

# Manx Notes 423 (2020)

## “MANX FOLKLORE AND SUPERSTITION”

(1903)

[12] Some time ago I noticed in the *Barrovian* an article on Manx Superstitions, which touched very briefly on the skirts of the subject.\* The writer indeed confined himself to legends, which, with one exception are not of a distinctly Manx character: they are legends which would receive little credence amongst even the most credulous of the Manx; and, at least one of [13] them is I believe the invention of modern advertisers. But there are some superstitions current in the Isle of Man which formerly and even to-day have been accepted as trustworthy. The general objects of superstitious beliefs are in the main the same everywhere. There are fairies, the “good-folk,” an abortive race of dwarfish monsters with powers over mortals; and there are humans with supernatural powers—witches and spirits. It is the former that flourished in the Manx island. Those terrible creatures are only euphemistically named “Good-folk.” If offended in the slightest degree they proved themselves vindictive in the extreme. In those good old days the poor country folk perforce placed a dish of water at the house door, and in the kitchen were placed dishes of simple food. Woe betide the unlucky man who forgot the water. Nothing went well with him. His cow inevitably died. Or if it was saved from premature death, its milk gave no butter. A blight fell on the crops and the poor fellow went headlong to ruin. There are thousands of legends illustrating the deadly vengeance of the fairies—their good deeds have scarcely a single record. It may be that prosperity was attributed to a Divine Providence, while the insulted gnome got the benefit of ill-fortune. Child-stealing, bodily hurt, and destruction to property were the works of these ill-mannered fairies. Nor had the provocation to be great—never was there much, often none. That very doubtful legend of St Trinian’s Church is a good illustration of the destructive tendencies of the “buggane,” a name I believe denoting more a devilkin than an ordinary fairy.

There are other legends that tell of the quick vengeance of these injured innocents. There was a woman, a stranger, from the adjacent kingdom of Britain, who married a Manxman, locally famous as one versed in the way of fairies. With ideas new to the islanders, she proposed to erect a stone wall to replace the alder fence which fronted her husband’s house. The husband objected knowing well that the alder is a tree sacred to the fairies—it is currently supposed to be their dwelling place—but the woman was obdurate. The husband yielded, and soon a new stone wall replaced the ancient fence. But the stone wall brought distress to the house. The English wife fell sick, and as she lay looking on her new stone wall, a strange woman came to her bedside, and addressed her:

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\* [See, Pseud [signed as “Manxman”], “Manx Superstitions,” *The Barrovian* 3 (1880): 113–14.]

“You are ill, my poor woman?”

“Yes,”

“Aye, and ever will you lie in pain, until you cover again the heads that you have laid bare,”

[14] With that the woman vanished, and no sooner did the husband hear of the occurrence than he explained that the alder fence must be replanted, for otherwise the fairy heads laid bare by its loss would wreak vengeance on the interloper who had overthrown their house. The woman consented, and the growing of the alder fence was the strengthening of the sick woman.

It seems to have occasioned no surprise that at one time the fairies were dwarfish; at another, indistinguishable from human beings. Nor did any seek to enquire why full grown fairies lived under alder trees, nor yet how they reduced their size. Being supernatural they defied the laws of nature, and, we must suppose, the house under the alder was only a whim. Besides the alder, the gorse also provided the fairies with a roof. It not infrequently happens that persons have experienced the peculiar sensation of being continually pricked by the gorse after having cut a gorse-hedge, and that, too, though they had worn gloves and had not felt any prick during the actual cutting. This phenomenon was attributed to the fairy dwellers in the gorse.

Not only for actually interfering with the fairies but even for betraying a knowledge of their presence was punishment meted out to mortals. Three young men were walking along the hill side, when they heard a piercing whistle. The youngest of the three, in a spirit of fun, replied with another whistle. His companions saw him stagger, and he was brought home with a raging fever. A celebrated fairy doctor explained that the illness was occasioned by the answering whistle, thereby angering the fairies, who on this occasion presumably wished to remain unnoticed. By the administration of herbs the young man was soon restored to health. This same youth with his brothers encountered a very astonishing adventure. Going into a field, they strolled along for a short time and returned to the gate, but the gate was invisible. Round and round the field they wandered, but there was no gate to be found. For an hour they searched the hedge until the gate eventually appeared in its original position. It must be added that the vulgar explanation of this incident will not hold water. They were neither drunk nor dreaming.

