

“THE GIENSE NIGHT, OR LEGGADS”

(1876)

SIR.—Can you or any of your numerous readers furnish me with the particulars of a very old custom which used to prevail in the Isle of Man at Christmas, viz., “*The Legghards?*” Whether it is still in existence, and if so, what is the nature of the institution?—Yours, &c,

PHILOLOGIST.

London, May 17, 1876.

Pseud [signed as “Philologist”]. “[Letter to the Editor] An Old Manx Custom.” *Mona’s Herald* 7 July 1876: 5d.

“THE GIENSE NIGHT, OR LEGGADS”

SIR,—In your issue of *Mona’s Herald* on the 7th of the present month, PHILOLOGIST, who dates from London, on the 17th ult., asks to be furnished with the particulars of a very old custom which used to prevail in the Isle of Man at Christmas, viz., “*The Legghards,*” —whether still in existence, and if so, the nature of the institution.

Please allow me to gratify PHILOLOGIST with the following particulars of that old custom, which has long ceased to exist in the Isle of Man, but of which I have a distinct remembrance from my boyhood, and the exciting scenes of which I have been frequently permitted to witness.

I refer “Philologist” to the word *Giense* in Dr Kelly’s Manks and English Dictionary,* which is a fair description of the institution, as far as it goes with the exception of his connecting the word *leggad* with “valentine,” which still exists, but is a different thing in itself, and takes place at a different period.

The word *gien* in tho Manks dialect means the same as tho word *gean* both among the Irish and the Scottish Celts. The word means in the above three dialects the same thing, viz., approbation, fondness, love—in its most Platonic and purest sense. And as if all these good and amiable qualities are exclusively combined in the constitution of the woman, the word *gien* in Manks, and *gean* in Irish and among the Highland Scots is one of tho names appropriated to woman. Hence the word *giense* was the name given to *Oie ny leggadyn*, the twelfth night of Christmas (old style), meaning the assignment of the lasses to the lads of the parish, or district, as partners for a supper and a dance, the lads bearing all the expenses of the entertainment.

As to the Manks word *leggad*, in the common acceptation of its meaning it is used even in the Ecclesiastical Courts as a *legacy*. But the genuine Manks Celts, who have been intimately accustomed from their boyhood to a colloquial acquaintance with *Chengey ny Mayrey Ellan Vannin*, that is, “their mother’s tongue, Isle of Man,” have a much better word for legacy than *leggad*.

Legacy is a word coined from *leggad*, not only meaning a testamentary gift, but also a spiritual ambassador, denominated Legate. There are several other words arising out of the same source, in order to form what is termed the English Language; a compilation of coined words—an assemblage of both ancient and modern dialects and languages, which bids fair, at some future period, to become universal.

Sheckteraght is a more appropriate word in the Manks dialect than *leggad*, inasmuch as it is a word directly derived from *shecktar* a person appointed in trust by a living friend (*compos mentis*) to fulfil after his decease the requirements of his will.

Notwithstanding that *sheckteraght* is a more appropriate term for a testamentary gift than *leggad*, yet the latter word is more full of meaning for the *Giense*, inasmuch as the master of the ceremonies (in Manks called *Mainster-ny-cuirraghyn*, that is, literally, the master of the invitations) not only assigned a young lassie to a young man, to be cared for in all proper respect, as a partner, for that night of festivity, but was also constituted a Legate, or a sort of Knight Errant, to escort his *leggad* in her various rambles, and to protect her from insult and harm at all other *giense* meetings, and elsewhere, during the year; or longer, if they could agree; in default of which he made himself liable to be marched about upon the *stang*.†

Many did agree longer than a year, in happy marriages, resulting from the arrangements of that first *giense* night.

The expression *oie-ny leggadyn*—the night of the leggads or legacies—arose out of the term *Giense*, inasmuch as the *leggads* were all arranged by the Master of the Ceremonies on that *first Giense* night for the whole year, with liberty from their master to repeat the *Giense* as often as they chose, provided they would strictly observe the terms of the first arrangement.

