

## FAIRY LEGENDS FROM THE ISLE OF MAN (4)

### THE LOST WIFE OF BALLALEECE

(1)

GEORGE BORROW ([1855])

I There was a man who had a wife whom he tenderly loved and who bore him several children. At last she was ill again, and being in great pain the Ferrishyn (Fairies) got possession of her and carried her away to their place of residence. The man was for a long time inconsolable, lamenting not only the death of his wife, but the desolute condition of his young family who were now deprived of their mother. At last, for his children's sake, he determined to marry again, hoping that the woman he should wed would prove to be a kind mother to them. The woman, however, whom he took to wife proved to be a very bad mother to his children, almost starving them and frequently beating them. She was, moreover, not very kind to the man himself, who frequently thought with sorrow and bitter tears on the wife he had lost.

One night as he lay asleep, his wife first appeared to him in a dream. "I am not dead, John," said she, "but am in the power of the Ferrishyn; and it is possible for you to recover me, provided you will take my advice."—"Only tell me what to do." said John, "and whatever it will be I will do it."—"Well," said the woman, "I will tell you what to do. On such and such a night the fairy company will ride through your barn, entering it at the north door and passing out at the south. I shall be amongst the company, mounted on the roan. Him you must seize, and you must pull me from his back. But you can only pull me from his back by doing exactly as I bid you. Before the night in question, you must clear out of the barn all the straw that is in it; not only every bundle of straw, but every stalk, every piece, however small, must be cleared out of the barn; not a bit must be left. If you remove every bit of straw from the barn, then can you pull me off the horse and hold me and have me, and I shall be your wife even as I was before, and the Ferrishyn will never more have power over me. But if the slightest bit of straw be left in the barn, then alas, alas! I shall be hurried away to the fairy home, and you shall never, never, see me more.

The man awoke from his sleep full of fear and wonder. For many days he brooded upon his dream and at last determined to follow his lost wife's advice, and to do everything he could to recover her, both for his children's account and his own. The night was now approaching when the fairy companies take their rides. So he set about clearing out his barn with all possible diligence. Not only did he fling all the straw out, but everything else that could be likened to it—every stalk of hay, everything in the shape of what grows in the ground. He did not leave a hen's feather or bit of goose's down; not a cobweb, for he took a besom and swept the cobwebs

away from the balks, roof and corners. O how he worked! O how he pried and peered! At last he could have sworn that not a bit of straw remained in the barn, either on the ground or on the walls, in the corners or on the roof. He even inspected the few utensils to see that not a particle of straw remained sticking to them. So at last he was tolerably easy in his mind, for he knew that he had done all that was possible for man to do.

Well, the night arrived, and he flung open the doors of the barn, and stationed himself in what he conceived to be the most convenient place for intercepting his passing wife. About twelve o'clock a mist began to drive from the north towards the barn, and in that mist he could hear the noise of the trampling of steeds. Presently the mist began to fill the barn. The moon, however, which was shining, enabled him to distinguish objects. Well, in came the company ambling through the barn: the white with its rider, the grey, the black, the mottled. But he let them all pass; none did he interfere with, but let them all pass out by the south door. Not a bridle of theirs did he seize; but not so did he act when the roan came ambling through. Forward he darts, seizes the bridle and tries to pull the woman off the back of the horse. But he could not, though he pulled as never man pulled before. "Let me be, John," said the voice of his dear lost wife; "you nor anybody else can pull me off. There's straw in the barn! That second wife of yours has had her eye on all you did, and, guessing what you were after, she put a wisp of straw under the bushel this very night, after you had examined all about the barn, and thought all was right and had left for a moment. Good bye, John! I shall never see you again. O wail, wail, wail!" Then he lost hold of her and away she ambled; and the company, woman, horses, and mist were all gone. John shortly afterwards died of grief; the second wife seized the property, drove the children forth, and what became of them God only knows. Let us hope, however, that God took care of them.—Kirk Braddan, 10th November, 1855.

