Manx Notes 426 (2020)

AGNES HERBERT
THE ISLE OF MAN
(1909)

*

CHAPTER X
FOLKLORE

This is the fairy land!
We talk with goblins and elfish sprites.
Comedy of Errors.

My old acquaintance of this isle.
Othello.

[169] The Isle of Man is particularly rich in folk-lore. Tradition tells of myriad giants, bugganes, trolls, witches, elves, and mysterious sprites of all varieties. The mermaid is called by the Manx Ben-vaney, Woman of the Sea.

"All nations have their omens drear,
Their legends wild of woe and fear,"

and the belief in the supernatural was, in former times, profound and universal all over the isle. Every Manx boy and girl of to-day who is born into this world alive starts with a belief in fairies, but nowadays the faith is crushed in early youth. There is nothing to foster it. Romance and lodging-house keeping do not run together. There is no connexion between a seaside landlady and romance. She is quite the most realistic thing in Nature.

Waldron, the much-quoted chronicler of ancient [170] days, after ascribing the extraordinary superstitions of the people to their colossal ignorance, says: "I know not, idolizers as they are of the clergy, whether they would ever be refractory to them, were they to preach against the existence of fairies, or even against their being commonly see; for though the priesthood are a kind of gods among them, yet still tradition is a greater god than they; and, as they confidently assert that the first inhabitants of their island were fairies, so do they maintain that these little people have still their residence among them. They call them the good people, and say they live in wilds and forests, and on mountains, and shun great cities because of the wickedness therein. All the houses are blessed where they visit, for they fly vice. A person would be thought impudently profane who should suffer his family to go to bed without first having set a tub or pailful of clean water for these guests to bathe themselves in, which the natives aver they constantly do as soon as ever the eyes of the family are closed wherever they vouchsafe to come."

ISSN 1351-2293

Cumming also, at a much more recent date, wrote: "It would be a mistake to suppose that the minds of the Manx peasantry are uninfluenced by a superstitious feeling of reverence for the fairy elves, and for places which tradition has rendered sacred to their revels."

I know from personal experience that in the more remote corners of the Isle of Man many of the cottagers believed in fairies and spirits generally, up to twenty years ago. At that time, as a child, I saw much of the [171] natives, and chatted with many old and middle-aged and young who did not doubt the existence of the "little people," or the "good people," in the least. The word "fairies" was always ostentatiously avoided, as the small sprites were supposed to dislike the use of it exceedingly.

Our old gardener, a walking volume of folklore, had many a yarn to tell of the ways and whims of the indefatigable Phynnodderee, a sort of hairy hobgoblin of the elves, good and bad, trolls and mermaids. The particular supernatural being which appealed to the old man most was the Lhiannan-Shee, or "spirit-friend," a feminine fairy of a very coming-on disposition, a sort of Lady Jane on the look-out for a Bunthorne whom she could follow round and flow over.

Quilliam had actually seen one of these mysterious creatures. She was waiting for him one night as he crossed the Rowany fields in Rushen. Charmed she never so wisely and according to Quilliam she was very taking indeed he would not speak to her. Had he done so, by so much as one word, that fairy would have followed him, invisible to everyone else, for ever. This catastrophe did befall a tailor in the village, a friend of Quilliam's, who stupidly spoke to a chance Lhiannan-Shee, without thinking of what he was doing, and wherever he went afterwards that Lhiannan-Shee, like Mary's lamb, was sure to go. This pertinacious fairy even went the length of accompanying her hero into the bars of public houses, where he often offered the shadowy presence a drink from his mug of beer to the amazement of the rest [172] of the company. That the beer mug was most probably the *causa sine qua non* of the whole episode does not appear to have struck anyone.

