

Midwife (or Godparent, or Nurse) for the Elves

fairy tales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther types 476*, 476**,
and migratory legends of Christiansen type 5070

translated and/or edited by



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The Troll Labor

Sweden

In the year 1660, when I and my wife had gone to my farm (*fäboderne*), which is three quarters of a mile from Ragunda parsonage, and we were sitting there and talking a while, late in the evening, there came a little man in at the door, who begged of my wife to go and aid his wife, who was just then in the pains of labor. The fellow was of small size, of a dark complexion, and dressed in old gray clothes.

My wife and I sat a while, and wondered at the man; for we were aware that he was a troll, and we had heard tell that such like, called by the peasantry *Vettar* (spirits), always used to keep in the farmhouses, when people left them in harvest time. But when he had urged his request four or five times, and we thought on what evil the country folk say that they have at times suffered from the *Vettar*, when they have chanced to swear at them, or with uncivil words bid them go to hell, I took the resolution to read some prayers over my wife, and to bless her, and bid her in God's name go with him.

She took in haste some old linen with her, and went along with him, and I remained sitting there. When she returned, she told me, that when she went with the man out at the gate, it seemed to her as if she was carried for a time along in the wind, and so she came to a room, on one side of which was a little dark chamber, in which his wife lay in bed in great agony. My wife went up to her, and, after a little while, aided her till she brought forth the child after the same manner as other human beings. The man then offered her food, and when she refused it, he thanked her, and accompanied her out, and then she was carried along, in the same way in the wind, and after a while came again to the gate, just at ten o'clock.

Meanwhile, a quantity of old pieces and clippings of silver were laid on a shelf, in the sitting room, and my wife found them next day, when she was putting the room in order. It is to be supposed that they were laid there by the *Vettar*.

That it in truth so happened, I witness, by inscribing my name.

Ragunda, the 12th of April, 1671.

Pet. Rahm.

- Source: Thomas Keightley, [The Fairy Mythology, Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries](#) (London: H. G. Bohn, 1850), [pp. 122-23](#).

The Clergyman's Wife

Sweden(Lapland)

A clergyman's wife in Swedish Lappmark, the cleverest midwife in all Sweden, was summoned one fine summer's evening to attend a mysterious being of Troll race and great might, called Vitra. At this unusual call she took counsel with her husband, who, however, deemed it best for her to go. Her guide led her into a splendid building, the rooms whereof were as clean and elegant as those of very illustrious folk; and in a beautiful bed lay a still more beautiful woman, for whom her services were required, and who was no other than Vitra herself.

Under the midwife's care Vitra speedily gave birth to a fair girl, and in a few minutes had entirely recovered, and fetched all sorts of refreshments, which she laid before her benefactress. The latter refused to eat, in spite of Vitra's reassuring persuasion, and further refused the money which the troll-wife pressed upon her. Vitra then sent her home, bidding her look on the table when next she entered her cowherd hut and see what she would find there. She thought no more of the matter until the following spring, when on entering the hut she found on the table half a dozen large spoons of pure silver with her name engraved thereon in neat letters.

These spoons long remained an heirloom in the clergyman's family to testify the truth of the story.

- Source: Edwin Sidney Hartland: [*The Science of Fairy Tales: An Inquiry into Fairy Mythology*](#) (London: Walter Scott, 1891), [p. 38](#).

The Servant Girl and the Elves

Germany

Once upon a time there was a poor servant girl who was diligent and neat. Every day she swept out the house and shook the sweepings onto a large pile outside the door. One morning just as she was beginning her work she found a letter on the pile of sweepings. She could not read, so she stood her broom in the corner and took the letter to her employers. It was an invitation from the elves, asking the girl to serve as godparent at the baptism of one of their children.

At first the girl did not know what she should do, but finally they convinced her to accept. It would not be right, they said, to decline such an invitation.

Three elves came and led her to a hollow mountain where the little people lived. Everything there was small, but more ornate and splendid than can be described. The new mother was lying in a bed of ebony decorated with pearl buttons. The covers were

embroidered with gold. The cradle was made of ivory, and the bathtub of gold. The girl stood in as godparent, and then wanted to go back home, but the elves asked her fervently to stay with them for three days. She agreed to do so, and the time passed with pleasure and joy. The little people did everything to make her happy.

