

Manx Notes 498 (2020)

ISABELLA LENEY

CONCLUDING CHAPTER OF SHADOWLAND IN ELLAN VANNIN

(1890)

[141] In this chapter we give in brief some of the superstitions of the Manx not introduced in the foregoing tales.

The faith of this people in charms was boundless, and as they fully believed in the many ills that might arise to them or their belongings from the evil-eye, where their own powers failed, they at once resorted to someone skilled in counteracting such dire influences. In 1712 a woman named Moor, of Kirk Lonan, was condemned to thirty days' imprisonment, and on release was further punished by having to stand for two hours, enveloped in a white sheet, in the four market towns of the island—the reason for this penance, “Witchcraft,” being placed in large letters on her back, that all might read. One of the many charges brought against her was that by “spells” she had made the cows of a neighbour “run dry” with [142] whom she had a long standing quarrel; and though the owner had taken up some of the soil on which she had stood when “casting the evil eye on the beasts,” spat upon it, “and thrown it over their backs” immediately the woman withdrew, strange as it may appear, it had no effect in doing away with the mischief.

These witches were gifted with wonderful powers, for not only could they by their spells prevent cattle yielding the proper quantum of milk, but could also control the winds. A certain number of knots were tied on a handkerchief; this handkerchief being given to the sailor or fisherman who had bespoke their services, by unfastening one or more of the knots, as might be found necessary, favourable breezes were assured to them.

Some time about the year 1833 flourished a Mr Charles Teare, of Ballawhane, in the parish of Andreas, better known as the “Fairy Doctor.” He was supposed to be skilled not only in the cure of all diseases inflicted on either man or beast by the evil eye, fairies, or witches, but was also gifted with the power of “laying ghosts.” Once only do we hear of failure; the famous Buggane of “Gob-ny-Scuit” proved too much for him. The locale of this spirit is now disputed ground—one history being that two brothers were crossing Barrule from Ramsey to Douglas, each mounted on a strong Manx pony. Unluckily for him, one of these men had his wife on a pillion behind [143] him. When near the summit of the mountain a quarrel arose between the brothers, and of so serious a nature that each drew his sword and engaged in mortal combat. Victory seemed to declare for the married man, till his wife, proving treacherous, threw her cloak over his weapon, when his brother, taking advantage of his disabled condition, ran him through the body. Ever since, at certain times may be

heard, near the cairn on the top of the hill, a melancholy wailing, supposed to be the complainings of the spirit of the betrayed husband and brother, who thus breathes his woes to any who may adventure themselves within reach of the doleful sound.

This *buggane* is also claimed in Kirk Maughold; the mournful cry is said to proceed from a cleft in the rock, where there is a small cascade; but this being far too prosaic an interpretation, we shall keep to the first and more generally received version.

A twig or branch cut from the *kiern* (mountain ash) is supposed to be a wonderful preservative against the evil-eye and mischievously inclined fairies. On Laa Boaldyn (May Eve), when all sorts of ills are to be dreaded from the little people, crosses cut from this tree are tied to the tails of the cattle and fastened on to the doors of stables and cowhouses. Besides this precaution, the gorse on the surrounding hills is set on fire to fright away evil-disposed spirits. At this time, too, there is always risk of the *tarroo ushtey* (water [144] bull) mingling with the cattle, from which very disastrous results in many ways may be expected, not the least of which is, that the monster tries, and often succeeds in tempting many a valuable cow to follow him into his favourite element, there to perish in the waters.

On Laa Boaldyn children are apt to be enticed away to Fairyland, and on the last day of April anxious mothers might be heard calling their brood home betimes, by blowing, through a cow's horn, formerly the accepted mode of summoning the young stragglers.

