

DARTMOOR IDYLLS

A review from the Illustrated London News , Sep.12th 1896

LITERATURE

Mr. Baring-Gould's New Volume

Mr. Baring-Gould is at once versatile and inexhaustible. You might almost apply to him not only Johnson's hackneyed compliment to Goldsmith, "Qui nuhum fere scribendi," etc; but even the King's compliment to Johnson, "I do not think you borrow much from anybody," said Farmer George. "I think, your Majesty, I've already done my part as a writer." "I should have thought so too," rejoined the King, "if you had not written so well." Certainly Mr. Baring-Gould has written much and well and variously without either borrowing from others or repeating himself. In his last book of short stories, *Dartmoor Idylls* (Methuen and Co.), he has indeed occasionally borrowed - but only from local tradition - the dry bones he makes live for us; for "Ephraim's Pinch" is historical, and the gruesome story of the corpse salted down in the chest which the guest discovered in his bed-room, is a legend of the "Warren Inn". Upon his mentioning his discovery next morning at breakfast, his hostess exclaimed carelessly, "Oh, it's only old vayther. The frost be that hard, the snow that deep, us can't.carr'n yet awhile to Lydford Churchyard to bury'n, so us has salted'n in."

Surely, too, even Mr. Baring-Gould's imagination, which can he sufficiently grotesque, is not responsible for the burial of the blind hero of "Goosie-Vair" with a pipe stuffed with sage and onions slipped between the dead lips? Having dined once - on his wedding day - on goose, he had kept the anniversary of this marriage feast ever after by having a commemorative whiff of sage and onions out of his pipe; and his brother-in-law put the pipe thus charged between his dead lips in order that his sister at the Resurrection might identify her husband. "I thought I'd gi'e my sister a bit o'surprise and pleasure like. Her'll be walking in the heavenly garding, and all at once her'll smell a snitch o' sage and ingins, and her'll jump up and say, "Tes Goosie-Vair, and there be my Thomas Coleman havin' his pipe o' sage and ingins - sure as iver, it be he comin', and her'll run to the gates and be the first to welcome he - comin' along smokin' of his pipe."

This obviously is an old story happily adapted and humorously dressed up by the author. It must not supposed that all, or even most of tile tales in the volume are of this grotesque and gruesome kind, since many of them are as idyllic as the title of the book suggests.

By the way, it is as well to warn readers who dread consumption for themselves or for their friends that Mr. Baring-Gould's specific for it is not to be relied on. "It is said that consumption is known on Dartmoor*. This perhaps is due largely, if not wholly, to the turf smoke - strongly antiseptic - that pervades every dwelling." But tile Irish peat-burning peasantry are far indeed from enjoying this immunity.

[* There should, surely, be a negative inserted somewhere here – MRG]