And now for the nature of the institution. At the instance of a few lads in the parish or district, but chiefly confined to the parish, who felt disposed to bear the expense of a supper and a dance at Christmas (old style) for themselves and their sweethearts (the latter being always the free guests of the former), invited the young men of the parish or district to subscribe for the Christmas *Giense*, and to have a public meeting to appoint a married man of profound respect, inviolate taciturnity, and one in whom both lads and lasses could place implicit confidence. After the election of *Mainster-ny-cuirraghyn*, i.e., “Master of the Invitations,”—or we may call him Master of the Ceremonies, who himself, as well as his wife, were also to be free guests—tho members of the intended *Giense* invested their master with power to take the management and responsibility of the whole of the first *Giense*, and as many meetings as the members would afterwards agree upon. He was to be sole arbiter of their destinies for the year, or to the day of their marriage, if that happy day should occur before the end of the year. He was to select a *leggad* for each lad, which was the most difficult part of his commission, but “Philologist” may depend upon it that the members of the *Giense* knew their selected Master to be a complete connoisseur in

the secrets of his neighbourhood and the pleasing of the fair sex. If not in himself quite up to the mark, though bound to to be a perfect mute until the much longed for night arrived, his ear was permitted to be open to every secret insinuation of both parties—his eye would be wide awake to every sly wink and every knowing nod; and by a system of hieroglyphics, known exclusively to themselves, their great Nabob Master (whose code of laws was like that of the Medea and Persians, which could not alter) was seldom much astray in arriving at a decision which became satisfactory to all parties, especially the fair sex.

At length the long wished-for *Giense-night* arrives. Highly beats the pulse, and still more highly the vibration of every anxious heart. The great Master of the Ceremonies ascends the rostrum, with as much pomposity as the officer in a Court of Justice when commanding universal silence. His mute tongue becomes voluble, and with a stentorian voice he proclaims his decision for that night and every other *Giense* for the ensuing year. Then arises such an exciting “hurrah hurrah, hurrah,” for *Mainster-ny-cuirraghyn* just as sailors only can manage. The chaotic crowd begins to stir, and to rush into order, jostling backward and forward as country lads can only do—each male member searching for the hand of his appointed *leggad*, in order to give her the loving squeeze and the hearty embrace.

[2f] Then follows the movement of each couple to their respective positions at the long plank-table, the rough rattling of chairs, and the clattering of knives and forks and plates on a board groaning under the exuberance of the solidities and niceties of the season. Then as soon as the keen, country appetite is appeased, and the soft social whisper creates the loud laugh, and the Master of the Ceremonies, at the head of the table, has satisfied his own appetite, and become wearied in cutting and carving for others, the loud country thump makes the dishes and plates themselves to dance on the table. Then a voice, which must produce universal attention, distinctly rings through the rude dining-room, “Clear the decks for the Dance!” *O, Vainster-ny-cuirraghyn!* (save the mark!) for a dance! The shuffling, almost to dislocation, of the lower limbs—the terrific thumping of the heels on the board—and the ludicrous pop-pop-pop of the fantastic toe, with now and again the clasping of hands and twirling each other round like a whirligig, with a loud scream, “*Cheough! cheough! cheough!*” to be repeated thrice, it baffles all description.

Now, in conclusion, the *Giense* and *Oie-ny-leggady*n, with every Phynnodderee and Lhiannanshee, have been banished to the regions of *Mannanan-beg-mac-y-Lheir, thee broor-lurgagh Ellan Vannin*.

The only relic which remains is the fiddle. O, the poor unfortunate fiddle had to bear all tho brunt. Although the sweetest instrument of music in all the world in the hands of a finished performer, for many years after the banishment of the unpopular *Giense* and the *leggads*, the poor inanimate but animating fiddle would be stared at as the receptacle of those swinish fiends which were ordered out of the maniacs to drown the pigs, in order to punish the disobedient Jews; yet I have seen many a sly

inkling given towards the corner of the *Cuillee*, where there was but spare room for a jig, yet where many a heart and foot were equally agile in answer to the sweet tones of the fiddle.

This world is a changeable world. In it the oldest fashions, habits, and customs once banished and execrated rise up again on the stage of life resuscitated—just like the once poor innocent despised fiddle, which has now become the nightingale even of many a sacred choir.—Yours, &c.,

YN CHENN VANNINAGH.

* *Giense*, or rather *Gienys*, *s*, a dance, a revel, especially that upon the twelfth night of Christmas, when the *mainshter* or master of ceremonies appointed every man his legad or valentine for the ensuing year, with these words:—*Eaisht-jee as clasht-jee, as cur-jee myner; ta N. as M. legadyn son y vlein shob, as ny sodjey, my oddys ad cordail. Moylloy as soyloy, jingey as pronney daue*, &c. It is a contraction of *gien* and *oieys*, nightly feast, or from *gien*, a female partner or woman.

† The *stang* was a sort of bier or ladder, to which the delinquent (by order of court martial) was firmly tied down, and paraded round the neighbourhood by the mob, singing all manner of ludicrous and opprobrious songs.

Pseud [signed as “Yn Chenn Vanninagh”]. “[Letter to the Editor] The Giense Night, or Leggads.” *Mona’s Herald* 28 June 1876: 2e–f.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

