

"OH! THE MISTLETOE BOUGH."

BY COURTHOPE FORMAN.

The tragedy of the bride who hid herself in the fatal chest, is a tradition that is not confined to England, and that even in England is claimed by more than one country mansion. In his "Genevra," Samuel Rogers, the banker poet, records the sad tale of this luckless daughter of the Orsini, who on the evening of her marriage to Francesco Doria, hid in an ancient chest, "richly carved by Anthony of Trent," and "therein alas, found Sepulchre."

A somewhat similar story occurs in Collet's "Relics of Literature," and there is yet another in the "Causes Célèbres." To return to England. The County of Hampshire is crowded with history and tradition, and is rich in those old houses round which history and tradition cling, and there are three mansions in Hampshire that are said to have been the scene of such a tragedy as that of "Genevra."

There is Bramshill, the seat of the ancient family of Cope—an historic house built by Lord Zouche early in the 17th century. There is the great mansion of Malshanger, near Basingstoke, built by the first Lord Thurlow at the end of the 18th century on the site of a far older house, part of which still remains, and there is Marwell Hall, within whose walls, history and legend both linger; and it is Marwell Hall that is popularly believed to have been the setting for Haynes Bayly's "Mistletoe Bough," the ballad that has become a household word at Christmas. A residence of some sort is said to have occupied the site on which Marwell Hall stands for centuries; but what we know with certainty is that about 1521, Sir Henry Seymour—a son of that stout Sir John Seymour, who was *persona grata* to "bluff King Hal" and was a prominent figure in the wars with France, and younger brother of the Lord Protector—either rebuilt or greatly enlarged the existing building. Here the King was a welcome guest, and here in an upper room of the mansion he was privately married to the beautiful Jane Seymour, a sister of his host. Other Kings have stayed at Marwell Hall. The young Edward the Sixth, spent a short time beneath Sir Henry Seymour's roof, and in honour of his visit a large stone, carved with the letters E.R. and the Royal Arms, was erected above the entrance of the house. Sir Henry, like all the Seymours, was an out-and-out Protestant, and his persecutions of the Catholics, who had the misfortune to be his neighbours, made him extremely unpopular. The Roman Catholic Priest at Owslebury, the Parish Church of

Marwell, solemnly from the altar with bell, book and candle, cursed Sir Henry root and branch. For that and for other offences, the Lord of the Manor had him barbarously dragged from the Church while celebrating his office, and more barbarously murdered. The curse seems to have been effective, for the three grandsons of Sir Henry were the last Seymours to own Marwell.

In the days of Charles II., Marwell Hall was in the occupation of Col. Richard Brett, a strong Royalist, and the "Merry Monarch" was a frequent visitor, his hostess being Lady Caroline Brett, the fair daughter of the 1st Earl of Orrery. Charles treated Col. Brett to a very usual form of his friendship—he borrowed from him more than £4,000—and in the loose Stuart fashion secured the interest by an annuity derived from the tax on beer and other liquors, an annuity that was never paid after Col. Brett's death. The present mansion was built in the early part of the 19th century; the central hall, the room where Henry VIII. married Jane Seymour, and some other portions of the old house being incorporated. The newer building followed the Tudor lines of its predecessor and was quite in harmony with those older portions that were preserved. Of the revels that ended so disastrously in the old oak chest, Duthy, a somewhat stilted writer of the earlier part of last century, thus describes the tragedy of the bride who "desiring more effectually to elude the pursuit of her companions stole secretly away to ensconce herself in an ancient massy chest which she had discovered in some remote and obscure apartment of the mansion

"When a spring which lay in ambush there

"Fastened her down for ever.

"Her absence, at first little noticed, at length gave great alarm, and anxious search was instituted which alas proved ineffectual; nor was her fate known, nor her remains discovered until after death had long banquetted on his victim." Marwell is not without its ghost, a "woman in white" who paces an avenue of ancient yews that leads from the eastern side of the Hall to the confines of the park. Her appearance is said to be the harbinger of evil fortune, and she herself is supposed to be the wraith of the fair and unfortunate Anne Boleyn, waiting ever in that dark avenue to wreak her vengeance on her almost equally unfortunate successor, Jane Seymour.

As for the fatal chest of which Haynes Bayly sang

"At length an oak chest that for years had lain hid

"Was found in the Castle—they lifted the lid,

"A skeleton form was found mouldering there,

"In the dress and the wreath of the lady fair!

"Oh! Sad was her fate—for in sportive jest

"She hid from her lord in the old oak chest,

"It closed with a spring, the bridal bloom

"Lay withering there in a living tomb"

that has long disappeared, alas! from the Hall, though a representation of it is still there showing a richly carved specimen of 16th or early 17th century work. Where is the original?

A friend of mine in the British Museum tells me that one authority states that it passed into the hands of a former rector of Upham, a small village not very far from Marwell Hall. This may be so, but all my enquiries as to its present whereabouts, have been fruitless—the *pièce de résistance* of the grim drama of the "Mistletoe Bough" has, I fear, been lost for ever.