Finally she wanted to return home. They filled her pockets with gold and led her outside the mountain. She arrived home. Wanting to begin her work, she picked up the broom that was still standing in the corner and started to sweep. Then some strange people came out of the house and asked her who she was and what she was doing there. It was not three days, as she thought, that she had spent in the mountain with the little men, but rather seven years. In the meantime her former employers had died.

- Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812), no. 39/II. This is the second story of a three-part grouping entitled "The Elves."
- Link to the German text: [Von den Wichtelmännern: Von einem Dienstmädchen, das Gevatter bei ihnen gestanden.](#)
- Note the close similarity between this story and [The Dwarfs in Schalk Mountain](#), as recorded by Carl and Theodor Colshorn, and included in the present collection.

The Godmother

Switzerland

Two girls, all dressed up, were walking along playfully and mischievously one evening when suddenly a gigantic fat toad waddled across their path. The girls joked about the large animal: One of them said that if it ever had a baby, she would be its godmother. The other one quickly added that she would cook for the occasion.

A few days afterward, late in the evening, an old woman knocked at the cottage door of the two girls, reminded them of their promise, and asked them to come to the baptism of the toad's child. They hesitated a long time, but fear finally drove the mischievous pair out into the night and the fog. The old woman led them to a remote place where the ceremony was taking place. A woman was there with a newborn child, and surrounded by all kinds of strange and unusual guests. Sighing, the two girls did what they had promised to do. As they were discharged from their duties, the woman thanked them kindly and gave them an apron filled with coal from the fireplace. The girls did not dare to throw the unwanted gift away, but as they quickly made their way homeward, they let most of the coal fall to the ground, paying no attention to a voice that repeatedly sounded from behind:

The more you throw away,
The less you will have!

When they arrived at home, the little bit of coal that they still had was nothing but pure gold.

- Source: Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Märchen aus dem Nachlaß*, edited by Heinz Rölleke (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1979), Nr. 25, p. 65.
- Rölleke's source: Unpublished papers of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Staatsbibliothek Berlin.
- A marginal note, in the handwriting of Jacob Grimm, on this manuscript states: "oral, from Switzerland, with no specific location."
- It is possible that the Grimms received this account from Wilhelm Wackernagel, the source of many of their Swiss tales and legends.

The Woman among the Elves

Germany

Not long ago there lived in Frankenberg a midwife who could tell many amazing things about the elves, for once she had spent an entire eight days among them observing their deeds and ways.

One dark night when all the neighbors were sound asleep a loud knocking at the house door had awakened the woman. She jumped up and peered through the window, but she could see nothing except for a lantern in front of the house.

Then a voice called out, "Throw on your clothes and come with me. A woman is in need of your service!"

The midwife did what she had been asked, went down, and with hesitating steps followed the lantern, which was already one street ahead of her. She could not see the person who was carrying it. Thus it went through several streets, then out through the convent gate, and then a good way beyond the town.

Finally the light stopped moving. A hidden trapdoor opened, and many steps led underground. Trembling and praying, the midwife followed her mysterious leader, and before long she found herself in a roomy chamber surrounded by elves, who cordially welcomed her. Before she had time to recover from her surprise, one of the little people stepped up to her and asked her to follow him to the woman for whose sake she had been summoned.

Soon afterward a tiny, cute elf came to the world. Since mother and child were both doing well, the midwife hoped that she would be able to return to her own people the

next morning. But that was not so. The elves did not want to let her go. Each day they treated her better than the day before, giving her everything that she could want.

During this time the elves often went out, not returning unless they were loaded down with all kinds of pretty things. Before leaving they always rubbed their eyes with a liquid which they kept in a glass. The old woman noticed this, and once when the little people had gone out she found the glass and put a little of its contents on her right eye.

In the meantime eight days had passed, and the elves no longer resisted the old woman's request. As soon as it was dark they allowed her to return home, saying, "For your reward take along those sweepings behind the door!"

Smart enough to not despise the unusual gift, she brushed the sweepings into her apron. Then with good cheer she followed the lantern, which -- as had happened eight days earlier -- was carried on ahead by an invisible hand.

