SKETCHES OF SOCIETY.

On the Prejudices and superstitions Ideas of the Peasants of that part of Lithuania called Lithuania (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 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 some precautions, on the first arrival of the vapours.

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 hoeing 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 the ground; but when he has crossed the tracks again, 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 everything 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 assaefetida.

Their hives are usually placed on the largest trees in the forest, or they make holes in those trees where the bees have settled 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 seythe it would make the cows lose their milk. After Midsummer, they use the seythe 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 sorrow upon their crops. The reaper that cut it will not touch such bewitched ears, and passes without cutting them.

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 anything to check the progress of the flames.

A funeral must never pass through a tilled field, not even in winter, though it might considered 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 saddled 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 Lettobians 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新媒体, 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 consider it unlucky.

(The Superstitions of the Estonians in our next.)
unfavourable, they endeavoured to appease the divinity by sacrifices. They sacrificed an ox; and when the trial led them to imagine that the divinity was still hostile, forgetting the strongest sentiments of nature, they even sacrificed a child!

The Esthonians 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 valuable to the botanist, as they gave a clue to the origin of superstitions. 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 ward off the claptrap that the peasants conceal these unlawful practices under the cover of the night.

Midsomer-day is particularly honoured by the Esthonian peasants, but Midsommer-day is for particular places, especially certain fountains or springs, which they regard as sacred.

A brook, called in the Estonian language Wöölanda, which has its source in a grove near a 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 its neighbourhood, formed a considerable stream, the cool and pure water of which abounding in fish, crossed numerous districts, and was called Pohja jõge, or the Sacred Stream. The country was threatened with sterility and all kinds of misfortunes, with 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 Pohja jõge 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
When he clergyman comes to visit a sick
person, they remark whether his horse
holds his head up, or the contrary; in the latter
case there is a strong probability of the
departure 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 in his
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 see him. - - - Some
places food is put on the floor in a
separate room, that the deceased may help
himself. - - - Others, holding a broider 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 suf
ciently, the broider 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 inhabi
nants 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 cer
emony; without this precaution, the infant
baptized would be subject to troublesome
diseases, and would have the alarming privi
lege 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 en
sure 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
to not eat meat directly before the christen
ing, that their godchild may not have the
tooth-ache, which otherwise would be per
petual. - - - Parents who have had the mis
fortune 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 Fri
day will become good for nothing, and will
perhaps even perish under the hands of the
executor.

They have also a thousand strange and su
perstitions ideas relative to the Communion:
- - - There are some who, after having taken
the consecrated wafer, endeavor, 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 re
ceived. - - - 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 up
wards, to keep off the lightning. These latter
do not suspect that they are such good na
tural 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 semy 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 hatched;
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.]

From the Literary Gazette No. 341. August 2, 1823.
POPULAR PREJUDICES AND SUPERSTITION IDEAS PECULIAR TO THE ESTONIANS.

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 Saint 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 (Rigakile Stadtblatler, 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 destined. - - - 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 Thursday, 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 kallikku (grey coat;) the hare, kayajyki (broad foot,) &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
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.