POPULAR TALES

AND

TRADITIONS OF HUNGARY.

INTRODUCTION.

THE poetical genius of a people is expressed in its traditions. They are the inartificial tokens of the riches or the poverty of its imagination. But the unruly play of the imagination is not the only source of tradition. If we retrace its course, we get to the wonderful spring of primitive ideas, where feelings and thoughts, phantasy and understanding, are not yet separated from one another, and where the first commencements of poetry and

the science of philosophy and mythology coincide. As we daily see with children, so nations in their childhood inquire the cause of every phenomenon, and just as the child rests satisfied with any answer, without examining its correctness—just as the child prefers those explanations which present an image to those which inculcate a principle—so the people prefer a legend, and little care to investigate the laws of physical nature.

The analytical understanding develops itself only in the riper age of man and nations; their childhood is governed by imagination.

The questions discussed in our times, of astronomy and geology, by the physical sciences and philosophy, were all comprised by the people of antiquity in their mythology, in which they expressed their ideas about divine and human things, the laws of moral and of physical nature. Mythology was to them what the Koran is to the Mohammedans,—the book of science and the book of law; a circumstance, which even at later periods often stopped scientific research. Herodotus does not venture to unfold the whole

extent of his knowledge, fearing to hurt the religious feelings of his countrymen; and Anaxagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, and other philosophers of Greece, felt in different degrees the tyrannical jealousy of the popular creed. The intuitive surmise of poetry in the first ages of the world supplies the researches of science.

But the mist which dims the dawn of science is dispersed at last by its increasing brightness; critical understanding replaces constructive imagination, and the horizon of the people is enlarged. Notwithstanding the many cling to tradition, even when the laws of nature no longer remain hidden to them, and the traces of their former views of life and nature still live in their legends.

Yet the moral feeling of the people is no less active than its imagination. In consequence, legends and traditions are almost always founded on moral ideas, which impart to them a still greater charm than imagination alone could have endowed them with.

As traditions are connected with the primitive sciences, so are they often founded on the

popular interpretations of natural or artificial monuments. When the people behold an extensive ruin in the midst of a silent wood, they do not inquire as to its real history—to them it is the work of giants or of fairies, and the name of the spot is alone sufficient to create a legend.

In the pages introduced by these lines, we have attempted to gather Hungarian traditions of manifold kinds. They belong to the different nationalities which inhabit Hungary.

The greater part of these legends are connected with phenomena of nature and explain the origin of the delicate feather-grass, of erratic-blocks, of warm springs, and especially of the characteristical shapes of the chalk-formation. Punishment for the desecration of Sunday is the theme of more than one popular Hungarian tale; the sinner is almost always transformed into a stone. Isolated chalk-rocks, and the stalactites in the caverns, often resembling human forms from afar, are explained by such tales. But the cruel lord, too, who oppresses his peasants — the *Dives* who wastes bread whilst poor men

starve at his threshold—and the bad step-mother, who compels her step-children to sin, are likewise transformed into stones.

The German brothers Grimm first directed public attention to the fact, that many popular tales and proverbs are fragments of ancient mythology. When paganism lost its sway, its reminiscences appeared often disguised as tales; the more easily so, as the fables of ancient mythology were nothing but the brilliant tissue of phantasy concerning principles of moral and physical existence. The people took the golden veil for the treasure itself, and, even down to our own days, do not easily part with it.

It is proved, that northern mythology, the worship of Wodin, Thor, Freya, Suttur, &c., once extended as far as the Teutonic languages are spread.

The recollections of these gods is not only preserved in the names of days, but re-echoes in more than one tale and proverb. Even the Slovak tradition of "Yanoshik" is derived from this source; and it is certainly remarkable to find fragments of Teutonic fables in the tales of a

Selavonic population, which notoriously had its own mythology totally different from that of the Teutons. There is but one common feature between them, viz., that the representation of the gods and their deeds is wholly unsuited to the plastic arts. In consequence of this, those legends never can become embodied in permanent forms, impressing the popular mind so well as the mythology of Southern Europe, or as the Eastern tales, though no less philosophical in their views of life and nature. Their want of well-defined beauty alienates them from our taste.

Wholly different from those legends and tales, which are connected with definite spots, and therefore confined to the neighbourhood of single localities, we meet with traditions proverbially known all over the country, such as the "Poor Tartar," or "Pan Twardowski."

The Jewish tales are of a peculiar stamp; they are derived from the Talmud, and are as typical of Judaism as the unaltered customs of the Jews.

Some legends scarcely connected with Hungary, have also been introduced in the following collection; their poetical merit must plead their cause.

The legends offered in this volume to the public, have not been unintentionally grouped in their present order. "The Baron's Daughter," the tale of "The Castle of Zipsen," and "Yanoshik," show us three distinct phases of Hungarian life in the middle ages. In the first tale we see the contrast of the proud allodial proprietor, disdaining to accept property as fief from a King, with the noblemen attached to the Court. The second sketches the opposition of the knight to the burghers. In the Slovack legend of "Yanoshik," the common robber appears as avenger of social injustice; at last overpowered by treason, not by the might of the cruel lords. The poetical idea, that Fortune escapes in the very moment when we dream we have caught hold of her—that there is a slip between the cup and the lip—is expressed in the German tale of "The Free Shot," and is again exhibited in the Slovak story of "The Golden Cross of Körösfo."

The Jewish legends of "The Guardians," and the Persian of "Anahid," picture how foolish is self-conceit, and how easily even the best and the wisest stumble when they brave temptation, instead of avoiding it.

In contrast with the brilliant colours glistening in these recollections of the East, we see in the German tale of "The Nun of Raushenbach,"* the gloomy hue of mediæval superstition. The legend leaves off with a dissonance: the nun, regretting her vows, and longing to forsake the peace of the nunnery for worldly happiness, cannot escape punishment. Nevertheless, our sympathy speaks for her; we feel that the vows imposed by the veil are unnatural.

But in the Hungarian tale of "Monastir," the cloister appears as the abode of expiation; and the story of "Wendelin Drugeth," restored to health on the very spot he had profaned, is a mediæval version of the ancient Greek legend

* The inhabitants of the Carpathian valleys are of German origin.

of "The Spear of Achilles," the rust of which alone could heal the wounds it inflicted.

"The Poor Tartar" and "Pan Twardowski" are satires on the domination of unamiable ladies, such as we often meet with in popular traditions. The Polish version of the latter leads us into the realm of magic, which always delights popular imagination. "The Rocks of Lipnick," "The Maidens' Castle," and "The Hair of the Orphan Girl," a Hungarian Cinderella, belong to this class, and represent the fairy mythology of Hungary; and if in "Jack the Horse-dealer," and "Klingsohr," more modern sounds prevail, the reader may excuse it, considering the claims which the present times never can fail to have on our imagination.

As the butterfly which gleefully flutters around the flower on which he at last rests, opening and closing his wings with slow cadence, is no longer the same when pinned and cased up under the glass of a cabinet; as the flower pressed between the leaves of a herbarium loses its original colour and fragrance; thus the popular tale too is deprived of its natural

brilliancy and vigour, when repeated far from the country to which it belongs. We have attempted wholly to preserve their genuine purity; how far we have succeeded rests with the reader to decide.