To fairies, be they kindly or the reverse, is ascribed a decided taste for hunting, and the better to follow their favourite pursuit, they do not hesitate to invade the stables of any farmers near, and mounting their steeds, the unfortunate animals are returned in early hours to their stalls, but always with painful evidence of their hard night's work. If in the morning a farmer finds his horse looking utterly jaded, heated, and trembling, "Ridden at the good people" he will give you as the cause; and will then proceed to tell you instances of how he or some of his acquaintances have seen, in the night, little men dressed in the orthodox hunting-costume, red, "tearin' over the counthrey" on their borrowed "mounts," "an' little horns at them that they're blowin' in whiles."

Of death omens there are many, the most striking of which is the phantom funeral. So real does this [145] seem that, over the *chiollagh*, many a tale is told of how, just before certain people have been called from this lower sphere, someone or other has seen a funeral cortege wind slowly from the house to the churchyard; the mourners have been recognised by the watcher, and in some instances even the name on the coffin deciphered, as in mimic show it was lowered into the grave. This would probably come under the heading of second-sight. When anyone is ill, if what are called corpse-lights are seen to hover round the bed, it is considered a certain sign that the malady will prove fatal.

On New Year's Eve, in many households, ashes are spread on the floor from the hearth to the door. If there are indications of footprints, the directions in which they point is anxiously looked for; if towards the door, it is an infallible sign that someone will be carried out before the end of the year; if the steps point inwards, a new inmate may be looked for.

On Oie Houinney (Hallow E'en) many ceremonies are gone through, the more important of which may probably be considered the making of the *soddag valloo* (dumb cake); not a word must be spoken during the mixing of this extraordinary compound, or all the efficacy is destroyed—in vain will the maiden anxious in dreams to see her future husband place a piece of this cake under her pillow. As the ingredients of this *soddag valloo* consist of flour, eggs and egg-shells, soot, *etc.*, by eating, instead of sleeping [146] upon a piece, she would probably under any circumstances have visions of many things she did not bargain for.

The *quaaltagh*, on New Year's morning, is a person on whom "hang great events." Great uneasiness is felt in the household lest the first person to enter should be fair-haired, and, above all things, a *spaagagh* (flat-footed) man or woman is deemed the most unfortunate—betokening misfortune through the whole coming year. One thing to be carefully observed on the first morning of the year is that whoever sweeps the floor must commence operations from the door to the hearth; if contrariwise, all good luck flies the household for the next twelve months.

On Hop-tu-naa (Hollantide Eve) young men go round the country singing "Hop-tu-naa, Trolla-laa," *etc.*, and expect to be presented with either money or something to eat and drink. On Hollantide Night it is believed that witches, fairies, and elves are allowed to roam about with greater freedom, and "work their wicked will," so they are specially propitiated. In most country houses, formerly, "leavings" of whatever had been the supper of the family was not removed from the table. Clean water was also put into crocks or mugs to refresh the "little people," before the household retired to rest. These same "little people" cannot be thought hard to please, if they were satisfied with cold porridge, or even the more pretentious meal of *braghtan*, which consists of barley [147] cake well buttered. Between two of these cakes is laid mashed potatoes and salt herring, the flesh being carefully picked from the bone.

Though so considerably treated by mortals, to partake of fairy hospitality is dangerous in the extreme, showing that the good people do not appreciate as they ought the kindness shown them; and bitter experience has proved to many that to accept money, food, or drink from these sprites is always followed by misfortune. The dairymaid offers more inviting fare, with the idea of saving herself undue fatigue at the churn. A pat of butter or a piece of curd cheese is put within easy reach of the "good people," in the hope of gaining their favour.

On St Stephen's Day a custom prevails which is not peculiar to the Isle of Man, though, perhaps, the origin there given of it may be. A fairy or witch, in the form of

mortal maid of small stature but rare beauty, so bewitched the male sex of the island, from the eldest to the youngest, that everywhere might be heard wives and maids weeping for their false husbands and lovers. Farms lay untilled; fishing-boats rocked idly and deserted in the bays or harbours; but, worse than all, this siren led those of whom she had wearied to the sea, where they perished; and it seemed probable that the Isle of Man would not have one of the male sex left to show warranty for its name, when a knight, clad in glittering armour, appeared upon the scene, not only prepared, but able successfully, to do [148] battle for the distressed damsels. His spells proved so effective that to escape them the witch assumed the form of a wren, and each year, on St Stephen's Day, it is supposed she revisits the place where she had caused such misery. Hence the hunting and killing of the poor little bird, whose shape she is supposed to have taken.

