

Manx Notes 342 (2018)

“THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE SOUTH OF THE ISLAND”

(1899)

Of the many hamlets which fringe the seaboard of the Isle of Man, few present to the enquirer into Folklore a wider held for research than the village of Derbyhaven, which nestles in the bay, by St Michael's Island, in much the same condition as it was half a century ago. True, the little place is on the eve of greater enlightenment.

There is at the present time hemp; pressed forward a scheme for street lamps, which are generally supposed to be hostile to the presence of fairies, if not ghosts, and a short time ago a new mission room was erected. But not even each luminous rays have availed to dispel from the minds of the natives those clouds of superstition which seem inherent to the Celtic nature. Thus, not content to relate those stories of haunted lane and bewitched house which have been handed down from father to son. from mother to daughter, and of which we shall presently treat at greater length, the present generation have found for themselves new sprites, new ghosts, to haunt the approaches to Derbyhaven.

It may be remembered by the reader that during the past summer two fatal accidents by drowning occurred inside the Derbyhaven breakwater. It is with the latter of these two cases that we have to deal.

The unfortunate man was found drowned one morning, while there were no circumstances to throw light on the manner of his getting into the water. He was a native of Ireland, and one of the “hands” of a small schooner that had come into the bay for safety from the storms. The man was in his lifetime a Roman Catholic and his corpse was duly buried, after an inquest, with the usual ceremonial of that church.

But it was alleged, and is now the common story, that he was buried *with his boots on*. According to Manx tradition, this usually tends to “walking,” and accordingly the “ghost” of the deceased is to be seen at night treading the lonely road from Derbyhaven to the graveyard, along which the body passed during the funeral.

But the story does not end here. The deceased is said to have been survived by his mother, who was passionately devoted to her son. Though she is still alive, the “longing” for her son is so strong on her soul that her spirit has found out the place of his death, and now a woman clad in a dark garb of blue or black is to be seen in the garden round the Roman Catholic Chapel on the front green. The apparition has already been seen by several people—chiefly women—who will not now dare to pass the haunted spot after dark. But it is not only in the dark that the supernatural beings exercise their influence. On the main road between Castletown and Ballasalla there is a garden which now belongs to Mr G.H. Quayle, and is familiarly known as “Quayle's Folly.” Anybody passing alongside the garden wall at the hour of noon is—or should be—filled with an eerie sensation that someone invisible is walking beside him.

There is a further well-authenticated story with regard to a big barn near the same place. About twenty years ago a Mr Sainsbury was returning from a mission room in the country, where he had been preaching, in company with a friend. As they were passing this barn, they heard the sounds of most melodious music wafted on the breeze, in the midst of which there came a burst of ethereal Song, surpassing all human power. Mr Sainsbury's companion was a headstrong young man, and, in spite of the entreaties of his friend, persisted in forcing his way inside to see from whence this music came. The other, certain that it was the fairies, and feeling assured that idle curiosity would be punished, walked steadily on; but after having gone some way, and realising that there was no sign of his friend re-appearing, he turned back and shouted. On receiving no response to his cries, he hastened on and told the tidings to the villagers, and forthwith a search was instituted. On reaching the building the mysterious music was no longer heard, and the place was entered. But though it and the neighbouring fields were thoroughly searched, that man has never been seen or heard of to this day.

In addition to these purely local spooks, the famous "Molug Vaar," which left Peel many centuries ago, has been seen to stalk round Hango, and sometimes on moonlight nights to cross the sands. Mr Hamilton, I believe, has publicly declared that he has seen the animal crossing the sea-shore. The apparition takes the form of a dog, and is of the size of a young calf, but is headless—a gruesome sight indeed. The spectre is more usually seen by the canine race, and it is a fact that quite recently a collie dog, while nearing Castletown on his way from Derbyhaven, went towards an open gate by Mr Karran's farm, which is at the foot of Hango. Suddenly it started back and tore off to its mistress with its tail between its legs and generally exhibiting signs of the greatest terror, cowering close up to the lady until she went to look for the cause of the fright. But she was unable to see or hear anything, though the dog could not be induced to go to the place again.

So far we have treated of ghosts of the road (if so they may be styled) but the following is an instance of a haunted field in this neighbourhood. There is a large field by Ronaldsway in which there is a big pool of water. A young man was returning home to Ballasalla, but instead of going round by the road, he thought that he would take a short cut across the country. His way led him through this field, which had the reputation of being haunted. Although the moon was full, the youth, once he got into the held, could not get out again. Round and round he tramped, but he could not find the exit. Then he tried to clamber over the wall, but his efforts were mysteriously repulsed until, about two hours later, he managed to escape over the wall at about the same spot as he had entered, and he did not get home till about twelve at night when he was quite fagged out, having had to go the long way round by the road after all. The mischievous spirits in this case are believed to be "fairies."

The superficial and conceited reader will, of course, say at this juncture, "Hum! Drink! of course." But he will be quite mistaken, for there is not a public house

within a couple of miles of the spot, and the incident took place before the Fort Island Hotel had been built. Moreover, similar occurrences has happened more than once in the same field. In the ancient Metropolis itself the race of ghosts are on the decline. Of course, according to tradition, the Castle is haunted. A dark figure, clad in mediaeval garb, tramps the now deserted corridors from time to time and on the stroke of midnight comes forth on to the bastions. But now that the Castle is shut up by night, the ghost feeling the insult has withdrawn to its own secret haunts, and it is now many years since it has been seen or heard of.

A similar fate has met the once famous and still historical spirit at St Michael's Island. The story may be summarised as follows: In the days when pirates and smugglers thrived, some treasure was secreted in St Michael a Island, and was vowed to the church. Later on, by a breach of faith, a band of pirates learnt the whereabouts of the treasure, but were unable to loot it without murdering the priest who guarded it. But the buccaneers were not to be turned from their purpose by the workings of conscience, and the priest fell a victim to their hungry blades. However, in dying he cursed his murderers, yet nothing daunted, the pirates transferred the loot to their vessel but the curse was not left unfulfilled. Hardly had they loosed anchor when the wind came on, and a hurricane arose which forced the ill-fated ship on to the very rocks from which the treasure had been stolen, and all hands were lost. From that time forward, at midnight, anybody standing in that chapel, now in ruins, would hear a jingle of money and dying moans.

Balladoole and Ballakeigan, the property of Mr Stevenson, being a couple of the oldest houses about the neighbourhood, have also the reputation of lifting haunted; the former by a lady in white, the latter by a couple of ladies dressed in black. These do not always make themselves known by actual visionary manifestations, but sometimes people who pass the gates of the avenues leading to either house are seized with panic and compelled to run as if the arch fiend himself were behind them; and this, even though the victim's mind was concentrated on far different topics than ghosts.

Now all these instances tend to prove that there does exist a tendency to what is billed superstition in the Manx mind, but the peculiar feature of their belief consists in us variety. For them the phantom need not be a transparent white spectre, visionary and unreal. Women in white, women in blue, women in black, dogs like calves, men in fishing attire, hunting as it were both singly and in couples, all come under the category of ghosts. Stranger still is their credulity in fairies. Even though some do not believe in their existence now, very few native islanders have the face to say that they never existed at all. It is Shakespeare's "Puck" come to life again.

"The Supernatural in the South of the Island." *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 June 1899: 8a.