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Elizabeth Gaskell

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I have lately met with a French book which has interested me much; and, as it is now out of print, and was never very extensively known, I imagine some account of it may not be displeasing to the readers of "Household Words."

It is called "Chants Populaires de la Grace Moderne, par C. Fauriel." M. Fauriel is a Greek, in spite of his French name, and the language in which he writes. The plan on which he has collected these "Chants Populaires resembles that of Sir Walter Scott, in his Border Minstrelsy." In both cases there is a preliminary discourse explaining the manners and peculiar character of the people among whom these ballads circulate, and the history of whose ancestors and popular heroes they commemorate. This discourse and the explanatory notes give the principal interest to the book, as they tell of the habits and customs and traditions of a people whom we are apt to moan over, as having fallen low from the high estate of the civilisation of their ancestors. But, as there are four millions of men who claim a direct descent from the most polished people the world has ever known, it becomes worth one's while to learn something of their present state.

M. Fauriel divides the poetry of modern Greece into two kinds; works of literature, written down as composed, and corrected and revised in strict accordance with the rules of art, and the real ballads − poems springing out of the heart of the nation whenever it is deeply stirred, and circulating from man to man with the rapidity of flame never written down, but never forgotten. Some of these songs relate to domestic, but the majority to popular, events.

Let us take the household songs. There are two feasts which are celebrated in every house. The first is on New Year's Day, the feast of St. Basil in the Greek Church. The account which M. Fauriel gives reminds me much of a Scottish New Year's Day. The young men pass from one house to another until all their friends have been visited; bringing with them presents, and going, in glad procession, to salute all their acquaintances. But, instead of our "I wish you a happy new year and many of them," the young Greeks, on entering each house, sing some verses in honour of the master or head of the family; others in honour of the mistress; the sons of the house have each their song, nor are the daughters forgotten. Those who are absent or dead receive this compliment last of all. The key changes; the remembrance of the lost is sung mournfully and sadly; but none of the family are left out on the feast of St. Basil. As they go along the streets they sing in honour of the saint. I was once, in England, most kindly received by a Greek family, who allowed me to witness their Easter−day ceremonies; which, in the expression of good wishes and the glad visits of congratulation paid by all the gentlemen to their friends, must have resembled a feast of St. Basil without the songs. The family consisted of a Greek mother, a most lovely daughter, and a son, who left his own home on this day to visit his friends.

In one corner of the small English drawing−room there was spread a table covered with mellow−looking sweetmeats, all as if the glow of sunset rested on their amber and crimson colours; and there were decanters containing mysterious liquids to match. In came one Greek gentleman after another with some short sentence, which burst forth as if it contained the perfection of joy. It was the Greek for "Christ is risen." Then all shook hands; the visitors tasted of the jewel−like sweetmeats, and rushed off to go somewhere else, and to have their places taken by other troops of friends. But we had no songs; nor do I know if, in our cold northern climate, the Greeks keep up the feast of the coming Spring. In Greece this is held on the first of March; the first of May would

often he early greeting to the spring in England. At this pretty holiday, the children in their spring of human life join the young men, and go singing about the streets, and asking for small presents in honour of the soft and budding time; and every one gives them an egg, or some cheese, or some other simple produce of the country. The song they sing is one which, for its grace and the breath of spring and flowers which perfumes it, is known in many countries, as well as in Greece, under the name of the Song of the Swallow. The children carry about with them the figure of a swallow rudely cut in wood, and fastened to a kind of little windmill, which is turned by a piece of string fastened to a cylinder.

The modern Greeks are an essentially commercial people. I have heard a saying which shows the popular opinion of their bargaining talents: "It takes two Englishmen to cheat a Scotchman; two Scotchmen to cheat a Jew; two Jews to cheat a Greek." This turn for commerce, added to the poverty of their own country, and the uncertain tenure of property there, causes numbers of Greeks to become merchants in other countries; but they suffer acutely on first leaving their homes; the nearer to the mountains the more they mourn; and their sadness as well as their joy is expressed by song.

