XI - THE ANCIENT DRAMA IN CORNWALL.

We found the modern Cornish theatre situated in a populous town; built up, as a temporary structure, with old canvas and boards; and opened to audiences only at night. We found the ancient Cornish theatre placed in a perfect desert; constructed permanently, though rudely, of mounds of turf--the sky forming its only roof, the flat plain its only stage, the broad daylight its only means of illumination. Nothing of the kind could be more strongly marked than the difference between the theatre of the past, and the theatre of the present day, in the far West of England.

In like manner, the country about Piran Round (such is the name of the Old Cornish amphitheatre) offers a startling contrast to the country about Redruth. You are at once powerfully impressed by its barren solitude, its dreary repose, after the fertility and populousness of the great mining districts through which you have just passed. Now, the large towns and busy villages disappear, the mines grow rarer, the roads look deserted, the wide pathways dwindle to the merest foot-track. Again you behold the spacious moor rolling away in alternate hill and dale to the far horizon; again you pass though the quaint coast villages; and see the few simple cottages, the few old boats, the little groups talking quietly at the inn door, as they have already presented themselves along the southern and western shores of Cornwall. Soon, however, your onward road towards Piran Round becomes yet more desolate. Ere long, not even a solitary cottage is in sight, not a living being appears: you find yourself wandering along the uneven boundary of a wilderness of sand-hills heaped up from the seashore by the wind. You look over a perfect desert of miniature mountains and valleys, in some places overgrown with thin, dry grass; in others, dotted with little pools of mud and stagnant water. Year by year, this invasion of sand encroaches on the moorland--year by year, it is ever shifting, ever increasing, ever assuming newer and more fantastic forms, now in one direction and now in another, with each fresh storm.

When you leave this dreary scene, you only leave it for the wild flat heath, the open naked country once more. You follow your long road, visible miles on before you, winding white and serpent-like over the dark ground, until you suddenly observe in the distance an object which rises strangely above the level prospect. You approach nearer, and behold a circular turf embankment; a wide, lonesome, desolate enclosure, looking like a witches' dancing-ring that has sprung up in the midst of the open moor. This is Piran Round. Here, the old inhabitants of Cornwall assembled to form the

audience of the drama of former days.

A level area of grassy ground, one hundred and thirty feet in diameter, is enclosed by the embankment. There are two entrances to this area cut through the boundary circle of turf and earth, which rises to a height of nine or ten feet, and narrows towards the top, where it is seven feet wide. All round the inside of the embankment steps were formerly cut; but their traces are now almost obliterated by the growth of the grass. They were originally seven in number; the spectators stood on them in rows, one above another--a closely packed multitude, all looking down at the dramatic performances taking place on the wide circumference of the plain. When it was well filled, the amphitheatre must have contained upwards of two thousand people.

Such is this rude, yet extraordinary structure, in our time. It has not lost its patriarchal simplicity since the far distant period when the populace thronged its turf steps to welcome the strolling players of their age. The antiquity of Piran Round dates back beyond the period of the earliest and rudest dramatic performances on English ground. It was first used for popular sports, for single combats, for rustic councils. Then, plays were acted in it--miracle plays--some translated into the ancient Cornish language, some originally written in it. The oldest of these are lost; but one of a comparatively late date has been preserved and translated into English. We will examine this book while we sit within the deserted amphitheatre; and thus, in imagination at least, people the simple stage before us with the rough country actors who once trod it--thus pry behind the scenes at all that is left to us of the ancient drama in Cornwall.

The play which we now open is called by the comprehensive title of "The Creation of the World, with Noah's Flood." It was translated in 1611, from a drama of much earlier date, for performance in Cornish, by William Jordan; was then rendered into English by John Keygwyn, in 1691; and was finally corrected and published by Mr. Davies Gilbert, in 1827. The Cornish and English versions are printed on opposite pages, so we can compare the two throughout, as we go on.

The play is in five acts, and is written in poetry--in a rambling octosyllabic metre, often varied by the introduction of longer or shorter lines, and sometimes interspersed (in the Cornish version) with a word or two of English. It occupies a hundred and eighty pages, containing on the average about twenty-five lines each. This would be thought rather a lengthy manner of developing a dramatic story in our days; but we must remember that the time embraced in the plot of the old playwright extends from the Creation to

the Flood, and must be astonished and thankful that he has not been more diffuse.

