think that on the day of judgment the churches will fall towards the north, they have great dislike to being buried on that side.

At the christening of a child, they observe whether it holds its head up or hangs it down. The former indicates robust health and a long life; the last makes them fear an early death. --- During the christening the father of the child runs as fast as he can round the church, in order to secure to the infant the gift of agility and nimbleness. This custom is particularly in vogue among the inhabitants on the sea-coast, where this quality is more essentially necessary. --- They take great care not to have a christening soon after a funeral. --- The godfathers and godmothers do not look at each other during the ceremony; without this precaution, the infant baptized would be subject to troublesome diseases, and would have the alarming privilege of seeing spirits. --- Several parents fasten a ring to the child's linen, that he or she may marry early; others conceal money, bread, and garlic, in the child's garments, on the day of his christening. The two first ensure to him riches, and the last secures him from the power of witchcraft. --- They despair of the life of the child if he goes to sleep during the christening. --- The sponsors take care not to eat meat directly before the christening, that their godchild may not have the tooth-ache, which otherwise would be perpetual. --- Parents who have had the misfortune to lose children in their infancy, often give to an infant the name of Adam or Eve, in the hope that the supernatural influence of these names will secure to the infant a long life. --- They avoid having their children christened on a Friday; Thursday, on the contrary, is a fortunate day. Many of them firmly believe that a child christened on Friday will become good for nothing, and will perhaps even perish under the hands of the executioner.

They have also a thousand strange and superstitious ideas relative to the Communion: --- There are some who, after having taken the consecrated wafer, endeavour, without being perceived, to take a part of it out of their mouth to use it for conjuring certain sorceries, and producing certain supernatural effects. --- On the day of the Communion it is almost a general custom to drink to excess, under the persuasion that it will add to the

efficacy of the sacrament which they have received. --- On the night after they have taken the Communion they sleep with a part of the clothes they had on, generally their stockings. On the same day they carefully avoid the use of tobacco, and do not go into the bath till many days after.

When it thunders, many country people believe that it is God pursuing the devil, and they shut their doors and windows with the greatest care, lest the evil spirit should take refuge in their houses. --- Others place two knives in the window, with the points upwards, to keep off the lightning. These latter do not suspect that they are such good natural philosophers. --- They regard with religious awe places and things struck by lightning; above all, stones which it has broken to pieces. Where such fragments are found, they believe that it was there the evil spirit took refuge when the hand of God struck him. --- Many believe the rainbow to be the scythe which the thunder makes use of to pursue the evil genii. --- Some fancy they can attract the wind from a certain quarter by holding up a serpent or a hatchet; and in the latter case, by hissing towards the quarter of the horizon from which they desire the wind to come. --- On New Year's Eve, if any noise be heard in the house which they cannot easily account for, they are firmly persuaded that one of the family will die in the course of the year.

[To be concluded in our next.]

POPULAR PREJUDICES AND SUPERSTITIOUS IDEAS PECULIAR TO THE ESTHONIANS.

*Birth, Death, Baptism, &c.*

PREGNANT women, when they lay wood in the stove, take care not to put it in contrary to the direction of the branches; this would influence the manner in which the child will present itself at the birth. --- When two pregnant women sneeze at the same time, it is a sign that they will have girls; if the two husbands sneeze, it announces that they will have boys. --- Great care is taken not to tread on the feet of pregnant women, otherwise their children would have deformed feet and crooked legs. --- As soon as a woman after her lying in can sit at table, she is placed at the upper end, to procure the infant good treatment and distinction during its life. --- Nothing heavy must be placed on a child's head, which would impede its growth. --- The first thing a child lays hold of indicates his future inclinations; the parents therefore place within his reach such things as they wish their children to be engaged with in future. --- When a child is born at the latter end of the week, it is a sign that he will marry late, or not at all, ---

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P8/14(3)

*Of Unlucky Days, &c.*

THE fishermen who dwell on the coasts of the Baltic never use their nets between All Saint's and St. Martin's; they would then be certain of not taking any fish through the whole year: they never fish on Saint Blaise's day. On Ash Wednesday the women neither sew nor knit, for fear of bringing misfortune upon the cattle. They contrive so as not to use fire on St. Lawrence's day; by taking this precaution, they think themselves secure against fire for the rest of the year.

