

# *The St. Helens Leader.*

## LOCAL TRADITIONS AND LEGENDS.

### VIII.—ST. ANNE'S WELL:

#### A LEGEND OF SUTTON.

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The condition of England in the fourth decade of the sixteenth century, presents a curiously interesting spectacle to the mind's eye of the historical student. That avaricious, regal grind-stone, Henry VII, had brought the nation, by his exactions, to such a condition, that at his death the young Prince Hal was gladly welcomed as one seemingly gallant and generous, and he had ascended the throne with the hopes of the nation high raised that the promise of his youth would bear fruitful fulfilment. This, however, was not to be, and twenty years of kingly rule had developed the latent hereditary vices of his character. The predominant vice of the father—avarice, had reappeared in the son, when, after years of war with France and Spain, and indulgence in royal pleasures, the coffers of the late king had become exhausted. The resistance of the Pope to Henry's desire for a divorce from his wife, Catherine of Arragon, had enabled Thomas Cromwell, the successor of Wolsey, to whisper the suggestion that the King should make himself Pope in his own dominions. Henry, nothing loth to follow where his inclination led, had very speedily assumed the rôle of head of the church, and in order to get his spiritual claims recognised by his clerical subjects, Cromwell was appointed Vicar General, and, by the skilful use of the exceptionally spiritual methods of coercion then in fashion, quickly succeeded in obtaining from the more compliant, the outward recognition of Henry's supremacy. The main body of the clergy, however, refused to regard anyone but the Roman Pontiff as head of the church, and Henry's anger at this disloyal conduct, together with his greed for money, were well used by Cromwell, who directed Henry's attention to the richly endowed monastic institutions which then dotted the whole of the land. Henry at once became a reformer, got his obedient parliament to authorise a commission of inquiry into the condition of the monasteries, ostensibly for the purpose of ridding them of abuses, but really to obtain possession of their incomes and endowments. The Earl of Sussex and a body of commissioners were sent to the northern districts, and already some of the smaller monasteries had been broken up, and their inhabitants dispersed, some to take refuge in the larger monasteries, others to relinquish religious life, and turn to more worldly occupations.

It was about this time that the events occurred which constitute the legend we are about to narrate.

For many years, a small Priory had stood on the summit of an eminence to the west or south west of Sherdley Park, in Sutton. Its site is now occupied by an old farmhouse, which was built on the foundations of the priory. Though the priory was pretty well endowed, having an extensive estate stretching on every side, the building was, as we have before said, but small, and it rarely had more than a dozen priests within its precincts. The prior, Father Delwaney, was a shrewd, worldly-wise, but good hearted man, and looked pretty sharply after the mundane interests of his charge, though the spiritual condition of his flock was by no means neglected. All the farms on the estate, were leased to well-to-do farmers, and were in a most flourishing condition, realizing a handsome revenue. The monks had a small farm connected with the priory, and a great portion of its produce was reserved for the poor, who were never denied alms, food or shelter. Whatever may be said of the abuses, which undoubtedly existed in a large number of these institutions, no question can be raised as to the benefit derived from them by the needy, indeed, they were the only institutions at that time which had any regard whatever for the poor.

Every monastery had its patron saint, its images and relics, and the other stock-in-trade of sanctity, which were then deemed necessary for the proper preparation of souls for the kingdom of heaven. This Sutton Priory had for its patroness, St. Anne, and among its sacred furniture, the most valuable was a well, named after St. Anne, which was situated in a field nearly a mile away from the priory, and about half a mile east of the spot where Rainhill Railway Station now stands, and was very near to the boundary hedge which divided the priory domain from that of Sir Richard Bold who owned great portion of the lands in Sutton and Rainhill. This well had obtained a wide reputation for the virtuous properties its waters possessed, and its fame drew large numbers of people from great distances who desired to be made whole of their ailments by bathing in the sacred fount. The cure of skin diseases was its specialty, and if we may trust the veracity of the monks, its wonderful curative powers had been conferred by St. Anne herself, who at one time or other, according to the monks'

story, had bathed her sacred person in its waters, which still retained the odor of sanctity. It being at such a distance from the priory, a small three-roomed house had been built over it, in which a couple of monks lived, to attend to the requirements of the afflicted, and to receive the toll levied upon those who sought relief from their physical ailments. The well was not more than six feet deep, and about five feet nine inches square, and had a large stone basin fixed at the bottom, in which we suppose the people stood while at their ablutions.