A very ancient Manx worthy lived in Port Erin—the natives call the place Port Iron—a grubby old fisherman of giant stature, who did not agree at all with the theory of Thales of Miletus that water is the origin of all things. He wore habitually a drill coat, fashioned somewhat like a jersey, which had been white once, but that was ages ago. It had a settled appearance, a look of long residence, in fact gave you the idea that its wearer went to bed in it. An old woman told me that many years previously the "little people" caught the Great Unwashed as he passed the scene of their revels in the depths of Lag-ny-Killey one starry night, and forcibly bathed him in a big deep dubb. When he returned home in the morning a second white coat hung over his arm, of which he could give no account. Everyone accounted for the phenomenon by saying that the fairies excavated this garment as they scrubbed away the dirt of ages. But of all this the old man would say nothing. I could not get him to

admit that he had ever been touched by a sprite. The sort of fairies the old fisherman had seen the most of were always clad in brilliant blues and greens, with small red caps; and as they danced gleefully about the rings, or swung on the branches of the flowering gorse, a little flickering light always accompanied them, a tiny glinting brilliancy which could never be explained. I know now all about the elusive will-o'-the-wisp. It was the "Tinkerbell" [173] of Mr Barrie's discovering. "Just a common girl. She washes the fairies' pots and pans."

If one has been brought up among a people steeped in folklore, with few companions, and those not the little know-alls of the cities, one is apt to eat greedily of the bread of Faëry, and drink deeply of the wine of dreams. Some of the stories heard so constantly carried conviction to our minds, and often, with my enthusiastic sisters and a brother inclined to play "doubting Thomas," I made a reconaissance in force to find the fairies. We waited patiently for them o' nights on the top of the *brooghs* of the Mull, and sat shivering, and very much afraid, at the foot of the Fairy Hill in Rushen, at midnight on Midsummer's Eve, the feast night of the elves. Our longing ears strained for the notes of the spirit music, for in this green *tumulus* the king of all the Manx fairies was said to hold his court. Alas! no sound save the tinkling murmur of the wind through the heather bells, and the dry rustle of the plumed heads of the myriad nodding grasses. Nobody would have given the sprites a warmer welcome! We were prepared to receive them so royally, but they never came! They never came!

The old people always told us that the thrilling sound of Elysian music, "strains inaudible to ears unblest," might often be heard coming from ancient *tumuli*. The well-known air of *The Bollan Bane*, or White Herb, an indispensable to witch-doctors the herb, not the air! was evolved from the witching lilt of a fairy chorus overheard by an interested musician.

[174] The gnomes of Mona, like those in all parts of the world, seem to be divided into two classes, the amiable, well-meaning, helpful spirits, and the malevolent spiteful variety, stealers of babies, spoilers of the crops, and destroyers of family peace and quiet. Sometimes child abduction is not meant cruelly by the little people, and in this connexion I well remember an episode which was told to me by a hunchback, the cause of all the trouble. The little romance took place in Surby, in Rushen Parish, not far from the *tumulus Cronk-Mooar*, or Fairy Hill. The sprites of the island are said to prefer as residences these ancient places of sepulture, and hundreds of years ago learned to use the flint arrow heads found therein.

The fairy hill at Rushen, however, is something more than a one-time barrow, or burial-place, for it shows unquestionably by its breastwork, and traces of a wide moat, that it had its uses as a fortified stronghold. Such an entrenchment the hill is some forty feet high, with steep sides would be most valuable against on-coming forces from Port Erin and Port St Mary. Tradition says that upon this eminence the then King of Man was slain in 1249 by Ivar, the knight.

In a simple cottage, looking down on to the green *cronk*, many years ago, a fisherman and his wife lived, and every night, in the cold winter, they went to bed early, in order that the "good people" might come in and warm themselves by the embers of the peat fire a practice said to be very general among [175] the fairies at that time. The careful housewife never failed to keep a bit of dough from the baking of the griddle cakes, never forgot to fill the crock with water, which she set in readiness for the sprites. The cottagers were childless, and, though very poor, longed for a son more than anything else in all the world. At last a son was born, a poor pitiful hunchback creature, fearsome in feature and in form. The mother cried for three days and three nights in her bitter grief and disappointment, and on the fourth morning, wakening from exhausted sleep, she noticed that her crippled boy was not by her side. In his place lay the smallest creature imaginable, perfect in body, and in his wide-open blue eyes lay all the wisdom of the ages. His wee face was afire with expression, brimful of possibilities, and varieties, and shades, and meanings, and illuminations, and imaginings, without a trace of sulkiness. But he was not pretty; that would have been too much to expect, seeing that he had taken more than his fair share of wits. He laughed incessantly, and every note was as a chime of silver bells. Instead of receiving the changeling gratefully, as the well-meaning fairies evidently hoped she would, the mother cried more than before, and, like Rachel, refused to be comforted. Contrary as a woman, she saw no perfection in this perfect child, fairy though he was; she just wept and wept for the misshapen baby she had lost. In between paroxysms of tears she fell asleep, and lo, when she opened her eyes, the deformed figure of the poor hunchback lay beside her once more, quite unharmed.