A half hour later she arrived safely at home, much to the amazement of her husband, who for eight days had been terribly worried over her disappearance. She told him everything that had happened and then shook the sweepings that she was carrying in her apron onto the table before him.

Oh, how the old people's hearts leapt for joy! How their eyes gleamed! How they stood there in silence, fearing that one little word of gladness might cause the dream to vanish that now so enraptured them! Finally they found their tongues. Their amazement turned to words, and they saw that it was no dream. It was pure reality. Lying on the table was a pile of glistening gold pieces!

Some time later there was a fair in Frankenberg. The midwife, who had suddenly become rich, walked among the market booths looking and from time to time making a purchase. Suddenly she saw the elves scattered throughout the crowd. Unseen by others they were skillfully plundering the tables and booths. This she could see with her right eye, which she had rubbed with the liquid at the time she was with the elves.

She could not stand to see the little thieves freely getting away with this, so she called out, "Hey! What are you doing?"

The elves recognized her and asked, "Which eye can you see us with?"

She answered, "With the right one."

Then they blew into her right eye, and in that instant it became like a black night. She never saw the elves again, and for as long as she lived she remained blind in her right eye.

- Source, Karl Lyncker, "Die frau unter den Wichtelmännchen," *Deutsche Sagen und Sitten in hessischen Gauen* (Kassel: Verlag von Oswald Bertram, 1854), no. 71, pp. 45-47.

The Dwarfs in Schalk Mountain and Wohlden Mountain

Germany

Schalk Mountain (Schalksberg), between Ettenbüttel and Wilsche, near Gilde on the Aller River, is only a little mole hill today, but formerly it was a high and narrow mountain in which the dwarf people made their home.

At that time no people lived here yet, and the dwarfs liked that, for they could carry on as they wished either above or below ground, and not be disturbed. They had a good life. For them every day was Sunday, with a holiday in the middle of each week. They ate and drank, played and danced, and at times did metalsmithing as well. Even today people often find the slag from the hard coal that they used in their work.

When the first herder came to this region he found nothing but fields of peas surrounding the mountain, and the most beautiful music sounded from within the mountain without interruption. However, when his sheep approached the pea fields, they jumped about as though someone were secretly pinching them. Moreover, his dog would often begin to yelp, and refused to approach the place again.

However, more and more people came here, establishing villages and conducting business. They often came into contact with the dwarfs, who were sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile, just as it happened. The underground people complained most of all about the humans' noisy activities, and, on the other hand, the humans complained about the thefts committed by the underground people.

But still, they often lent one another a helping hand, and whenever the humans did something for the dwarfs, they were rewarded with red gold.

Thus there was once a poor but pious servant girl who was busy cleaning out the house. Just as she about to carry the sweepings outside, she discovered a letter lying in her dustpan. It was addressed to her. Standing her broom against the wall, she read it. In the letter she was summoned to stand in as a godparent for a dwarf child the next day, and was promised that no harm would come to her.

She did not want to do this, but her employers told her that she must not decline, for if she did so, it would not go well for her. Thus she went forth that night, for that was when she was told to come. At twelve o'clock the mountain opened, and now she was just as pleased as she earlier had been afraid, for down there it was magnificent.

Everything was made of pure gold, and everyone was friendly and well disposed toward her.

After giving the child a name, they laid it into a golden cradle, and the musicians played until it fell asleep again. Then they had the best things to eat and drink, after which they danced and sang until morning on a large meadow. After they were tired, the girl said that she wanted to return home, but the dwarfs begged and begged until she finally agreed to stay three more days, and all three days were filled with pleasure and joy.

When she finally started out for home, the dwarfs rewarded her most generously and told her that the golden cradle would be saved for her forever. Then they opened the mountain and let her go.

The servant girl went home and took the broom from the wall in order to sweep out the entranceway. But behold, the house had changed completely during the three days. The entranceway was completely different. The cows had a different sound and a different color, and her good old white horse was gone. Some people approached her, but she did not know any of them. They spoke differently and wore different clothing styles. And no one knew anything about her. She told them all about her employers, but no one remembered them. And they all stared at her.