For two or three years considerable unpleasantness had existed between the Prior and Hugh Darcy the steward of Sir Thomas Bold the neighbouring land owner, chiefly owing to a dispute between them as to certain rights of access to the well and the position of the boundary between certain of the estates. The disagreement, as we may suppose, from long delay had not by any means improved, but had gradually increased from time to time until at last from the stubbornness of the steward, positive enmity had broken out between them. Darcy, the steward, was a man who, though he doubtlessly attended to his master's interests, looked likewise sharply after his own; and had, where opportunity offered feathered his own nest pretty well. Indeed very ugly rumours were afloat as to some of the transactions he had been concerned in, and the Prior got the idea into his head that Darcy had a purpose in being awkward in the dispute between them. On one occasion the Prior and the steward met at a short distance from St. Ann's Well, and the latter at once began talking in an overbearing manner, which was highly offensive to the prior, who said one in his position would not brook such insult. Darcy, still in the same tone, remarked that perhaps he would not hold his position long, and strode off home to Rainhill. Delwaney, somewhat alarmed at Darcy's last remark, and well aware of the perilous uncertainty they were in at those times, hurried back to the priory, to consult with the monks, but they could make nothing of it. Their suspense, however, did not last long, for a day or two after, Dr. Layton and Dr. Lea, two of the king's commissioners, accompanied by several officers, made their appearance, and presented to the prior the vicar general's order for their removal from the priory, and to take possession of it and its holdings in the king's name. It is needless to describe the scene which followed, protest was useless, and the monks were fain to make the best of it. Each monk was allowed a gown and £2 in money, and they were then told to betake themselves to Parr Abbey which still remained untouched, while the prior was compelled to accompany the commissioners to the well to deliver up possession of that also. On their arrival they found Darcy, the steward, awaiting them, and from the understanding that apparently existed between him and the commissioners, Delwaney was at no loss to comprehend the whole matter.

With an entire want of sympathy for the prior in his unfortunate situation, Darcy from the coarse brutality of his nature, could not refrain from openly sneering at his position. Delwaney, whose feelings were already overstrained, was stung almost to madness with Darcy's taunts, and would have laid violent hands upon him had he not been held back by the officers. With teeth tightly clenched, and his face white with suppressed passion he almost hissed out the words "The curse of the serpent be on thee, thou spoiler of the Lord's inheritance, thy ill-gotten gains shall not profit thee, and a year and a day shall not pass ere St. Anne thy head shall bruise." Darcy at first turned pale, doubtless cowed by the terrible earnestness of the prior's fixed glance, and the thought of his ominous utterance made him shudder, but recovering himself he turned on his heel, and, affecting a contemptuous laugh, strode away from the spot. No sooner had he turned, than Delwaney, with a gasp, fell back senseless into the arms of one of the monks who rushed forward. They bore him into the cottage, and laid him on a pallet, made use of what restoratives were at hand, and one of the monks who had acted as "leech" to the priory inmates producing his lancet, tried bleeding, but all in vain, he neither spake nor moved, and the darkening circle below the eyes told the "leech" but too plainly that all hope of recovery was gone. The two monks watched by his side, but in three hours he had breathed his last.

The monks, accompanied by two of the officers, took the body to Parr Abbey, where it was reverently laid in the dust, and masses said for the safety of the soul.

Darcy, through the interest of his master, Sir Richard Bold, got a grant from the king of the farm on which the well stood, and at once demolished the building over it, and for some time all appeared to go smoothly with him, but the prior's last look and last words haunted him continually, and he could not get rid of the strange foreboding of coming evil. Three months after the prior's death, his only son was taken with a mysterious illness, which baffled all the skill of the neighbouring "leeches," and under which he sank after two days of agony. The bereaved father, who had lost heavily in some unfortunate speculations he had ventured into, to drown his grief and wretchedness, plunged recklessly into dissipation, which speedily lost him his post of steward. Nothing could stop the downward career of the wretched man, who went on from bad to worse. One night, after imbibing deeply at a tavern near Micklehead, he left at a late hour, and reeled towards Rainhill in a very advanced state of intoxication. He never reached home, and his wife who had waited all night for his coming with the greatest anxiety, aroused the neighbours at day-break, and begged them to make a search for him. The shortest road home was along

the footpath past St. Anne's Well, and here the search began. Nothing was seen until they came to the well, in which Darcy was found lying dead, his head crushed in. Such was Darcy's end, ~~thus~~ the prior's prediction had been fulfilled, and here endeth the legend of St. Anne.

What credence the story is worthy of, is not for us to say ; this we know, that St. Anne's Well is still to be seen, though its steps are worn and broken. Its holy waters have long departed, and, save the rainwater which has accumulated, some weeds, and a few water beetles, nothing remains to remind us of the ancient miraculous powers of St. Anne's Well.

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