When anyone is leaving his home to go into a strange land, his friends and companions meet together at his house to share with him one final meal; and, after that, they accompany him on a part of his way, as Orpah and Ruth accompanied Naomi; as Raphael's companions, for the great love they bore him, went with him when he left the studio of Perugino. And as they walk along they sing. There are songs set apart from time immemorial for the sad occasion of a Greek's departure from Greece; and others are made on the spot, out of the excited feelings of the moment. There is a story told of a youth − the youngest of three brothers − but little beloved by his mother: the poor fellow endeavoured in vain to win some scanty sprinkling of the affection that was showered on his elder brothers; and at last he determined to become an exile from that home which was no home to him. So he set forth, accompanied by his young companions, his brothers, his sisters, and, as a matter of form, by his mother herself. Four or five miles from his birthplace there was a small gorge through which the narrow road wound. This was the determined point of separation; and here, among the rocky echoes, were sung the most doleful farewell songs. Suddenly the young man mounted upon a rock, and improvised a poem on the sufferings he had experienced from the indifference of his mother. He cried to her to bless him once, before he went away for ever, with something of the wild entreaty of Esau when he adjured Isaac to "Bless me, also, O my father!" Nor was this strange poetic appeal in vain: "the mother, with a sudden Eastern change of feeling, could hardly wait until the improvised song was finished (I have sometimes felt as impatient over an improvised sermon), before she in her turn sang her repentance; and promised, if he would remain at home, that she would be a better mother for the future." M. Fauriel says no more. I should not have been sorry to have had the old fairy−tale ending affixed to this true story, "And they lived together very happily for ever after."

Now let us hear about the marriage−songs. Life seems like an opera amongst the modern Greeks; all emotions, all events, require the relief of singing. But a marriage is a singing time among human beings as well as birds. Among the Greeks the youth of both sexes are kept apart, and do not meet excepting on the occasion of some public feast, when the young Greek makes choice of his bride, and asks her parents for their consent. If they give it, all is arranged for the betrothal; but the young people are not allowed to see each other again until that event. There are parts of Greece where the young man is allowed to declare his passion himself to the object of it. Not in words, however, does he breathe his tender suit. He tries to meet with her in some path, or other place in which he may throw her an apple or a flower. If the former missile be chosen, one can only hope that the young lady is apt at catching, as a blow from a moderately hard apple is rather too violent a token of love. After this apple or flower throwing, his only chance of meeting with his love is at the fountain; to which all Greek maidens go to draw water, as Rebekah went, of old, to the well.

The ceremony of betrothal is very simple. On an appointed evening, the relations of the lovers meet together in the presence of a priest, either at the house of the father of the future husband, or at that of the parents of the bride elect. After the marriage contract is signed, two young girls bring in the affianced maiden − who is covered all over with a veil − and present her to her lover, who takes her by the hand, and leads her up to the priest. They

exchange rings before him, and he gives them his blessing. The bride then retires; but all the rest of the company remain, and spend the day in merry−making and drinking the health of the young couple. The interval between the betrothal and the marriage may be but a few hours; it may be months, and it may be years; but, whatever the length of time, the lovers must never meet again until the wedding day comes. Three or four days before that time, the father and mother of the bride send round their notes of invitation; each of which is accompanied by the present of a bottle of wine. The answers come in with even more substantial accompaniments. Those who have great pleasure in accepting, send a present with their reply; the most frequent is a ram or lamb dressed up with ribands and flowers; but the poorest send their quarter of mutton as their contribution to the wedding−feast.

