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A Dissertation On Sussex Proverbs And Curious Sayings

Occasionally in his conversations with me ol' Martin Malpass, my gardener, makes use of some quaint proverbial saying that is a remnant of the rustic philosophy current in the days of his youth. Sussex proverbial sayings are no longer extant as the small change of conversation; and the morals to which they might point, as well as the tales they might adorn are, in these days, presented without such ornaments.

Malpass was relating to me the tergiversations of Baldy's boy. It appears that on a recent day the youth was told off to give him assistance in "mucking out the squire's hog pond." Baldy's boy, however, was disinclined for work; probably he had contempt for Martin's over-seership. The old man completed his recital of his assistant's shortcomings by saying, "He's as saucy as Hinds; he would make a loiter pin to wind down the sun."[1]

From the context I gather that by this expression Malpass meant that Baldy's boy was not only impudent, but that he was a dawdler as well. I had never before heard the term "loiter pin," and I asked Martin what it meant.

"Can't say disackly, sir; it's one o' them words we folkses used to say when I was a young man."

Nor since Martin made use of the term have I been able to track it down. It is in no dictionary I have consulted; nor have my questionings brought me a solution, even from mechanics who, I thought, might be expected to know it. Martin's complete phrase I have had authenticated by other old Sussex folk, but none have explained "loiter pin." (The phrase may refer to a delaying pin for the windlass to let down the sun by degrees).

I have noted down a number of Sussex proverbial sayings collected from Martin Malpass and other old Sussexians during a number of years; and I have spent an hour in making a selection from my store. These I present to the reader for the furtherance of his own wisdom.

If you tell me a piece of news that is already known to everybody, I may comment in the Sussex way by saying, "My Lord Baldwin's dead," though I should be unable to tell you who Lord Baldwin was.[2] If you are unfortunate you may have "the Devil's own luck, and your own too." You may know a "brewer of mischief who deserves to be drowned in his own mash tub." If you desire ill for your enemy wish him "short shoes and long corns." Do not forget that appearances are sometimes deceptive, for a thing may be "all glitter, like a brass button in a sweep's eye."

"If you won't work in the heat you may have to go hungry when the frosts come." You may, however, be a very worthy fellow. If so I could wish that you may have to "put up with no worse yoke than that of an egg." Beware of gluttony, for you may "eat enough

to sink a barge, and drink enough to float it again." Beware, also, of the man who exaggerates, for "he would canter nine miles round a cabbage." He who has his affairs well in hand is to be commended, for "he has got the fore-horse by the head."

If you are a hairy man, you may be said to be a "happy man; a hairy woman is a witch." "When a woman wears the breeches you may know that they don't fit the man," which proves that he is not master in his own house.

You are instructed to beware of the flatterer in the term "don't trust him who gives you brass love and copper compliments." If you are one who attempts to achieve the impossible I remind you that "you can't whistle and eat flour." If you have a fit of idleness you may know that "old Lawrence has got hold of you," though who "old Lawrence" is I am unable to say.[3]

If you are a true friend you are a "bread and cheese friend." If I wish you good I shall "hope that you'll live till you die, and that every hair of your head will become a wax candle to light you to glory"; or I may hope that your "big toe may never stare you in the face for want of shoe leather." You may mean well: "Well, if you mean well so let you fare well." As for our nation's enemies, "I'd have their skin turned into parchment, and our rights written on it." So "God bless us all, and the Devil take the rest."

A chatterbox may be reminded that "every baa loses a bite"; one may be as "pert as a tom-tit," or "poor and pert like a rat-catcher's dog." If you are one who makes much fuss over small matters you "puff and pant like a broken winded robin." You may be "as sharp as a rat-catcher's dog at a sink hole"; and a woman with many mischief-loving children must have "eyes in her elbows to see what's going on behind her." A cheerful person is "as merry as a grig" (frog), even though his garden crops are slow to mature, for "parsley seed always goes nine times to the Devil before it comes up."

That poverty always has its resources is illustrated by "'Tis a poor common where a goose cannot get a bite." One who suffers extreme poverty may be described as having to "eat shorn bugs for dinner." The shorn-bug is a beetle. An evilly disposed person is described as being "as black as a habbern," a "habbern," I believe, being the back of a firegrate. One may be "as deaf as a bittle," which is simply a wooden bowl. More cryptic is the saying, "One shoulder of mutton gets down two," which probably means you can't have one shoulder off a sheep, but must kill it and take both even if you only want one.

"Nobody likes working for a dead horse": that is for wages already received. If you hear that a man "died under the gallows," the phrase must not be misinterpreted, for it means merely that he died of overwork. A vice may be "like a lawyer: if once it lays hold of you, you don't easily get shut on't" (rid of it). A "lawyer," in this case, means the branch of a bramble bush; though I understand that there are members of the legal profession to whom that proverb might equally well be applied.

A misfortune which affects all alike, and which none can avoid, is called "neighbours' fare." Too much of a good thing is "a faggot above a load": as "I do call it a faggot above

a load to have to turn out again after my hard day's work." "One boy is a boy; two boys is half a boy; three boys is no boy at all,"[4] is more subtle than is at first apparent.

A person may be "as hard as a beggar-boy's heart," or "as hard as a skim-dick," which means that he may be as hard-hearted as the Sussex cheese known as "skim-dick"—so-called because it is (or was) made from skim milk.

