

Manx Notes 326 (2018)

“RELICS OF THE DARK AGES EXISTING IN THE ISLE OF MAN IN THE PRESENT DAY” (1859)

This is a short but well-observed piece on Manx folklore written by some under the initials “P. D.,” whose identity cannot be readily established. The author was not Manx, but claimed residency of some years in the Island. Topics covered are witchcraft, the evil eye, and charming.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

REFERENCE

Anon [initialled as “P. D.”]. “Relics of the Dark Ages existing in the Isle of Man in the Present Day.” *Manx Sun* II June 1859: 1c–d.

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[1c] We are accustomed so speak with pity not unmingled with contempt, of the weakness and want of intelligence displayed by our otherwise respected and respectable ancestors in their belief in the practice of witchcraft, and the efficacy of charms or incantations either to avert misfortune or cure disease, as the case may be. It would be a curious study to ascertain how much, *in reality*, the majority of the dwellers in out-of-the-way corners of her most gracious Majesty’s British dominions are in advance of preceding generations in their superstitious adhesion to these relics of barbarism or monkish craft, the cunning inventions of those who sought by every means in their power, to enslave the ignorant and terrify the weak.

To the inhabitants of large towns, where instruction and light have been poured forth so liberally for years, almost “without money and without price,” it may seem incredible, or at the least difficult, to believe that in remote country districts, especially mountainous or hilly localities, the belief of the lower classes, the working men and women, in the power of witches, the existence of the evil eye, and the efficacy of charms and incantations, are as fresh as in those bye-gone times that we, in our proud consciousness of superior light and advancement, are accustomed to designate *the dark ages*.

Take a few examples in illustration. Circumstances have rendered me pretty familiar with the Manx; I have been a resident amongst them more or less for years, and while admitting and eulogizing the general good principle, right feeling, and strong common sense that characterise them as a people, I have been astonished at the elements of superstition that more or less distinguished them.

Even the educated and highly-cultivated portion of them, as far as I have seen, are slow to declare their disbelief of such things, but have little lingering leanings in

favour of signs, warnings, and omens. But they are not the subjects of my present remarks, so I will leave them alone, and confine myself to the common people, the agricultural labourers and farm servants especially, a widely scattered and pretty numerous class.

I will relate what I have heard at different times, chiefly from them, and partly from members of clerical families, who, from their position, are necessarily intimately acquainted with such matters.

There is an old woman living in the parish of Lezayre who enjoys the enviable reputation of being a witch. A young woman who, at the time I am about to mention lived in the service of a farmer in the parish, told me with the utmost earnestness that the witch's son called at the door one day when she was busy churning, and in his mother's name asked for some buttermilk. Not having any she refused him, and went on churning; but from that moment it was of no avail, the butter refused to come, and she got none at all while the witch, who kept only one cow, took sixteen pounds of butter to sell on market day, the production of her dairy, which was a common event with her when the farmers round about were unsuccessful.

There is also a tale current respecting a woman in the parish of Kirk Andreas, who, being suspected of being a witch, was clearly established as such by a lucky sportsman who seeing through a hedge a hare crossing a field, fired and wounded it in a limb, when, getting over to secure his game, he found to his astonishment that he had only shot the old lady referred to, whose useless arm to the present day testifies against her.

Another, very similar in detail to the one just related, is attached to an old woman now resident in my neighbourhood, but the feat in this instance was accomplished by means of a *sixpence* used instead of a bullet, silver being esteemed peculiarly efficacious in the detection of witches. In this case the old lady had also assumed the form of a hare, which seems to be the favourite disguise of the sisterhood, and may possibly account, in some remote degree, for the very scanty supply of such game offered for sale in Manx markets, as compared with other places, the humanity of the sportsmen, doubtless, interfering with their zeal in the pursuit and capture of what may after all prove to be only a miserable old woman *incog*.

The belief in the *evil eye*, its power and baneful effect, is general also with this class of people. A pretty baby, or child endowed with an unusual share of good looks that begins to wane and fade unaccountably, has been "looked at." The remedy for this is a remarkably simple one. Some of the dust of the ground on which the suspected owner of the evil eye has stood must be gathered and thrown over the patient, and the spell is forthwith broken. N.B.—Cattle being subject to the same malady, must be treated on the same principle, the evil eye affecting biped and quadruped impartially. It is asserted that a hare crossing a field stood still to stare at a team of horses employed in ploughing, when, to the horror of the ploughman, they instantly

dropped dead on the ground. He and his assistant must either have had some previous experience in such matters, or else been distinguished for presence of mind under trying circumstances; for, instantly collecting [1d] some of the dust whereon pussey had stood, they threw it over the inanimate beasts and at once restored them to life and activity. Another time one of these four-footed witches stood to regard a cow in her stall, the same fearful results taking place, to be remedied by the same simple means, thus by a double proof putting the efficacy of the process beyond all question.

Now then for the charms. They are so numerous that I really am at a loss where to begin and how to select such as may be most useful to the community in general, by saving the pocket of Paterfamilias in that expensive annual item, the doctor's bill.

The only article I fear he may find it difficult to obtain is *faith* in the remedy, without an unlimited quantity of which the prescriptions are, alas! useless.

If your own hands or those of your children are disfigured with those unsightly excrescences called warts, you must *steal* a piece of raw beef, and rubbing it nine times backwards over them, secretly bury it in a dry sandy place, when as the beef decays, the warts will disappear, but perfect secrecy must be preserved, no one, not even your wife, from whom you probably never had a secret before, must receive a hint of this interesting transaction if you wish it to succeed.

But perhaps your moral perceptions are of too high an order to admit of *stealing* even a remedy for what is extremely annoying to your sense of personal elegance. I am happy to be able to assist you in ridding your hands of their unwelcome parasites, and at the same time save your conscience from the burden of a hidden theft. Here is another charm for the same purpose, and I doubt not quite as efficacious.

A piece of woollen thread must be procured and a knot tied upon it to represent each individual wart. It must be thrown away in some place that the patient is ignorant of, or buried; and as the thread rots the warts will die away. I am not sure, however, whether there is not some form of incantation pronounced over it previously, if so, I am unfortunately unable to furnish it.

I will conclude with one, a *poetical* one too, by the bye, the publication of which will, I hope, draw upon me the blessings of countless thousands of my fellow-creatures who have suffered from that excruciating malady—the toothache; while I fear it may render me exceedingly unpopular with those highly respectable individuals, the professors of dental surgery, with one branch of whose flourishing practice it is likely seriously to interfere; for who would undergo the agony of extraction when the following charm, written on a scrap of paper and stitched securely into the inner garments, is a certain means of prevention as well as cure?

Saint Peter was ordained a saint,

Standing on a marble stone,

Jesus came to him alone,

And saith unto him—“Peter, what is it makes thee snake?”

Peter replied—“My Lord and Master it is the toothache.”

Jesus saith—“Rise up and be healed, and keep these words for my sake,
And thou shalt never more be troubled with toothache.”

P. D.