[176] But the fairies never came again. The glowing embers of the flickering fire tempted them not at all, and as the disappointed sprites tossed on the keen breath of the snow-sheeted mountains they sang, with the Immortal One:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.

All sorts of weird happenings occurred in Manx fairyland at Christmas time. Every Phynnodderee, troll, and spirit was bereft of supernatural power, and no care was exerted to guard a Yule baby from the thievish elves. At ordinary seasons the most drastic measures must needs be taken, such as a tight necklace of red cord wound about the infant's neck, or the tongs iron is a non-conductor to the sprites were laid across the little wooden cradle. The sartorial developments I think, don't you, that amid such a poetical setting that looks better than the unvarnished humdrumidity of the word "trousers"? of the baby's father were also extraordinarily efficacious in heading off predatory fairies. A pair, however decrepit, placed nonchalantly on the bed saved a whole world of trouble and anxiety.

To keep bad fairies away all manner of charms were common. Branches of cuirn, mountain ash, fashioned into a cross without the aid of a knife a fatal assistance

which would at once have nullified and ruined everything were put up over the doors of stables. Yellow flowers also, gorse, primroses, and cushag, laid [177] across a threshold gave sanctuary against the machinations of the evil spirits.

Fairies, as is well known, object to any noise, and therefore we always hear of them haunting the great silences of the isle. The green hill-tops, the recesses of the glens, and lonely meadow lands lent their swards and level nooks to further the fairy revelries. If the humming world came nearer, and the sound of the sweep of life insistent, then the disturbed gnomes would quit the neighbourhood for somewhere more retired. When the flour mill was built by the glen side at Colby, the old Manx folk predicted that the good people would leave their haunts of olden time, and so it fell out. One early morning a ploughman going to his work heard a low, pathetic, forlorn moaning, like the gentle breaking of rippling waves on a stony beach, and there, pressing up to the hills, in scurrying, hurrying myriads, were many sprites, carrying on their tiny backs their household goods, climbing on and on, until the mists of the mountains enveloped their energetic little figures.

Of stories of the Phynnodderee and the Glashtin there are dozens. These merry trolls have prodigious strength, and are sympathetically inclined to man on occasion, and equally vengeful if the whim seizes them. If you look for the definition of a Phynnodderee in the Manx dictionary, you will see that Cregeen calls him a "satyr," and tells us that the Manx Bible refers to the spirit in that form. *Hig beishtyn oaldey yn aasagh dy cheilley marish beishtyn oaldey yn ellan, as nee yn phynnodderee gyllagh da e heshey.* (The wild beasts [178] of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow.) But the Phynnnodderee is not exactly a satyr, for all that. The word probably just fitted the requirements of the translator, and the title of the elf was taken in consonant vainness.

We cannot tell whereabouts the Phynnodderee keeps himself to-day. He may be deep in the green *tumuli*, oppressed in this age of sceptical unbelief, or he may have returned to his brother in Scandinavia. For the little troll surely came to the Isle of Man with Orry, perhaps in a fold of the giant Viking's tunic, perhaps beneath the wings of his golden helmet. When the fairy made the venturesome journey, he left behind him a tiny twin, whose name was Swartalfar.

He has hidden himself somewhere, our blithe little Brownie, and never now flits about the island, or swings on the branches of the *tramman* tree. We miss him, we miss him very much. "There has not been a merry world since he lost his ground."

The fairies remained *en evidence* in Mona's Isle for a longer period than anywhere else, I think. Chaucer reported the fairies of England to be on the eve of packing up, if indeed they had not already departed, in his time, though some savants learned in necromantic lore declare that the sprites continued to exist until the Reformation, which, for some occult reason, affected the little people to vanishing point.

The elves of Manxland survived the *sturm und drang* of the sixteenth century happenings, and since the small creatures cannot die utterly no archæologist [179] has

ever yet found the Pygmæan grave of an inhabitant of fairyland they must be near us somewhere still.