The eve of the marriage, or rather during the night, the friends on each side go to deck out the bride and groom for the approaching ceremony. The bridegroom is shaved by his paranymph or groom's man, in a very grave and dignified manner, in the presence of all the young ladies invited. Fancy the attitude of the bridegroom anxious and motionless under the hands of his unpractised barber, his nose held lightly up between a finger and thumb, while a crowd of young girls look gravely on at the graceful operation! The bride is decked, for her part, by her young companions; who dress her in white, and cover her all over with a long veil made of the finest stuff. Early the next morning the young man and all his friends come forth, like a bridegroom out of his chamber, to seek the bride, and carry her off from her father's house. Then she, in songs as ancient as the ruins of the old temples that lie around her, sings her sorrowful farewell to the father who has cared for her and protected her hitherto; to the mother who has borne her, and cherished her; to the companions of her maidenhood; to her early home; to the fountain whence she daily fetched water; to the trees which shaded her childish play; and every now and then she gives way to natural tears: then, according to immemorial usage, the paranymph turns to the glad yet sympathetic procession, and says in a sentence which has become proverbial on such occasions − "Let her alone! she weeps!" To which she must make answer, "Lead me away, but let me weep!" After the cortage has borne the bride to the house of her husband, the whole party adjourn to church, where the religious ceremony is performed. Then they return to the dwelling of the bridegroom, where they all sit down and feast; except the bride, who remains veiled, standing alone, until the middle of the banquet, when the paranymph draws near, unlooses the veil, which falls down, and she stands blushing, exposed to the eyes of all the guests. The next day is given up to the performance of dances peculiar to a wedding. The third day the relations and friends meet all together, and lead the bride to the fountain, from the waters of which she fills a new earthen vessel; and into which she throws various provisions. They afterwards dance in circles round the fountain.

At every one of the ceremonials which I have thus briefly recounted, a song appropriate to the occasion is chanted; they explain the motive of each particular act − of what event in human life it is to be considered the type. Even the shaving has its song, set apart. But many of the forms I have described are very poetical, and full of meaning in themselves. The character of the marriage songs is tender, yet gay and hopeful; but the character of the "myriologia," or funeral songs, is altogether despairing and sad. When any one dies, his wife, his mother, and his sisters, all come up to the poor motionless body, and softly close the eyes and the mouth. Then they leave the house, and go to that of a friend, where they dress in white, as if for some glad nuptial occasion: with this sole difference, that their hair is allowed to flow dishevelled and uncovered. Other women are busy with the corpse while they change their dress in a neighbour's house; the body is dressed in the best clothes the dead possessed; and it is then laid on a low bed, with the face uncovered, and turned towards the east; while the arms lie peacefully crossed on the breast. When all these preparations have been made, the relations return to the house of mourning; leaving the door open, so that all who wish once more to gaze on the face of the departed may enter in. All who come range themselves around the bed, and weep and cry aloud without restraint. As soon as they are a little calmer some one begins to chant the myriologia − a custom common to the ancient Hebrews, as well as to the more modern Irish − with their keenness and their plaintive enumeration of the goods, and blessings, and love which the deceased possessed in this world which he has left. In the mountains of Greece, the nearest and dearest among the female relations first lifts up her voice in the myriologia; she is followed by others, either sisters or friends.

M. Fauriel gives an instance of the style of dramatic personation of events common in the myriologia. A peasant woman, about twenty−five years of age, had lost her husband, who left her with two infant children. She was extremely uneducated, and had lived the silent, self−contained life common to the Greek women. But there was something very striking in the manner in which she began her wail over the dead body. Addressing herself to him, she said, "I saw at the door of our dwelling, yea, I saw at the door of our house, a young man of tall stature and threatening aspect, having wings like the clouds for whiteness. He stood on the threshold of our home, with a naked sword in his hand. 'Woman,' he asked, 'is thy husband within?' − 'He is within,' replied I; he is there, combing the fair hair of our little Nicholas, and caressing him the while that he may not cry. Do not go in, O bright and terrible youth, thou wilt frighten our little child!' But the man with shining white wings heeded not my words. He went in. I struggled to prevent him, O my husband! I struggled; but he was stronger than I. He passed into our home; he darted on thee, O my beloved! and struck thee with his sword. He struck thee, the father of our little Nicholas. And here, here is our little son, our Nicholas, that he would also have killed." At these words she threw herself sobbing on the corpse of her husband, and it was some time before the women standing by could bring her round. But she had hardly recovered before she began afresh, and addressed her dead husband again. She asked him how she could live without him; how she could protect his children without his strong arm to help; she recalled the first days of their marriage, how dearly they had loved each other; how, together, they had watched over the infancy of their two little children; and she only ceased when her strength utterly failed once more, and she lay by the corpse in a swoon like death itself.