This prejudice of lucky and unlucky days has existed at all times and in all nations; but if knowledge and civilization have not removed it, they have at least diminished its influence. In Livonia, however, the people are more than ever addicted to the most superstitious ideas on this subject. In a Riga Journal (*Rigaische Stadtblätter*, No. 3657, anno 1822, edited by M. Sonntag,) there are several passages relative to a letter written from heaven, which is no other than a catalogue of lucky and unlucky days. This letter is in general circulation; every body carries it about him, and, though strictly forbidden by the police, the copies are multiplied so profusely as to increase an evil, all attempts to destroy which have hitherto failed. Among the country people this idea is equivalent to the doctrine of fatality; and if they commit faults, or even crimes, on the days which are marked as unlucky, they do not consider themselves as guilty, because they were predestined. - - - The flight of certain birds, or the meeting of certain animals on their first going out in the morning, are in their minds good or bad omens. - - - They do not hunt on St. Mark's or St. Catherine's day, on penalty of being unsuccessful all the rest of the year. - - - It is a good sign to sneeze on Christmas day. - - - Most of them are so prepossessed against Friday, that they never settle any important business, or conclude a bargain on that day; in some places they do not even dress their children. - - - They do not like visits on Thursdays, for it is a sign that they shall have troublesome guests the whole week.

The care and preservation of their flocks are also a fruitful source of superstitious ideas. - - - In some districts, when the shepherd brings back his flock from the pasture, in spring, for the first time, he is sprinkled with water from head to foot, in the persuasion that this makes the cattle thrive. - - - The malignity of beasts of prey is believed to be prevented by designating them not by their proper names, but by some of their attributes. For example, they call the fox *hallkuhl* (grey coat;) the bear, *layjatyk* (broadfoot,) &c. &c. - - - They also fancy that they can oblige the wolf to take another direction by strewing salt in his way. The howling of wolves, especially at day-break, is considered a very bad omen, predicting famine or disease. In more ancient times it was imagined that these animals thus asked their god to give them food, which he threw to them out of the

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clouds. - - - When a wolf seizes any of their cattle, they fancy they can oblige him to quit his prey by dropping a piece of money, their pipe, hat, &c. They do not permit the hare to be often mentioned, for fear of drawing it into their corn fields. - - - To make hens lay eggs, they beat them with an old broom. - - - In families where the wife is the eldest child of her parents, it has been observed that they always sell the first calves, being convinced that if kept they would not thrive. - - - To speak of insects or mischievous animals at meal-time is a sure way to make them more voracious.

If a fire breaks out, they think to stop its fury by throwing a black hen into the flames. This idea, of an expiatory sacrifice offered to a malevolent or tutelary power, is a remnant of paganism. Various other traces of it are found among the Esthonians; for instance, at the beginning of their meals they purposely let fall a piece of new bread, or some drops of liquor from a bottle not yet begun, as an offering to the divinity.

It is very offensive to the peasants for any one to look long into their wells; they think that it will cause the wells to dry up.

When manure is carted into the fields, that which falls from the cart is not gathered up, lest mischievous insects and blights come upon the corn.

When an old house is quitted for a new one, they are attentive in noting the first animal that dies. If it be an animal with hairy feet, the sign is good; but if with naked feet, some fowl, for instance, there is mourning in the house; it is a sign of misery and bad success in all their undertakings.

These are the prevailing popular prejudices in the three Duchies: a great number of them, especially among the Esthonians, are connected with their ancient Mythology; others originate in that general weakness in the untaught mind, which seeks in strange practices a remedy for fancied future or actual present evils. The most enlightened nations are nevertheless full of prejudices. There are as many in the Rue St. Denis and the Marais, as there are on the banks of the Duna and Lake Peypus.

In another letter I shall give some particulars of the ancient Religion of the people of the Baltic provinces, and compare it with Scandinavian Mythology. I am, Sir, &c.

COUNT DE BRAY.