Many years ago an insular Wesleyan minister claimed to have actually *seen* the passing of the local sprites. He told his congregation that the island would luckily be fairyless for ever, for he had watched the little people set out to sea, and their ships were empty rum casks. In hurrying myriads the tiny elves packed themselves away as tightly as could be, and then off they went across Douglas Bay in the teeth of a freshening breeze.

That is not the way in which a fairy would travel! In an empty rum puncheon! So we do not believe the story. It is a most unmitigated misstatement. He never saw the Mooinjer-Veggey "little people" pass away.

The Phynnodderee would sometimes gather the. harvest if he saw it in danger of spoliation, and fold the cattle of an evening. He was a simple little fairy, too, for all. He could not discriminate between a sheep and a hare. Once upon a time, in amiable mood, the sprite intended to bring in the herds ere the tempest, sullenly brewing, broke upon the mountain slopes. With the sheep, nibbling the grass spears, was an agile hare, and the fairy would shepherd him too, thinking the small brown thing was certainly of the band. To do this the Phynnodderee had first to chase his quarry three tunes round Snaefell, and when at last the worn-out hare was captured and folded willy-nilly with the sheep, the breathless sprite told the farmer that [180] the "loghtan beg" (little native sheep) had given him more trouble than all the rest!

The words *beg* and *veg*, literally translated, mean "small," but they are Manx terms of endearment also. A mother sometimes adds *beg* or *veg* to her child's name, as for instance Tommy *Beg* or Tommy *Veg*. It depends a lot for its meaning on how it is used. If your mother says it, the tiny syllable is more than small. It is just the biggest, sweetest, tenderest, most lovable word in all the Manx language.

Train tells us of a day when the Phynnodderee cut down and gathered up the grass in a certain meadow which would have been injured if left out any longer. The farmer ungrateful specimen expressed his dissatisfaction with the work, and upbraided the fairy for not having cut the grass closer to the ground. In the following year the Phynnodderee allowed the farmer to cut it down himself, but went after him stubbing up the roots so fast that it was with difficulty the farmer escaped having his legs cut off by the angry sprite. For several years afterwards no person could be found to mow the meadow, until a fearless soldier from one of the garrisons at length undertook the task. He commenced in the centre of the field, and by cutting round as if on the edge of a circle, keeping one eye on the progress of the *yiarn folderagh*, or scythe, while the other

Was turned round with prudent care
Lest Phynnodderee catched him unaware,

he succeeded in finishing his task unmolested, and [181] this field, situated in the parish of Marown, hard by the ruins of St Trinian's, is, from the circumstances just related, still called *yn lheeanee rhunt*, or "the round meadow."

Work never daunted the Phynnodderee. Train recalls yet another kindly action of the sprite in the story of a house which was to be built near Tholt-e-Will, for which it was necessary to haul the building materials from a great distance. One white block in particular, desired as a corner stone of the domestic temple, resisted all efforts to transport it to the required site. Evidently the constructor was not superstitious. The Manxman of long gone times would have nothing to do with white stones, and if such were included in the ballast of a ship the voyage was "off" until the offenders were removed. Many little white shore pebbles were found scattered about in the ancient graves of Man, and the dread which enveloped the old-time places of sepulture probably descended to all white stones. Even to this day it is not every Manxman who will include one in the masonry of his home. The familiar saying, *"T'on cha doaney-myr clagh vane"* ('Thou art as impudent as a white stone'), is a pretty simile suggested by the noticeably conspicuous blocks of quartz which gleam brightly on the mountain slopes, and wink in the sun like myriad Argus eyes. "Imperent" is a word which occurs very often in the insular vocabulary.

But I am digressing, and that badly.

Forced with the superhuman task of removing the great stone to the slopes of Tholt-e-Will, the disconsolate [182] builder saw his work at a standstill, until, hey presto! the Phynnodderee to the rescue. In one night the elf conveyed the huge *clagh-bane*, and all the other necessary building material, to the chosen site. You can see the white stone for yourself to-day. Naturally the gratified Manxman wished to reward his little coadjutor, who was apparently dressed in more or less, rather less than more, elfish "altogether." Some tiny garments were prepared, and scattered haphazard about the haunts beloved of the Phynnodderee, deep down in the woodland glades by a rushing stream, o'erhung with green tramman. Presently the sprite came the grateful house-builder had concealed himself that he might watch proceedings and, looking a gift horse very much in the mouth, took up the clothes one by one, examining them carefully. Then with a disconsolate cry the little elf voiced his feelings thus:

"Bayrn da'n chione, dy doogh d'an chione,
Cooat da'n dreeymn, dy doogh da'n dreeym,
Breechyn da'n toin, dy doogh da'n toin,
Agh my she lhiat ooilley, shoh cha nee lhiat Glen reagh Rushen."