"Manx Folklore," *Isle of Man Examiner* 30 December 1899, 5e–f.

(2)

ANON (1900)

2 Another story of her great-great-grandmother is rather interesting: "There was great rejoicing in Ballaleece when a son and heir was born, but their joy was soon turned into mourning, for Mistress Leece had vanished out of her bed, and could not be found. The house was searched from attic to basement, high and low, stables and barns, but no Mistress Leece could be found; so they knew she had been 'tuk' with the fairies, and Leece mourned bitterly. The boy grew apace, and the years went on, and Leece took unto himself another wife. One night, he was standing thinking of his fairy bride, when suddenly she appeared, and said: 'For all the love you ever bore me, get me away from these tormentors, as my life is miserable, and I promise never

to disturb your present happiness.’ So he promised. She said: ‘Seven nights from now I will visit this place. Get the barn swept clean; not a straw must be left in it, and the two great winnowing doors must be left open, and we’ll all ride through. I shall be the thirteenth rider, and pull me off my horse. Remember, you must not tell a soul, or I shall be lost!’ The days went on, and there was never such a cleaning and scrubbing of a barn before or since, and everybody wondered what was going to happen. The night arrived, and Leece was on the watch. He heard the distant bark of dogs, cracking of whips, and the thundering of the horses’ hoofs on the hard ground. Nearer and nearer they came; then into the barn came dogs, horses, and their merry, merry riders. Now for the thirteenth! Leece was ready with outstretched arms. On her horse, sat his lovely young bride of long ago, as young as lovely as ever. He shouted: ‘At last, Ellen! At last!’ ‘I am undone, and lost for ever,’ she cried. ‘Look under the sieve, and listen. You are the last Leece of Ballaleece—no son, no Leece, shall ever inherit a foot of it.’ With that she rode away. He had told his wife, who, not wanting a younger bride in her place, put some straw under the sieve.” Moral: Never tell your wife.

And the years went by, and young Leece grew strong and handsome. He went to the shoemaker’s one day, and finding them at dinner, he proceeded to the garden until the meal was over. As he did not return, the shoemaker went out to look for him, and found the last of the Leeces stretched dead upon the garden walk—took by the fairies! (I have given this story in Miss Kelly’s own words, and she firmly believes in the truth, of it.)

“Fairy Stories and Folk-Lore of Manxland (i),” *Mona’s Herald* 2 May 1900, 5c.

(3)

WILLIAM CASHEN (1911)

3 A Ballaleece woman was captured by the fairies; and, soon afterwards, her husband took a new wife, thinking the first one gone for ever. But not long after the marriage, one night the first wife appeared to her former husband and said to him, and the second wife overheard her: “You’ll sweep the barn clean, and mind there is not one straw left on the floor. Then stand by the door, and at a certain hour a company of people on horseback will ride in, and you lay hold of that bridle of the horse I am on, and don’t let it go.” He followed the directions carefully, but was unable to hold the horse: the second wife had put some straw on the barn floor under a bushel.

W.Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911) 130.

WILLIAM CASHEN (1912)

4 Sometimes the fairies stole women. There is a tale about a Ballaleece woman who was captured by the fairies; and, soon afterwards, her husband took a new wife, thinking the first one gone for ever. But not long after the marriage, one night the first wife appeared to her former husband and said to him, and the second wife overheard her: “You’ll sweep the barn clean, and mind there is not one straw left on the floor. Then stand by the door, and a company of people on horseback will ride in, and you lay hold of the horse I am on, and don’t let it go.” He followed the directions carefully, but was unable to hold the horse; the second wife had put some straws on the barn floor under a bushel.

William Cashen, *William Cashen’s Manx Folk-Lore*, ed. Sophia Morrison (Douglas: Manx Language Society, 1912) 19.

\*

STEPHEN MILLER RBV