The dramatis personæ muster by the legion. In the first act, we have the whole heavenly host: in the second, are superadded Adam, Eve, "Torpen, a devil," Beelzebub, the Serpent, and Michael the Archangel; in the third, besides these, Death, Cain and his wife, Abel and Seth; in the fourth, we have the addition of Lamech, a servant, a Cherubim, and a first and second devil; and in the fifth, Enoch, Noah and his wife, Shem, Ham, Japhet, Seth, Jaball, and Tubal Cain.

The author manages this tremendous list of mortal and immortal characters with infinite coolness and dexterity. Nothing appears to embarrass him. He follows history in a negligent, sauntering way, passing over a hundred years or so, whenever it is convenient; and giving all his personages their turn of talking in orderly and impartial rotation. His speeches are wonderfully moral and long; even his worst characters have, for the most part, a temperate and logical way of uttering the most violent language, which must have read an excellent lesson to the roistering young gentlemen among the audiences of the time.

We will now examine the play a little in detail, quoting the stage directions (the most extraordinary part of it) exactly as they occur; and occasionally presenting a line or two of the dialogue from the old English translation wherever it best illustrates the author's style.

The first act comprehends the fall of the angels--the introductory stage direction commanding that the theatrical clouds, and the whole sky to boot, shall open when Heaven is named! All is harmony at the outset of the play, until it is Lucifer's turn to speak. He declares that he alone is great, and that all allegiance must be given to him. Some of the angels glorify him accordingly; others remain true to their celestial service; the debate grows warm, and some of the disputants give each other the lie (but very calmly). At length, the scene is closed by Lucifer's condemnation to Hell, which, as the directions provide, "shall gape when it is named." The faithful angels are then told to "have swords and staves ready for Lucifer," who, we are informed, "voideth and goeth down to Hell apparelled foul, with fire about him, turning to Hell, with every degree of devils and lost spirits on cords running into the plain." With this stirring scene the act ends.

The second act comprises the creation and fall of man. Here, again, we will consult the stage directions, as giving the best idea of the incidents and scenes. We find that Adam and Eve are to be "apparelled in white leather in

a place appointed by the conveyor" (probably the person we term stage-manager now); "and are not to be seen until they be called; and then each rises." After this, we read:--"Let Paradise be finely made, with fair trees in it, and apples upon a tree, and other fruit on the others. A fountain, too, in Paradise, and fine flowers painted. Put Adam into Paradise--let flowers appear in Paradise--let Adam lie down and sleep where Eve is, and she, by the conveyor, must be taken from Adam's side--let fishes of all sorts, birds and beasts, as oxen, kyne, sheep, and such like, appear."

Then, we have the preparations for the temptation, ordered thus:--"A fine serpent to be made with a virgin's face, and yellow hair on her head. Let the serpent appear, and also geese and hens." Lucifer enters immediately afterwards, and goes into the serpent, which is then directed to be "seen singing in a tree" (the actor who personated Lucifer must have had some gymnastic difficulties to contend with in his part!)--"Eve looketh strange on the serpent;" then, "talketh familiarly and cometh near him;" then, "doubteth and looketh angrily;" and then eats part of the apple, shows it to Adam, and insists on his eating part of it too, in the following lines:--

"Sir, in a few words, Taste them part of the apple, Or my love thou shalt lose! See, take this fair apple, Or surely between thee and thy wife The love shall utterly fail, If thou wilt not eat of it!"[4]

The stage direction now proceeds:--"Adam receiveth the apple and tasteth it, and so repenteth and casteth it away. Eve looketh on Adam very strangely and speaketh not anything." During this pause, the "conveyor" is told "to get the fig-leaves ready." Then Lucifer is ordered to "come out of the serpent and creep on his belly to hell;" Adam and Eve receive the curse, and depart out of Paradise, "showing a spindle and distaff"--no badly-conceived emblem of the labour to which they are henceforth doomed. And thus the second act terminates.

The third act treats of Cain and Abel; and is properly opened by an impersonation of Death. After which Cain and Abel appear to sacrifice.

Cain makes his offering of the first substance that comes to hand--"dry cow-dung"(!); and tells Abel that he is a "dolthead" and "a frothy fool" for using anything better. "Abel is stricken with a jawbone and dieth; Cain casteth him into a ditch." The effect of the first murder on the minds of our first parents, is delineated in some speeches exhibiting a certain antique simplicity of thought, which almost rises to the poetical by its homely adherence to nature, and its perfect innocence of effort, artifice, or display. The banishment of Cain, still glorying in his crime, follows the lamentations

of Adam and Eve for the death of Abel; and the act is closed by Adam's announcement of the birth of Seth.