(Cap for the head, alas! poor head, Coat for the back, alas! poor back, Breeches for the breech, alas! poor breech, If these be all thine, thine cannot be the merry Glen of Rushen.)

With a sobbing moan the fairy fled away on the breath of the wind, leaving the discarded garments behind him.

The Glashtin was a goblin, with attributes very similar to those of the Phynnodderee, and sometimes [183] this spirit is confounded with the masculine counterpart of the Lhiannan-Shee, the Dooiney-oie, or night man. This friendly supernatural creature attached himself to particular families, to whom he played herald of events, or warner of disasters. His voice, we learn from Train, "was very dismal, and when heard at night on the mountains, sounded something like H-o-w-l-a-a, or H-o-w-a-a." Really a depressing domestic demon.

Bugganes were creatures of evil nature. St Trinian's was afflicted with the presence of a very active specimen of the buggane genus.

The mermaid, or Ben-varrey—history has very little to say of the merman, Dooiney-varrey is no relation to the Cughtagh, a spirit of the sea, whose *raison d'être* was just singing to herself in the spectral gloom of the caves. She sang because she loved to sing, from sheer joie de vivre apparently, and being woven into the labyrinthine muffled noises of the waves surging into the rocky crannies, and always so far from human habitation, the everlasting chant bored nobody, least of all the Cughtagh, who was born for no other purpose than to manufacture carols of the coast. The Ben varrey was much more active. Waldron tells us of his astonishment when he realized that the Manx had a whole-hearted belief in mermaids, and records several yarns about the fascinating sea-maidens. He says that during Cromwell's government the Isle of Man was little resorted to by trading vessels, and that "uninterruption and solitude of the sea gave the mermen and mermaids (who are enemies to any company but [184] those of their own species) frequent opportunities of visiting the shore, where, on moonlight nights, they have been seen to sit, combing their heads, and playing with each other; but as soon as they perceived anybody coming near them, jumped into the water, and were out of sight immediately." The exclusiveness which Waldron observed would appear to have been but transitory, for at some periods the special line of the Ben-vaney was an overwhelming affection for every personable Manxman. So frequent and violent were her amatory affairs that she must have been a perfect nuisance to herself, and it is no wonder that, with so many love interests running concurrently, a few of them ran into one another, and were telescoped, necessitating stone-throwing at the young mortal a rude manner of reprisal for which a highly incensed Ben-vaney showed great partiality. A mortal hit by one of these fairy-thrown missiles at first suffered no pain, only very suddenly, an hour or so afterwards, with an acute stab where the stone had struck, down sank the victim quite dead.

A gentle spirit, Keimagh, haunted the stiles which lead to all the old churchyards, and it may be she does so still. Her thought was all for the dead, and unless the everlasting sleep of her silent army was disturbed, the brooding tender Keimagh had no terrors for anyone. To her the storm-tossed phantom spirits of the little unchristened babies took their griefs, burying their tear-stained eyes in the filmy folds of her misty gown.

In the Isle of Man the stillborn children are buried [185] in the night it may be so everywhere, I do not know as though they would apologize for encroaching even so far as on consecrated ground. This phase of Christian Christianity makes my unlogical feminine mind turn pagan and run *amok*. It seems so altogether unexplainable why a parson has to withhold his kindly attentions from an unbaptized baby, and bestow it, full measure, running over, on some perhaps utterly worthless grown-up. This by the way.

There is a quaintly charming story of an old Manxman passing Arbory Church at midnight one Christmas Eve, and as he came level with the giant fuchsia hedge which borders the vicarage garden, he heard a soft low wailing, piteously insistent, coming from the shadowy graveyard. As he drew nearer and nearer, the trailing gentle murmur took voice and words, the sad grieving lament of an unchristened infant: *"Lhiannoo dyn ennym me! Lhiannoo dyn ennym me!"* said the quiet sighing breath over and over again. ('A child without name am I! A child without name am I!')