Occasionally there is some one among the assemblage of mourners who has also lately lost a beloved one, and whose full hearts yet yearn for the sympathy in their griefs or joys which the dead were ever ready to give, while they were yet living. They take up the strain; and, in a form of song used from time immemorial, they conjure the dead lying before them to be the messenger of the intelligence they wish to send to him, who is gone away for ever. A similar superstition is prevalent in the Highlands, and every one remembers Mrs. Hemans's pathetic little poem on this subject.

It is rather too abrupt a turn from the deep pathos of the faithful love implied by this superstition, to a story of something of a similar kind, which fell under the observation of a country minister in Lancashire, well known to some friends of mine. A poor man lay a−dying, but still perfectly sensible and acute. A woman of his acquaintance came to see him, who had lately lost her husband, and who was imbued with the idea mentioned above. "Bill," said she, "where thou art bound to thou'lt maybe see our Tummas; be sure thou tell him we have getted th' wheel o' the shandry mended, and it's mostly as good as new; and mind thou say'st we're getten on vary wed without him; he may as wed think so, poor chap!" To which Bill made answer, "Why woman! dost 'oo think I'se have nought better to do than go clumping up and down the sky a−searching for thy Tummas?" To those who have lived in Lancashire the word "clumping" exactly suggests the kind of heavy walk of the country people who wear the thick wooden clogs common in that county.

But let us jump (like Dr. Faustus) out of Lancashire into Greece. In that country some of the people around the corpse are not content with sending messages to their dead friends; they place flowers and other tokens of remembrance upon the body, entreating the last deceased whose remains lie before them to bear their flowers and presents to those who have gone before.

All these messages and these adieus are expressed in song; nor do they cease until the body is laid in the grave. For a year afterwards his relations arc only allowed to sing myriologia; any other kind of song, however pious or pathetic, is prohibited by custom. The anniversary of the death is kept by a dual gathering together of the friends, who go in procession to the grave, and once more chant their farewells. If a Greek dies far away from Greece, they substitute an effigy for the real corpse, round which they assemble, to which they bid farewell, but with an aggravation of sorrow and despair; inasmuch as he has died far from his own bright land. But perhaps the most touching of the myriologia are those addressed by the mothers to the infants they have lost. When the child dies very young no one but the mother sings the myriologia. It is hers, and she belongs to it. The tie between them was too mysteriously close to allow a stranger to intermeddle with her grief. But her lost child takes the form of every

pretty thing in nature in her mind. It is a broken flower, a young bird fallen out of the nest and killed, a little yearling lamb lying dead by the side of its mother. It is the exclusive right of women to sing the myriologia. The men hid farewell to their companion and friend in a few simple words of prose, kissing the mouth of the deceased ere they leave the house. But two centuries ago, among the mountains of Greece, the shepherds sang the myriologia over each other.

