

Manx Notes 506 (2020)

“HAVE YOU EVER HAD A CHARM SAID OVER YOU?”

(1)

(1887)

SIR.—Will you kindly spare me a small space in your valuable journal to expose a most pernicious system. Mostly every body would be led to suppose that with the march of Religion, Education and Science the belief in witchcraft, and what is called the evil eye were things of the past. But it is not so.

An old man belonging to the North of the Island who styles himself Charles Ballaquane’s successor, and claims to be up in all Charles’s secrets and cures, whither the disease be caused by what he calls the evil-eye or witchcraft. This man as witch and herb doctor visits monthly the South of this Island with his packages of chopped herbs, and is doing a roaring trade, not only amongst the labouring classes, but he visits some very respectable farmers, and makes a nice thing out of his dups by selling his witch-curing and witch prevention herbs.

A married woman in Santon is also driving a paying trade in dispensing to ignorant and silly people her chopped herbs. Scarcely a day passes but that she has some customer for her curative herbs. I believe she claims some distant relationship with some of the late witch-doctors at the North of the Island.

Yours obediently,

ARGUS.

Pseud [signed as “Argus”], “[Letter to the Editor] To the Editor of the *Manx Sun*,” *Manx Sun* 8 October 1887: 4g.

(2)

(1900)

It is proverbial that superstitions die hard. Some people question whether they ever die at all—whether the superstition does not merely change its form, and reappear anew in a different guise. There is certainly a wonderful faculty in human nature for believing the marvellous, and adhering tenaciously to the old beliefs, in spite of reason and argument. The belief in charms and spells was universal in the Isle of Man, and even at the present day, is more common than is generally supposed. It is probably no exaggeration to say that at least half of the native Manx people of the present day entertain a belief in charms of one kind or other. The spread of education has done a great deal, no doubt, amongst the younger generation to dissipate superstitious beliefs, but, amongst the old and middle-aged there is still an open or half-confessed belief in fairies, charms, or supernaturalism generally.

The cure of disease, especially certain kinds of disease, by supernatural methods, is one of the commonest of superstitions. So the practices adhered to are not entirely

superstitious, and it is hardly possible to draw a line exactly to indicate where medicine ends and superstition begins. In the old days, when doctors were few and far between, resort was had to various herbs, and some of the old Manx housewives had a wonderful knowledge of these remedies. Hanging around the ceilings and mantelpiece were scores of bunches of withered herbs, all supposed to be remedies for different complaints, and housewife was ready, at all times, to prescribe for her neighbours. Her knowledge is not altogether scientific, but was, no doubt, approximately correct, being based on observation and tradition. In fact, many of the principal herbs are used today in medicine.

But there were a few did not believe in the efficacy of charms as well. For the cure of warts it was common to take a piece of thread, and tie upon it as many knots as there were warts to be cured. The thread was laid where four roads met, and the person would shortly be cured. Another equally certain cure was to take a piece of paper and put a number of pebbles in it, corresponding to the number of warts, and dispose it in the same manner. A third method was to touch the wart with water which are collected in a particular manner on the roadway. Mesmeric passes were resorted to, especially for the cure of styes in the eye, or boils, or carbuncles. The head of a pin rapidly twisted and passed over them was wonderfully effective, and so was the touching of the affected parts with the golden ring.

Nearly all the country people, a generation ago, believed in a charm for stopping the flow of blood and wonderful stories of been told of some of the celebrated charmers. Within living memory, for instance, Mr Corkill, of Baldwin, had a great reputation in this respect. Caesar Sayle had a horse which was badly cut, and was bleeding to death. He went to Mr Corkill and told him about it. Corkill asked some questions about the horse, its age, colour, and the character of the wound, and so on. Then he went into a corner and repeated some enchanted words. He then told Sayle he could go home, as the horse had stopped bleeding. Sayle replied, gloomily, that he expected to find the horse dead when he got home. "No, indeed," said Corkill, "the bleeding has stopped, and the horse is all right." Sayle, on reaching home, found it was so, and the flow of blood had stopped at the exact time that the charm was put on it by Corkill.

There was a schoolmaster, forty years ago, in Sulby Glen, who was a wonderful wizard. If a cow was sick, or a person either, he could cure them by charms and spells. A woman went to him to be cured of whitlow, and he accosted her at the door with the remark, "I knew thou were coming." He went upstairs, as his usual custom was, and repeated a certain formula, which resulted in a "complete cure." He was a noted herb doctor, and could cure people or animals of any complaint under the sun.

"Charms and Spells," *Isle of Man Times* 8 September 1900: 11a.

(3)

(1907)

Not so many years ago people in the country districts of the Isle of Man strongly believed in the “Evil eye.” I have seen an old woman walking round fields and picking herbs to provide a safeguard for her cattle. I can well remember terrifying the poor creature by simply looking over my shoulder at her, and pretending to find a certain herb in a hedge. Her alarm was so great that she took to rapid flight. Are there any silly people of this class in existence today?

“Not so many ...,” *Mona’s Herald* 9 January 1907: 3b.

(4)

(1907)

Have you ever had a charm said over you? I wonder whether there are, at the present day, any old Medicine Men who employ charms for the relief and recovery of suffering humanity in the Isle of Man. I can well recollect, being taken as a child suffering from a stubborn sore throat, to be charmed by old Kneale, of Regaby-veg. Out in the world, the old man was as common-place an individual as could be found. But the moment you engaged with him in a professional consultation he became quite a different individual. Immediately he assumed an air of great importance, and became enveloped in mystery. His steps grew more and more measured and slow; his aspect was the aspect of one overwhelmed by a sense of the solemnity of the occasion; he spoke in whispers. Placing the patient in a chair, he proceeded to rub the throat on both sides, with both hand, up to the ears, muttering to himself all the time an incantation, the only words of which were distinctly audible, were “Jesu Chreest.” Then he would smear the throat with some butter, repeating the incantation and the rubbing, and lastly with another repetition of the incantation, he would rub in the butter with the flat side of the blade of a knife. I cannot recollect whether or not the patient received any benefit from the treatment. He was over-awed by it, I remember, and he recalls with pleasure the drives to Regaby-veg and back to his distant home. A breath of air in the country was very agreeable.

“Have you ever ...,” *Mona’s Herald* 9 January 1907: 3b.

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“Have you ever had a charm said over you?” Many Manx people have indeed had charms recited over them and here are a number of reports of such encounters with folk charmers and healers over the years.

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