

Manx Notes 327 (2018)

“CHARMS AND SPELLS”

(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 re-appear 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 once 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. Some of the practices adhered to are not entirely superstitious, and it is hardly possible to draw a line exactly to indicate where 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 her ceilings and mantelpiece were scores of bunches of withered herbs, all supposed to be remedies for different complaints, and the housewife was ready, at all times, to prescribe for her neighbours. Her knowledge was 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 few who 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 had collected in a particular manner on the roadway. Memeric 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 a golden ring.

Nearly all the country people, a generation ago, believed in a charm for stopping the flow of blood and wonderful stories have 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.

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