

“COUNTRY FIRESIDES IN THE OLDEN TIMES A WINTER’S NIGHT IN A COUNTRY FARM HOUSE”

(1898)

When the crops were down for the season, about the middle of May, all the folks, farmers, small crofters, and labourers, started to obtain their winter fuel, and, as coal was very little used, turf and ling were used for warmth and cooking in those days. The turf and ling were obtained from the mountains, and for weeks all were busily engaged, first digging the turf out of the bogs, and placing the turf sods in a suitable position for some time to dry, as the turf or peat when dug was wet, and consequently heavy for carting home, and as the roads were steep and also very rugged, it was a very laborious task for the horses engaged in conveying this fuel to the people’s respective residences. This turf was black soil, and when properly dried, made a very good fuel as regards heat, but was rather slow in burning, very little blaze coming from it; and ling, being a faster burner, was used for baking griddle cakes and other cooking; whilst the turf was piled on at night for heat—and a very good fire it made of a cold winter’s night. The ling grew on the surface of the mountain, and still grows there (it is now generally called heather) and it was pulled out of the ground by a small piece of iron with a crook on one end. These odd instruments are now very rarely seen; but some of the people in the mountain districts still burn ling, and still use these crooks for pulling it. This was rather hard work in the hot weather, especially for the hands, and if engaged in pulling for several consecutive days, the hands get hard and sore. The ling when pulled was ready for carting home at once; so the turf as it required some time to dry, was first dug, and, when drying, the work of pulling and carting the ling was proceeded with, and when the ling was home the turf was ready to be carted in. The ling and turf were then stacked near the dwelling-house. These stacks were snugly thatched to keep them dry; and, if straw was scarce, rushes were used for thatching—some of the small cottages were then covered with rushes instead of straw. Farmers still use rushes to thatch their corn stacks if their stock of straw has been consumed the previous winter and spring, and this often happens after a dry summer. The farm houses being larger than the cottages, had quite comfortable fire places or hearths, on which they burned their turf and ling. These hearths had seats all round, with the exception of behind the fire place and a small space in front; and fixed seats called settles were used in a great number of the large fire places, and very cosy and comfortable seats they made. The young people of these days used to spend many a night on these settles courting or “sooreing,” as it was then called. In most of the farm houses these seats have disappeared; and ovens, boilers, and cooking ranges similar to those in town are now used. However, in a chance farm house near the mountains, these old fire places are still seen, and turf and ling are still burnt; but they are now very rare, and are well worth a visit, as they

are a relic of the good old times, and if seen, give a better idea than a description, however graphic, can give. These turf fires were kept constantly burning, being amply replenished before retiring for the night; and the reason for this was the difficulty of fire kindling in those days, matches being then unknown, and the tinder box, with its flint and steel, were the only means of fire lighting. If a neighbour's fire sometimes happened to go out, he often went to the nearest house and asked for a burning turf; and as turf keeps burning for a considerable time, he had ample time to carry it a good distance and so start his own fire. The houses were never so bleak and cold on a winter's morning, if during the night a good fire was kept burning on the hearth, and when the people turned out in the morning the house was warm and comfortable. The following is a short description of a country house on a winter's night in the old times: Around the lonely dwelling the wind, accompanied by rain or snow, is blowing a whole gale, which only those accustomed to country living have experienced causing the building to vibrate at intervals, and the windows to rattle, and the wind whistling through the key-holes, makes the old kitchen weird and lonely in the extreme. The family, sitting round the large turf fire spinning yarns about old times, are suddenly startled by an extra gust of wind, causing something outside to fall, or by a whistle louder than ordinary through the key-hole. One of the elder folk remarks, "We must clear (i.e., retire) and leave the house for them, as the little chaps are about. We must put down a good fire for them this cold and stormy night." Very few more words are spoken, and the inmates retire early in favour of the nightly visitors (*ie.*, the fairies), who are badly in want of the warm kitchen and the good fire. Very soon afterwards noises among the plates and dishes are heard, and the strange little folks with their red jackets sit down and partake of a hearty supper, the cowl being left on the table for them. After that the spinning wheel is heard merrily going, while laughter and chatter, which the people of the house don't understand, are constantly indulged in. The dwellers of the house remark the next morning, "They," meaning the fairies, "were last night about in style."

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