The original significance of the custom is dying out even now. Women are hired to express an assumed grief in formal verses, where formerly the anguish of the nearest and dearest gave them the gift of improvisation. Before I go on to explain the character and subject of the occasional songs, I had perhaps better mention what class of men are the means of their circulation among the peasantry of Greece, as well as through the islands of the Archipelago. There are no beggars in these countries, excepting the blind; all others would think it shame to live by alms, with their blue and sunny sky above them, and their fertile soil beneath their feet. But the blind are a privileged class; they go from house to house, receiving a ready welcome at each, for they are wandering minstrels, and have been so ever since Homer's time. Some of them have learnt by heart an immense number of songs; and all know a large collection. Their memory is their stock in trade, their means of living; they never stay long in any one place, but traverse Greece from end to end, and have a wonderful knack in adapting their choice of songs to the character of the inhabitants of the place where they chant them. They generally prefer the simple villagers as audience, to the more sophisticated townspeople; and, in the towns, they hang about the suburbs rather than enter into the busy streets in the centre. They know, half by experience half by instinct, that the most ignorant part of a population is always the least questioning, and the most susceptible of impressions. The Turks stalk past these blind minstrels with the most supreme and unmoved indifference; but the Greek welcomes them affectionately, particularly at those village feasts which are called paneghyris, and which would fall as flat as Hamlet without the part of Hamlet, if there were not several blind singers present. They accompany themselves on the lyre, a five−stringed instrument, played with a bow.

These minstrels are divided into two sets; those who merely remember what they have learnt from others, and those who compose ballads of their own, in addition to their stores of memory. These latter, in their long and quiet walks through country which they know to he wild and grand, although they never more may see it, "turn inward," and recall all that they have heard that has excited their curiosity, or stirred their imagination either in the traditional history of their native land, or in the village accounts of some local hero. Some of the minstrels spread the fame of men whose deeds would have been unknown beyond the immediate mountain neighbourhood of each, from shore to shore. In fact these blind beggars are the novelists and the historians of modern Greece; but if one subject be more clear to them than another, it is always the deeds of arms of the Klephts; the Adam Bells, and Clyne o' the Cloughs, or perhaps still more the Robin Hoods, of Greece. All these songs are chanted to particular airs. The poet must be also his own musician: if he can also improvise he is a fully−accomplished minstrel. There was one who lived at the end of the last century at Auspelatria in Thessaly, under the shadow of Mount Ossa. His name was Gavoyanius, or John the Blind. He was extremely old; and, in the exercise of his talents, he had amassed considerable wealth; so at the time when the account was given he lived at home at ease, and received the visits of those who wished to hear and were ready to pay for his songs. The Albanian soldiers of the Pasha − degenerate Greeks who served the Turk, and who could find no one to chant their exploits, voluntarily or gratuitously − used to pay John the Blind to sing their fame: the higher the praise, the greater the pay.

I have alluded to the paneghyris. They are feasts in honour of the patron saint of some one hamlet where the meeting is held, all the surrounding villages turning out their inhabitants to come and make merry. In short they must bear a close resemblance to the wakes in England; for they are always held on the Sunday after the saint's day to whom the parish church is dedicated. But there are some slight differences between a Greek paneghyri and English wakes; the Eastern festival is gayer and more simple in character. The evening before a paneghyri, each of the neighbouring villages comes trooping in to the place of rendezvous; the people are dressed in their Sunday's best, and march along to merry music. When they arrive at their destination they make haste to pitch their tents; and those who are not rich enough to possess the necessary canvas pluck branches of trees, and make themselves a leafy covering to protect themselves from the dew and the moon's beams; both of which are held in the East to

be injurious to health. On the day of the feast every one goes to the service in church in honour of the patron saint. When they come back to their houses or tents there is no general feast for everybody to share. Each family prepares its separate meal; the greater number in the open air, and nothing is to be seen (or smelt) but roasting mutton and broiling lamb. After dinner the dancing begins; every village dances by itself, and makes merry by itself until supper time. Alter that they pay visits to each other, or listen to the blind minstrels who accompany each set of Villagers.

The little Homers of the day find an attentive and numerous audience in the groups who sit round them in the cool of the evening; some on the soft turf, crushing below them the blue hyacinth which makes the ground purple and odorous hereabouts; some on pieces of rock, all listening with unquestioning eagerness; all, for the time, forgetting that the Turk is their neighbour. Many ballads are composed expressly for these occasions; nor can there he a surer