The old man paused by the wall, and looking up towards the old kirk, with its white bell-turret outlined in the moonlight, he said clearly, and very tenderly: *"My she gilley eu, ta mee bashtey eu Juan, as my she inneen eu ta me bashtey eu Joney.*" ('If thou art a boy I christen thee John, and if thou art a girl I christen thee Joney.')

With a happy sigh, like the wind sinking to rest, the little ghost lay content and at peace.

This story rather reminds me of the haphazard [186] christening of a small relative of my own, a poor weakling, born apparently but to die at once. He lay upon his nurse's knee, and everything looked as though the end was at hand. Imbued with the prevalent idea that at such times anyone who had the presence of mind to fling himself or herself into the breach may conclusively and effectively play padre, the nurse hurriedly damped her ringer from a bottle of dill water standing beside her, and, like a drowning man clutching at a straw, seized upon the first names which happened to flit across the disturbed surface of her inner consciousness. "Wellington Napoleon!" she said solemnly, "I christen thee Wellington Napoleon!"

Instead of this thunderbolt flattening out the infant utterly, the mere pronunciation of these martial nominations seemed to help it rally its forces. Like its great namesakes, the atom held the foe at bay, and Death drew off with averted head. Sometimes it falls out that life is not worth the price one pays for it, and this thought came to the mother as she saw the possibility of her boy having to go through the world burdened with the high-sounding, impossible-to-live up-to designation, unwittingly bestowed. For nurse maintained stoutly that under all the circumstances she was fully qualified to undertake the christening process, and there was no getting away from the patent fact that the baby was named, if unsatisfactorily. How did they get out of it? Well, they could not entirely. They compromised. And made things a trifle easier for the youthful hope by juggling him into Arthur Bonaparte.

[187] I am wandering from the subject! But—a big but— did you ever know a woman stick to the point? Inevitably she must wander off down every byway and tempting bridle-path.

Giants, too, we had in Man. One spell-bound monster, a Triton among the Minnows, lived somewhere—I cannot exactly localize the spot—in the subterraneous passages of Castle Rushen.

Apparitions of all kinds haunt the "great waste places," and a stalwart spirit was abroad in the Tarroo-Ushtey, a water bull, fairy frequenter of the curraghs, an amphibious creature who has been known to join the herds of domestic cattle in the fields and lure away the finest heifer of them all to destruction. Even so late as 1859 a Tarroo-Ushtey was reported to be frequently seen in a field near Ballure Glen, and people journeyed thither from all parts of the island to "put a sight on it."

Witchcraft, in all its devious branches, flourished vigorously, in spite of the drastic punishments meted out to sundry of the necromancers. Suspected witches —we hear very little of wizards—were subjected to the water ordeal until the seventeenth century. This method of obtaining evidence of the guilt or innocence of the suspect may have been satisfactory from the point of view of the promoters, but scarcely so satisfying and excellent to the witch herself, who derived no justice at all from the rough tribunal, the inevitable result being fatal to her in any case. The accused of "sorcerie and witchcraft " was thrown into a big deep pool of the Curragh. If she swam, or managed [188] in some fashion to keep herself afloat, every allegation made against her was held to be amply proven, and a roll down Slieau Whuallian in a spiked barrel, or a fearsome pile of burning faggots, ended the life which the bogs of the Curragh had failed to take. If, on the other hand, a suspected witch allowed herself to drown decently, with some degree of dignity, her "innocencie was declared," and she was enthusiastically accorded Christian burial.

References to the practice and punishment of witchcraft occur very frequently in the episcopal and civil histories of the isle; but the names of the sorcerers are not now, save in isolated cases, island-wide. The personalities of the once celebrated myriads who practised the black art have passed to the dim and hazy land of forgotten things. Few are labelled and bracketed as fit to stand by Caesar, who is, of course, Mannanan, the greatest wizard of them all.

Mannanan Mac Lir, necromancer and navigator, looms large in the early history of Ireland as a sort of god of the sea, and in some periods he merges into a famous merchant-pilot who "understood the dangerous parts of harbours; and, from his prescience of the change of weather, always avoided tempests." We glean much of his character and attributes from this old literature, for throughout the Irish legends the name of Mannanan in one form or another is scattered about the ancient manuscripts in most generous profusion.