The married woman should remember that

> "If you rock the cradle empty,
> Then you shall have babies plenty,"

and that is the reason why the well-dowered mother avoids the cradle when the baby does not occupy it. An economical cottage wife "cannot refuse to make little feet fit old shoes," and if she has contempt for poverty she may wish it "in a ditch, and the Devil throwing stones at it."

"If you go nutting on Sunday, Satan will be sure to come and hold the boughs down for you," was a phrase, I imagine, coined to frighten naughty children.

The saying that "ill-gotten money does not last" is translated in Sussex by the phrase, "what is got over the sow's back is mostly spent under her belly." "Smugglers' gold does not wear" was a variation of this proverb, which was current in the days of "free trade." Another traditional saying, applied to one who quickly earns and spends money, is "'Tain't no good to pour in at the bung-hole so long as it runs out at the spicket" (spigot).

One of the best Sussex proverbs is applied to a person whose intentions are suspect:

> "We've wintered un an' summered un, an'
> wintered un agen, an' now it doan't sim as if
> we can trust un."

An old bachelor is an object of contempt.

> "I don't believe in old bachelors; they ought
> to lie on a bed of nettles, sit on a wooden stool,
> eat alone from a wooden trencher, and be their
> own kitchenmaids."

In East Sussex there was a saying, in humorous contempt of the inhabitants of the little village of Piddinghoe, in the valley of the Sussex Ouse, who were said to "shoe their magpies." The saying has puzzled many an inquirer, but I think that if we remember that the magpie is mischievous and inquisitive, and for "shoe" understand "shoo" the puzzle is solved.

Another witticism relating to Piddinghoe declares that the villagers "hang up their ponds to dry." A Sussex writer suggests that this saying arises from the fact that whiting was there made from chalk ground in water. After the water had been drained off the sediment was placed on shelves, under pent-houses, to dry.

And again of the same villagers, with reference to their peace-loving habits:

> "Englishmen fight, Frenchmen too;
> We doänt—we live Pidd'nhoe."

Another Piddinghoe saying declared that the villagers dug in the ground for moonshine; but this is not so silly a matter as at first it seems, for "moonshine" was the cant term for smuggled spirits, and the Piddinghoe smugglers, like others, sometimes buried the kegs of "moonshine" in the ground to conceal them from the eyes of prying Preventive men.

With reference to the alleged slumberous character of the cathedral town of Chichester, it was once a common saying that "While one half of Chichester is asleep 'tother half goes on tiptoe for fear of waking an' 'em up."

Some cynic, who came to the conclusion that there was parsimony in Lewes seems to have invented a phrase which has long been quoted against Lewesians in the term, "The folk of Lewes are so mean that they'd skin a rat for its hide and fat."

Other Sussex places have cynical sayings attached to them. For instance, it is declared that "Storrington folk are so simple that they have to look at a pond to see if it rains." The people of Barcombe are said to be "so silly that when they want a cart they build a wagon and saw it in two," and to have placed manure at the foot of their church steeple for the purpose of making it grow as high as the spire of the neighbouring village church of Cuckfield.

Here are some sayings applied to the weather:—

> When Firle Beacon wears a cap [fog]
> We in the valley gets a drap;
> When Firle Beacon's head is bare,
> All next day it will be fair.

If there happened to be a fall of snow in April it was illustrated by a saying to the effect that the gates were left open at Crowborough Fair. The "gates" in question are weather gates, and were said to shut out winter weather at the time of the fair in April.

Such, then, are some of our rustic sayings; not all have I noted here, by any means, but sufficient, I hope, to give you a taste of their quality. Of all that I know the dearest to my heart, because it most clearly illustrates the character of the Sussex people, is that which declares (in a phrase, redolent of their favourite animal, the pig), "We *wunt* be druv!"[5]

Arthur Merrick didn't have the luxury of Google in 1927. I offer the following search engine wisdom from 99 years in his future. *S.W.C.*

[1]According to *A Glossary of Words, &c., Current in East Lincolnshire* (Jabez Good, 1906) a

> **Loiter-pin**—A stick or piece of wood "whittled" for pastime.

That doesn't seem likely in context. Merrick himself speculates in a footnote "The phrase may refer to a delaying pin for the windlass to let down the sun by degrees." No such thing as a 'delaying pin' that I can find and a *belaying* pin (the word he was likely reaching for) doesn't have anything to do with winding a windlass. It's a mystery.

[2] In *A complete collection of English proverbs […]* First published in 1678 by John Ray, Baldwin was a known unknown even then.

> "It is used when one tells that for news which every body knows. A Sussex proverb, but who this Lord Baldwin was I could not learn there."

[3] From his collection *The Salt-Cellars* published in 1889, Charles Spurgeon wrote:

> Old Lawrence has got, hold of you. Which means that the man is in the power of the demon of laziness, St. Lawrence being the patron of idleness. Surely that is not the Lawrence who was martyred on a gridiron! And yet perhaps it is; for lazy people will find things rather hot in these days, even if they do not go to the grill-room of utter bankruptcy.

[4] This wry observation has been sourced to many counties in Britain – and the United States. The Chinese version is "one monk carries the water; two monks share the water; three monks have no water" though I'm not sure why monks would be as flighty as boys.

[5] This is my favourite Sussexism; I've been chasing the provenance for years. The earliest example found in print so far appears in *A dictionary of the Sussex dialect and collection of provincialisms in use in the county of Sussex* by the Reverend W.D. Parish, 1875, who says:

> "I wunt be druv" is a favourite maxim with Sussex people.

I speculate that earlier examples could be found inscribed on the necks of Sussex pottery pigs.