Jehaney-cheays (Good Friday).—On this day no iron must be used for any purpose—even the poker is laid aside, and when necessary to rouse the fire, a stout stick from the kiern tree is used in its place.

Laa'l Breeshey (St Bridget's Day).—Keeping this day has for long fallen into disuse, but formerly rushes used to be spread on the floor, and St Bridget was thus invited to enter:

*Brede, Brede, tar gys my thie, tar dyn thie aymys noght.
Foshil jee yn dorrys da Brede, as Chig da Brede e heet Staigh.*

Bridget, Bridget, enter. Come to my house to-night.

Open the door for Bridget. Let Bridget come in.

This saint was born in 453, and it is said she received the veil from St Patrick, and founded the nunnery at Douglas.

The Manx people had to contend not only with fairies and witches, but gobolds and cobolds. These creatures were supposed to choose as their home the caves with which the coast of Ellan Vannin is thickly studded. Like the "little people," they seem to have preferred more solid food than the sweets "the honey [149] bee sips" from each opening flower, and the dew that hangs from its leaves was not sufficient to quench their thirst, for we are told they took toll from the flocks of the farmers near, and, besides this, milked their cows to provide for their wants.

At Spanish Head they deprived an unfortunate man of nearly his whole flock of sheep—they disappeared one by one—and he and his family seemed likely to sink into abject poverty and wretchedness, when suddenly the depredations of the enemy ceased. This farmer's son, who must have been a brave man for his time, made a search into the gobold's cave, where he saw the bones of many of the slain sheep lying about; but besides this he found a sack, on which in large letters was his father's name. This he put on his back and carried home. On being opened it was found to contain treasure of gold and silver. The ill-luck attending "fairy gifts" does not seem to have attached to this, for this farmer and his family ended in being about the richest people in the isle.

The Manx, in common with many other peoples, hold a belief in “cities under the sea.” These submarine cities are supposed at certain times to rise to the surface of the water, and if anyone on seeing this is fortunately carrying a Bible, he or she has only to hold this up, and they are at once conveyed in safety through the waters to these strange dwellings; but woe betide the unfortunate explorer if by any means he is induced to part with his Bible, for in that case [150] he can never return to his home or friends again. Mermaids and mermen also find the sea and air of this haunted isle to agree with their constitutions, for the fair mermaidens are often seen combing their tresses to the accompaniment of some seductive song, whilst either seated on some rock or floating slowly in the waters, her tail floating gracefully behind her, and also by judicious management propelling her gently on her way.

I.H. Leney, “Concluding Chapter of *Shadowland in Ellan Vannin*,”
Shadowland in Ellan Vannin (London: Elliot Stock, 1890) 141–50.

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The previous *Manx Note* reproduced the Introduction to *Shadowland in Ellan Vannin* and contained a brief biographical note on Isabella Leney the author showing her links to the Island, Ramsey in particular, though her roots were in Ireland. “I have endeavoured to introduce the superstitious beliefs and observances that have existed, or do still exist, in the island, clothed in the embellishment of a story,” were her words in the Introduction, and make it easy to overlook the book, indeed dismiss it, until the final chapter is read, if one makes it that far. Here she has a different strategy for presenting Manx folklore, “[a] few of the folk-tales of this interesting isle I have put together in this volume, but have not, except in the concluding chapter, followed the example of some writers on, or compilers of, folk-lore, who give in bare detail what they have to relate.” And we are indeed thankful to her for that bare detail as that chapter contains a number of well-observed items of Manx folklore, especially as regards fairy legends. There was a better collector of folklore present in the pages of the book than a literary embellisher.

STEPHEN MILLER RBV