The fourth act relates the deaths of Cain and Adam, and contains some of the most eccentric, and also, some of the most elevated writing in the play. Lamech opens the scene, candidly and methodically exposing his own character in these lines:--

"Sure I am the first That ever yet had two wives! And maidens in sufficient plenty They are to me. I am not dainty, I can find them where I will; Nor do I spare of them In anywise one that is handsome. But I am wondrous troubled, Scarce do I see one glimpse What the devil shall be done!"

In this vagabond frame of mind Lamech goes out hunting, with bow and arrow, and shoots Cain, accidentally, in a bush. When Cain falls, Lamech appeals to his servant, to know what is it that he has shot. The servant declares that it is "hairy, rough, ugly, and a buck-goat of the night." Cain, however, discovers himself before he dies. There is something rudely dreary and graphic about his description of his loneliness, bare as it is of any recommendation of metaphors or epithets:

"Deformed I am very much, And overgrown with hair; I do live continually in heat or cold frost, Surely night and day; Nor do I desire to see the son of man, With my will at any time; But accompany most time with all the beasts."

Lamech, discovering the fatal error that he has committed, kills his servant in his anger; and the scene ends with "the devils carrying them away with great noise to hell."

The second scene is between Adam and his son Seth; and here, the old dramatist often rises to an elevation of poetical feeling, which, judging from the preceding portions of the play, we should not have imagined he could reach. Barbarous as his execution may be, the simple beauty of his conception often shines through it faintly, but yet palpably, in this part of the drama.

Adam is weary of life and weary of the world; he sends Seth to the gates of Paradise to ask mercy and release for him, telling his son that he will find the way thither by his father's foot-prints, burnt into the surface of the earth which was cursed for Adam's transgression. Seth finds and follows the supernatural marks, is welcomed by the angel at the gate of Paradise, and is

permitted to look in. He beholds there, an Apocalypse of the redemption of the world. On the tree of life sit the Virgin and Child; while on the tree from which Eve plucked the apple, "the woman" is seen, having power over the serpent. The vision changes, and Cain is shown in hell, "sorrowing and weeping." Then the angel plucks three kernels from the tree of life, and gives them to Seth for his father's use, saying that they shall grow to another tree of life, when more than five thousand years are ended; and that Adam shall be redeemed from his pains when that period is fulfilled. After this, Seth is dismissed by the angel and returns to communicate to his father the message of consolation which he has received.

Adam hears the result of his son's mission with thankfulness; blesses Seth; and speaks these last words, while he is confronted by Death:--

"Old and weak, I am gone! To live longer is not for me: Death is come, Nor will here leave me To live one breath!

I see him now with his spear, Ready to pierce me on every side, There is no escaping from him! The time is welcome with, me-- I have served long in the world!"

So, the patriarch dies, trusting in the promise conveyed through his son; and is buried by Seth "in a fair tomb, with some Church sonnet."

After this impressive close to the fourth act--impressive in its intention, however clumsy the appliances by which that intention is worked out--it would be doing the old author no kindness to examine his fifth act in detail. Here, he sinks again in many places, to puerility of conception and coarseness of dialogue. It is enough to say that the history of the Flood closes the drama, and that the spectators are dismissed with an epilogue, directing them to "come to-morrow, betimes, and see very great matters"--the minstrels being charged, at the conclusion to "pipe," so that all may dance together, as the proper manner of ending the day's amusements.

And now, let us close the book, look forth over this lonesome country and lonesome amphitheatre, and imagine what a scene both must have presented, when a play was to be acted on a fine summer's morning in the year 1611.

Fancy, at the outset, the arrival of the audience--people dressed in the picturesque holiday costume of the time, which varied with every varying rank, hurrying to their daylight play from miles off; all visible in every direction on the surface of the open moor, and all converging from every

point of the compass to the one common centre of Piran Round. Then, imagine the assembling in the amphitheatre; the running round the outer circle of the embankment to get at the entrances; the tumbling and rushing up the steps inside; the racing of hot-headed youngsters to get to the top places; the sly deliberation of the elders in selecting the lower and safer positions; the quarrelling when a tall man chanced to stand before a short one; the giggling and blushing of buxom peasant wenches when the gallant young bachelors of the district happened to be placed behind them; the universal speculations on the weather; the universal shouting for pots of ale--and finally, as the time of the performance drew near and the minstrels appeared with their pipes, the gradual hush and stillness among the multitude; the combined stare of the whole circular mass of spectators on one point in the plain of the amphitheatre, where all knew that the actors lay hidden in a pit, properly covered in from observation--the mysterious "green-room" of the strolling players of old Cornwall!