Local tradition sometimes exalts the magician into a giant who dashed about his little territory [189] on three legs, and at other times it compresses him into a

Pygmæan creature, so insignificant as to be almost unnoticeable. Oftenest of all he is a redoubtable warrior, girt about with an unpierceable coat of chain mail, and an infallible sword sarcastically named "The Answerer" not because the mighty blade made a habit of replying to parleying quibblers contrariwise; its terrible whispers never could receive response. The canoe used by the famous necromancer was called "The Wave-sweeper"; and altogether Mannanan forces upon our notice the fact that he had a very nice taste in the christening of things. I wonder how the high-sounding names of the modern lodging-houses would strike his artistic mind.

Caillagh-ny-Ghueshag managed to impress her dominant character on the shifting sands of time, and the name and fame of Tehi-Tegi, the beautiful enchantress, linger yet in the annals of necromancy in Man. Of different calibre was Teare, the great witch-doctor of Ballawhane, a well-remembered sorcerer of sorts.

Caillagh-ny-Ghueshag was an inspired prophetess. The words mean, so far as they can be correctly translated, "Old woman of sorcery" or spells. At one time the word Caillagh meant any old dame; but at last it was only used in connexion with witches and those suspected of dealings with the supernatural. The manifold predictions of this great and clever Caillagh are very difficult to fathom, and her ordinary remarks on every-day affairs possess the same baffling qualities as do her inspired messages. The majority [190] of her erudite prophecies altogether elude interpreta tion. The homely brain is hopelessly puzzled and befogged by the profound depth of *"Dy nee ass claghyn glassey yoghe sleih nyn an an"* an oracular sentence meaning, 'people would get their bread from grey stones,' and *"Dy beagh chimlee caardagh ayns chooilley hie roish jeney yn theill"* remains an unravelled mystery to the effect that 'There will be a smithy chimney in every house before the end of the world.'

We have no idea what Caillagh meant to hint at, but it is evidently something very uncomfortable. She was a privileged orator, and, like one or two leaders of our own time, was a licensed coiner of involved remarks which, from their very unintelligibility, seem so ingenuously ingenious that ordinary hum-drum brains accept them gratefully as too Socrates-like and profound to be trifled with or derided. A "Let sleeping dogs lie" principle which is not without its advantages.

Tehi-Tegi was an altogether mythical personage, an irresistible charmer who enslaved the hearts and minds of every man until the island became a dreary waste, untilled, unsown, overgrown, neglected; for the one aim and object of Manx masculinity was to make love to Tehi.

Teare of Ballawhane was a popular charmer, counteracter of spells, and manufacturer of ceremonies for use against the machinations of fairies and evil spirits. He had power over the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. He is described by Train, in his *History of the Isle of Man*, as "a little man, far advanced into the [191] vale of life. In appearance he was healthy and active; he wore a low slouched hat, evidently too large for his head, with broad brim; his coat of an old-fashioned make, with his vest and breeches, were all of loaghtyn wool, which had never

undergone any process of dyeing; his shoes, also, were of a colour not to be distinguished from his stockings, which were likewise of loaghtyn wool. He is said to have been the most powerful of all these practitioners, and when their prescriptions had failed in producing the desired effect, he was applied to. The messenger that was despatched to him on such occasions was neither to eat nor to drink by the way nor even to tell any person of his mission. The recovery was supposed to be perceptible from the time the case was stated to him."

After the death of Teare his daughter carried on the witch doctor business. It was always held that the peculiar gifts which go to make a successful charmer were hereditary, and descended through the generations, via alternate sexes. A father would transmit the recondite virtues to his daughter, that daughter to her son, and so on. The only possible way for anyone having the faculty of second sight to dispossess himself or herself of it was to marry someone equally blessed, or afflicted it all depends on the point of view. Then the great gift died utterly. One nullified the other, I suppose, just as it will often fall out with our voting arrangements when we give the franchise in England to married suffragettes.

Besides the people who inherited the power of second sight, many babies came into the world fore-doomed [192] to it. Posthumous children, and a seventh son of a seventh son, were of a band who could lift the mysterious veil of the Unknown and look behind.

