

Manx Notes 671 (2024)

“SOME MANX CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS” (1902)

If you watch a Manxwoman sweeping her cottage floor, you will notice that she sweeps the dust almost to the edge of the step, and then brushes it up into a shovel. You wonder why she does not sweep it out into the road. If you are inquisitive enough to ask the reason, she will tell you that she does not want to sweep out all her luck and that of her family. To prevent this she must burn her sweepings, not cast them on the road.

On New Year's Eve the custom is to tidy up the hearth, flatten the ashes into a cake, set the cottage door ajar, and leave food on the table, so that if the fairies come they will find they have not been forgotten. The ashes are eagerly scanned in the morning. If there is a footmark in them with the toes pointing from the door, there will be a birth in the house before the year is cut; but should the toes of the footprint point towards the door, there will be a death in the family. A large plate of powdered salt made into several little heaps, each heap representing a member of the household, is frequently left on the table on New Year's Eve. If a heap topples over in the night the person representing that heap will die within the year. The present writer knows of a case where this test came true.

Fairies are not encouraged at any other time of the year, only on New Year's Eve. Visitors to the Island will doubtless have noticed the fanciful patterns drawn in white chalk on the doorsteps. This is done to keep the fairies away “Have you ever seen a fairy?” I asked an old Manxwoman. “Indeed I have,” she replied. “And what were they like?” “The prettiest little creatures you can imagine, about four inches in height, and all dressed in scarlet and green, with pink caps on their heads. I saw them dancing, on that hedge,” pointing to a garden which is now within the town boundary of Douglas. The woman had not gained her idea of fairies from books, as she could not read.

Ghosts are firmly believed in, not only by such women as the one who saw the fairies, but by men, young as well as old Manxmen never get angry if you suggest that what they saw was a shadow. They quietly aver that it was no shadow, and, then, by their manner, you are given to understand that it does not matter whether you believe it or not; they saw so-and-so's ghost, that is quite enough for them.

Not long ago a youth living in the Island was smitten with an incurable disease, after which event he came into a fortune. He bitterly bewailed having to leave it behind him, and for some time after his death he was said to revisit his old home. Natives will tell you of having seen many whom they knew in life.

It is believed that people dying with any secret trouble on their minds cannot rest in their graves. Wives have been known to ask their husbands within an hour of death if their minds were quite easy, “because,” they add “we don't want you walking

about here and frightening us all after you are gone.” It sounds brutal, but they do not mean it unkindly.

A house on the Laxey highroad was for many years believed to be haunted. At one time it was inhabited by a farmer, who, for safety, buried his money unknown to his family. Coming downstairs one day he missed his footing, fell, and broke his neck. While the house remained unlet, the old farmer would return and sit at one or another of his windows, always in his shirtsleeves. With the advent of a new tenant he ceased to appear personally, but strange noises were heard in the house. Once a mantelpiece fell without any apparent cause. People invisible to the eye passed in and out of the house with sufficient noise to make the occupier aware of their presence; and there was a general air of unrest about the place, as each succeeding tenant found out, until by accident the buried treasure was discovered.

The Manx method of preparing for a funeral is peculiar. Every inch of wall and every article of furniture in the room in which the corpse lies must be covered with white sheets. The effect is not pleasing. Most especially must the mirror be covered up, for it would be dreadfully unlucky both to the dead and the living either to see yourself or the deceased through a looking glass in a death chamber.

Luck enters largely into the life of a Manxman. No fisherman gives a light to a man on another boat, for were he to do so his mates would declare their luck was gone. Some boats are more fortunate in their catches than others. To steal some of the ballast of a successful boat is thought to get some of their luck. A fisherman who makes one or two unsuccessful trips will on his return light some gorse in the centre of his boat, and carry a burning branch to every crevice where the supposed evil spirit that brought him the ill-luck is supposed to lurk.

Plenty of farmers still believe in the evil eye. The writer knows a farmer who, when one of his cattle is taken ill, at once goes to a woman whom he suspects of having bewitched the animal. This he does with a view of propitiating the suspected witch. The remedies she suggests he always applies immediately, and the beneficial result he attributes to her witchcraft.

“Some Manx Customs and Beliefs. (From the “Liverpool Echo.”)” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 20 September 1902: 5c.

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