And the play!--to see the play must have been a sight indeed! Conceive the commencement of it; the theatrical sky which was to open awfully whenever Heaven was named; the mock clouds coolly set up by the "property-man" on an open-air stage, where the genuine clouds appeared above them to expose the counterfeit; the hard fighting of the angels with swords and staves; the descent of the lost spirits along cords running into the plain; the thump with which they must have come down; the rolling off of the whole troop over the grass, to the infernal regions, amid shouts of applause from the audience as they rolled! Then the appearance of Adam and Eve, packed in white leather, like our modern dolls--the serpent with the virgin's face and the yellow hair, climbing into a tree, and singing in the branches--Cain falling out of the bush when he was struck by the arrow of Lamech, and his blood appearing, according to the stage directions, when he fell--the making of the Ark, the filling it with live stock, the scenery of the Deluge, in the fifth act! What a combination of theatrical prodigies the whole performance must have presented! How the actors must have ranted to make themselves heard in the open air; how often the machinery must have gone wrong, and the rude scenery toppled and tumbled down! Could we revive at will, for mere amusement, any of the bygone performances of the theatre, since the first days of barbaric acting in a cart, assuredly the performances at Piran Round would be those which, without hesitation, we should select from all others to call back to life.

The end of the play, too--how picturesque, how striking all the circumstances attending it must have been! Oh that we could hear again the merry old English tune piped by the minstrels, and see the merry old English dancing of the audience to the music! Then, think of the separation

and the return home of the populace, at sunset; the fishing people strolling off towards the seashore; the miners walking away farther inland; the agricultural labourers spreading in all directions, wherever cottages and farm-houses were visible in the far distance over the moor. And then the darkness coming on, and the moon rising over the amphitheatre, so silent and empty, save at one corner, where the poor worn-out actors are bivouacking gipsy-like in their tents, cooking supper over the fire that flames up red in the moonlight, and talking languidly over the fatigues and the triumphs of the play. What a moral and what a beauty in the quiet night view of the old amphitheatre, after the sight that it must have presented during the noise, the bustle, and the magnificence of the day!

Shall we dream over our old play any longer? Shall we delay a moment more, ere we proceed on our journey, to compare the modern with the ancient drama in Cornwall, as we have already compared the theatre of Redruth with the theatre of Piran Round? If we set them fairly against one another as we now know them, would it be rash to determine which burnt purest--the new light that flared brilliantly in our eyes when we last saw it, or the old light that just flickered in the socket for an instant, as we tried to trim it afresh? Or, if we rather inquire which audience had the advantage of witnessing the worthiest performance, should we hesitate to decide at once? Between the people at Redruth, and the people at Piran Round, there was certainly a curious resemblance in one respect--they failed alike to discern the barbarisms and absurdities of the plays represented before them; but were they also equally uninstructed by what they beheld? Which was likeliest to send them away with something worth thinking of, and worth remembering--the drama about knaves and fools, at the modern theatre, or the drama about Scripture History at the ancient? Let the reader consider and determine.

For our parts, let us honestly confess that though we took up the old play (not unnaturally) to laugh over the clumsiness and eccentricity of the performance, we now lay it down (not inconsistently), recognising the artless sincerity and elevation of the design--just as in the earliest productions of the Italian School of Painting we first perceive the false perspective of a scene or the quaint rigidity of a figure, and only afterwards discover that these crudities and formalities enshrine the germs of deep poetic feeling, and the first struggling perceptions of grace, beauty, and truth.

FOOTNOTES:

[4] In case any of my readers should feel desirous of seeing a specimen of the Cornish language at the date of the play, I subjoin the original text of the seven lines of John Keygwyn's translation, quoted above.

"Syr, war nebas lavarow, Tast gy part an avallow, Po ow harenga ty a gyll! Meir, Kymar an avail teake, Po sure inter te ha'th wreage An garenga quyt a fyll Mar ny vynyth y thebbry!"

Some of this looks like a very polyglot language. But the ancient Cornish tongue had altered and deteriorated; and was indeed changing into English at the period of our play. Why the author should have helped himself, in his literary emergency, to the two Latin words in the fifth line (inter te) when English would have served his turn as well, it is difficult to discover, unless he wished to show his learning before the rustic audiences of Piran Round.