

Customs of the Church.

SHROVE TUESDAY AND ASH-WEDNESDAY.

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH, in his most interesting book 'On the Study of Words,' says that if the history of the English nation were lost or forgotten it might almost be recovered by studying the origin and meaning of some of the commonest words in the English language—the uses to which they were put, the changes which they underwent, and the tongues of other nations from which in the first place they were borrowed.

In the same way a good deal of Church history and Church teaching may be gathered from words that are still in common use, though their old significance has been too often forgotten.

Of all those who speak of *Shrove* Tuesday, and even to a certain extent keep the day by a little extra enjoyment of some sort, how many are aware that the real meaning of the name is *Confession* Tuesday? and that the fact of its being so named—from the Anglo-Saxon verb to *Shrive*—bears witness at once to the antiquity of the name, and of the custom to which it refers.

It dates back indeed to a time long past, when in a rude and barbarous age the Church had wisely laid down rules for her members as to the strict keeping of the forty days of Lent, enjoining these grown-up children—for in their half civilisation they were hardly more—to deny themselves in the indulgence of their gross appetites, to put some check on the enjoyment of their coarse pleasures, and try, at least for a time, to live less like brutes, and more like men and like true Christians.

For the most part these rules were obeyed and respected, but by a sort of reaction this last day before Lent was seized upon as a last opportunity for revel and enjoyment before the time for fasting and self-denial came. And this was tacitly permitted, and even encouraged, by the authorities, both civil and religious.

The ancient merry-makings that still prevail in some parts of England—even down to the pancakes and the children's battledore and shuttlecock—are all that now survive in this country of Shrove Tuesday rejoicings such as now turn the city of Rome upside down during the Carnival. As far as general and public festivities go, England was perhaps a merrier country then than now: and the whole population would turn out to make holiday with even less excuse than forty days of enforced dulness to follow.

But in the midst of the racket and feasting a single bell would ring from each church tower. In some places it rings still: and people call it the 'Pancake Bell,' and wisely imagine it to be a warning to housewives to put on the frying-pan! Our forefathers, in spite of their riotous glee, had in some respects more serious and manly views of life and of their duties. To them it was the 'Shriving Bell,'—the token that the priest was in his place in the church, waiting to hear the *private* confession of all who came to him, to give them absolution in God's name, and to appoint them certain penances or punishments, which they were to inflict upon themselves during Lent, in order to help them to get the better of their besetting sin, whatever it might be. In a large church there would be several priests in attendance, and several corners where the penitents might kneel, free from observation, to whisper their confession into the ear bent down to hear them, rising up at last to go on their way with fresh shame for past sins and new rules and helps for the future.

In after years, no doubt, confessions were sometimes carelessly made and carelessly heard, and the penances inflicted were useless or childish. But certainly it was not always so, and many a man and woman must have been so advised and helped as to have cause to look on Shrove Tuesday as a step towards a nobler life.

And this mention of penances brings us