Diseases occasioned by fairy hands were numerous. Epilepsy, fever, and especially paralysis, were attributed to the unhappy fairy. A fit of any kind was said to have been due to walking on a “bad place,” a small piece of ground appropriated by the fairies. These plagues were often effectually cured by “Fairy Doctors.” These doctors often possessed no small skill. The secrets discovered by the father were handed to the son. Vegetable medicines were carefully studied and many a famous fairy [15] doctor would not be inferior to many of the highest diplomaed practitioners of the nineteenth century. Besides the cures effected by vegetable medicines, what is called

personal magnetism, probably contributed to the Fairy Doctor's success. This property is possessed by many Manxmen to-day. Not a few are able to relieve that swelling on the eye, called a stye, by simply repeating a form of words. The cure must be effected not by the formula, but by the personality of the charmer.

There is one other sphere in which the fairies ran riot. This was child changing. There have never been any gipsies or similar vagrants in the Isle of Man. If therefore, the astounding stories of changelings are authentic, no explanation can be given. Tales are current of strange women seizing children in the harvest field, and of releasing them only when pursued and seized by the parents of the child. Strange to say, these thieves never were able to vanish, like orthodox spirits. So great was the terror felt by the country people, that it was never considered safe to leave a child alone for a few minutes, without putting it into the cradle, and carefully laying the tongs above. This was a barrier which the fairy hands dared not pass.

The explanation of many of the fairy myths, if explanation there be, is to be referred to a peculiar coincidence of events. Such at any rate appears to explain the cure of a certain valuable horse. Of the truth of the facts there can be no doubt. A certain villager, a scoffer at fairy doctors, met one of the brotherhood at a friend's house. The scoffer, deriding the fairy doctors skill, provoked the latter to prophesy. "Take care," said the doctor, "lest thy best horse fall not ill, and thou shalt yet send for me." It is a wonderful fact, that, on going home, the man found his horse dying. Urged by his neighbours, he sent for the doctor he had derided; the doctor refused to come, but after continued importuning he bade the farmer's man go home, and the horse would be well. It seems like a miracle. When the man reached home, he found the horse had recovered.

Of tales and legends like these, there are hundreds. Many are dying out with the old generation. Many are known only to the family immediately interested. But they offer a wide field of study, for their psychological and social interest.

Of witches and other spirits there are legends in the Isle of Man as there are probably everywhere. To many an old dame has been attributed the power of supernaturally transferring the milk of her neighbour's cow to her own cottage. The punishment for proven witchcraft was severe; and the law decreeing it is not yet obsolete. It is of the nature of an ordeal. Placed in a barrel lined with spikes, the unhappy [16] witch is set on the summit of an almost precipitous hill near St John's, called Slieu Whallin. The barrel is rolled down the hillside. Should the culprit come forth unharmed she is a true woman, and no witch. To a casual observer the converse would seem more likely to be true. Should she come forth unharmed, then indeed she must be a witch.

Perhaps the most peculiar Manx Legend is that relating to the famous Black Hound (Moddhey Dhoo) of Peel Castle. Of this, a full account is given by Sir Walter Scott in *Pevensey of the Peak*. And in the Lay of the Last Minstrel, there is a reference to it. Sir William of Deloraine, says Sir Walter,

was ... ghastly, wan,  
 Like him of whom the story ran,  
 That spake the spectre hound in Man.

Unlike Dr Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the Black Hound of Peel, was never malignant if left to his own devices. He must have enjoyed a great popularity. There is a hill, quite eight miles distant from Peel, called Cronk-y-Voddy (the Dog's Hill) in honour of the Hound of Peel.

[—], "Manx Folklore and Superstition," *The Barrovian* 72 (1903), 12–16.

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As with the previous two notes (*Manx Notes* 421 & 422), a piece on Manx folklore in a school publication, in this case the Old Boys' Magazine of King William's College, namely *The Barrovian*. However, in this case there is much material that is new and of interest. Overall, this is a well-observed and put together contribution especially as regards fairy legends, and, as the author comments, "[t]here are thousands of legends illustrating the deadly vengeance of the fairies—their good deeds have scarcely a single record."

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