

# Manx Notes 505 (2020)

## “GATHERING UP THE DUST FROM OFF THE FEET OF THE BEWITCHER”

### BREAKING THE SPELL OF THE EVIL EYE

1901

Some people hold that superstition is dead—especially of late years, since Nan Wade, the Ballawhane and other famous charmsters, have passed away. Not so at St John’s, at any rate. Within the last few days a certain farmer was unfortunate enough to lose a valuable cow, and as the cause of her death could not be attributed to natural causes, he concluded that some evil eye had been cast upon the beast. To counteract the influence of the spell upon the others, he took his broom and pail, and having first swept the cross roads at Ballacraine and St John’s, he then visited the door of each church, chapel, and public house in the vicinity, in the hope of gathering up the dust from off the feet of the bewitcher. Acting on the maxim that “prevention is better than cure,” the farmer sprinkled the dust so gathered upon the living cattle on his farmstead. And this in the twentieth century! Where are our ministers and our educationists?

“[The Man on the Prom] Some people hold ...,” *Peel City Guardian* 27 April 1901: [3]a.

1911

A writer in a contemporary complains that the men engaged in repairing the Highways of Patrick and German leave the clippings of thorn fences to be blown and kicked about, the roads with grievous consequences to cyclists. The practice is not confined to the above-named parishes. It is followed in other parishes, and it certainly reprehensible. Even after the thorn branches have been removed, the “whins” remain for days, or weeks; and lucky is the cyclist who can ride over a piece of roadway strewn with them without punctures. A workman of our acquaintance had a curious experience arising indefensible practice. He had to pass every day over a stretch of roadway in which the larger clippings had been removed, but which was sown with “whins,” and after his tyres had been punctured in about a dozen places, he took a besom and proceeded to sweep the surface of the roadway. While he was thus engaged, a woman who lived in a cottage adjoining the road, attacked him furiously with her tongue. She had, it seems, jumped to the conclusion that he thought he or some member of his family, had cast “the evil eye” upon some of his belongings, and that he was sweeping the road with the purpose of sprinkling the dust, on the bewitched person or animal, and thus breaking the spell. He had to allow her to talk herself out of breath before venturing to explain his reason for

sweeping before her door, and he found some recompense for his punctures and scolding in beholding the smile which overspread her countenance when she grasped the real significance of his action. We hope the Highway Board will take steps to remove this grievance. It would not be difficult, to do so. All that would be necessary would be the removal of the clippings before they ripen and shed the “whins” by being blown or kicked about the roadway.

“A writer in ...,” *Mona’s Herald* 6 September 1911: 6f.

1959

Mrs Rhoda Quine, of Ballasalla, told me that she went sweeping when she was a girl. A certain woman was jealous of her mother, she said, and had caused her to burn and scald herself on a number of occasions when she was working at a certain house, so she told her daughters they would have to go sweeping.

They dressed themselves up, one in the mother’s and one in the father’s clothes, took a feather broom and crept towards the other woman’s cottage. They swept, not the crossroads, but the woman’s doorstep, collecting the dust in a cocoa tin. They had been warned to speak to no one on the way, so they did not return the greeting of the two people they met.

On reaching home they gave the dust to their mother, who put it into a small calico bag and sewed it into her corsets. She wore it to her dying day. And even then the daughters were taking no chances. The wreath sent by the other woman was not placed on the coffin, but secretly destroyed.

“[Snippets from the South] Mrs Rhoda Quine ...,” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 27 November 1959: 5d–e.

\*

“Snippets” indeed, but none the less valuable for that—involved here is the belief in the evil eye and the breaking of the ill-will cast by gathering up the dust from the footsteps of the person suspected of wishing harm on either a person or their livestock.

STEPHEN MILLER RBV