The services of a witch doctor were often requisitioned in a bad herring season, and charms were laid upon the nets. The witches, who were thought to be invisibly wreathed about the boats, to the complete ruination of the harvest of the sea, had to be exorcized. This driving out of the witches by fire was a very general practice up to the eighteenth century. Colonel Townley, who watched the process as performed by the fishermen at Douglas in 1789, tells us: "They set fire to bunches of heather, going one at the head, another at the stern, others along the sides, so that every part of the boat might be touched."

Written charms and chanted charms were powers in the land, and the echo of them lingers faintly to-day in the memory of the old people. I well remember hearing an old crone in Cregneish, one of the most primitive villages on the island, use the invocation against King's Evil upon an afflicted grandchild. She was not an accepted witch-charmer, or dabbler in the occult, although we held her in considerable awe and respect in consequence of the many strange tales which were current about her. Mystery and illusion surrounded her like an aura. Perhaps she represented the last of a line of great witch-charmers. Touching the pitiful scar with gnarled brown fingers, the old crone repeated with great solemnity: "I am to divide it in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; whether it be a sprite's evil, or a King's Evil, may [193] this divided blemish banish this distemper to the sands of the sea."

This was said three times over in Manx, with great deliberation.

The celebrated *Cadley-Jiargan* of the old-time necromancers is still used playfully to charm away "pins and needles." *"Ping, ping, prash, Cur yn cadley-jiargan ass my chass."*

It is too comprehensively elusive for translation and relies for its complete effectiveness on its mysterious impregnability. *"Ping, ping, prash"* is almost "a terminological inexactitude." To begin with, it wants a few more "y's" scattered about it to be really representatively Manx. "Y" in the Manx language is an abounding necessity, and is voluminously recurrent. All languages seem to possess an all-pervading letter, as all great writers have an all-pervading word. "Glamour" permeated De Quincey, and "winged" perfectly haunted Shelley. "Y" enfilades the Manx, and forms the bed-rock of most of the words.

There is an unaccountable insular superstition that some of the island creatures hibernate. They are seven in number, and known as *ny shiaght cadlagyn*, or the seven sleepers. The "We are seven" has elongated in the passing of years, making the original list larger, and varying the names of the drowsy band; but the ones who can make good their prehistorical right to inclusion are *Cadlag*, a "Let's pretendia" animal of Jabberwock variety, *Cooag*, the cuckoo, *Craitnag*, the bat, *Cloghan-ny-cleigh*, the stone-chat, *gollan-geayee*, [194] the swallow, *foillican*, the butterfly, and *shellan*, the bee.

When a baby was born the old-time folk saw to it that the little one remained in the room where it first saw the light until after the baptism. This was the simplest way by which the threatening dangers of predatory fairies and the Evil Eye might be reduced to a minimum.

Train tells us that, in the room where the mother and baby lay, a wooden hoop arrangement was set, with lining of sheepskin, evidently a rough tray of sorts; and on this a heap of oat cakes was laid, and cheese, a hospitable offering to the mortal visitors who flocked to "put a sight on the *bogh millish.*" "Bogh millish" means "poor dear," and is a frequent term of endearment.

The fairies had scraps of cheese and bread scattered all about for the picking up, and this was called the *blithe meat*. Cheese seemed to be a *sine quâ non* at birthday celebrations. The woman who carried the baby to church for the christening had a pocketful of the ubiquitous fare, which she presented to the first passer-by, whether he required it or not, and this gift was considered to be an infallible recipe against all kinds of magic and sorcery.

The green tramman, or elder tree, possessed remarkable fending-off properties. A witch kept her distance from a cottage so o'ershadowed, and there is hardly an old tholthan, or well, without its flourishing protection. In insular superstition the tramman was the tree selected by Judas Iscariot for his gallows.

> Agnes Herbert, *The Isle of Man* (London: John Lane, 1909). Chapter x, "Folklore," pp. 169–93.

*

The Isle of Man by Agnes Herbert was published in 1909, in a genre at the time that was known as a "colour book," a title that featured a number of original colour plates combined with an accompanying text. Herbert's book is little referenced (if at all) and despite drawing on material from printed sources there is still original material here in this chapter worth reading.

Stephen Miller, RBV