Now in Gilde there lived an old shepherd who himself did not know how old he was, and no one else knew it either. When he heard about the girl, he came over and said that his grandfather had told him that when *his* father was young, a girl had gone to the dwarfs and had not returned.

That instant the girl turned into an ancient woman, collapsed, and was dead.

Schalk Mountain is now almost completely gone. The dwarfs departed, but they left behind the cradle filled with gold. Many have searched and dug for it, but no one has found it. Someday, however, a swineherd, the servant girl's last relative, will drive his herd this way, and a sow will root out the cradle, and with part of the gold the herder will have a church built in Ettenbüttel. Its tower will be higher than the Andreas Tower in Braunschweig, in other words, just as high as Schalk Mountain formerly was. He will present the golden cradle to the king, and with the remaining money he will live comfortably until he dies.

- Source: Carl and Theodor Colshorn, "Die Zwerge im Schalks- und im Wohldenberge," *Märchen und Sagen* (Hannover: Verlag von Carl Rümpler, 1854), pp. 114-17.

- Note the close similarity between this tale and [The Servant Girl and the Elves](#), as recorded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and included in the present collection.

An Underground Woman in Labor

Germany

A woman who died at Neu-Bukow in 1841 at the age of 118 told that when she was a child underground people lived in a mountain near her home town (the name is not given). She herself and other children often saw them, but they always ran away from them. One night an underground man knocked at their door and asked the mother to go with him. His wife was in labor. He also asked to borrow a kettle. The mother went with him and was gone the entire night. She returned the next morning and reported that a little boy had been born.

- Source: Karl Bartsch, "Unterirdische in Kindesnöthen," [Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg \[Mecklenburg\]](#), vol. 1 (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1879), [p. 88](#).
- Bartsch's source is a Frau Weinberg from Rostock.

Midwife for a Nixie

Germany

A midwife in Westerhausen was sitting one evening at home when someone knocked on her window and shouted that she should come outside. She did so, and there stood a nix, who told her to follow him. They walked to the Beck [a deep pond near Westerhausen], and the nix took a rod and struck the water with it. The water separated, and with dry feet they walked to the bottom.

Here the woman helped the nix's wife deliver a child. To thank the midwife, the nixie told her that when the nix asked her how she should be paid, instead of money, she should ask for some of the sweepings.

Then the midwife bathed the new baby, and while doing so she heard the nix's other children -- there were five of them -- running around and asking their father, "Shall we pinch her? Shall we pinch her?" But the father told them not to.

When the midwife was finished the nix asked, "What shall I pay you?"

Following the wife's advice, she requested some of the sweepings from behind the door.

"God told you to say that," said the nix, giving her what she wanted. Then he took her back home, and when she looked at the sweepings, they had turned to pure gold.

- Source: Adalbert Kuhn and Wilhelm Schwartz, [*Norddeutsche Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg \[Mecklenburg\], Pommern, der Mark, Sachsen, Thüringen, Braunschweig, Hannover, Oldenburg und Westfalen: Aus dem Munde des Volkes gesammelt*](#) (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1848), [pp. 173-74](#).
- This is the third legend in a group titled collectively "Der Nickelmann." The individual legends are not given separate titles.
- Westerhausen is a village near Halberstadt in northern Germany.
- The water spirit in this legend is identified in the original German as the *Nickelmann*, translated here as the generic *nix* (female *nixie*).

The Midwife of Hafoddydd

Wales

Once on a time, when a midwife from Nanhwynan had newly got to the Hafoddydd Brithion to pursue her calling, a gentleman came to the door on a fine gray steed and bade her come with him at once. Such was the authority with which he spoke, that the poor midwife durst not refuse to go, however much it was her duty to stay where she was. So she mounted behind him, and off they went, like the flight of a swallow, through Cwmllan, over the Bwlch, down Nant yr Aran, and over the Gader to Cwm Hafod Ruffydd, before the poor woman had time even to say "Oh!"

When they reached there, she saw before her a magnificent mansion, splendidly lit up with such lamps as she had never seen before. They entered the court, and a crowd of servants in expensive liveries came to meet them, and she was at once led through the great hall into a bed-chamber, the like of which she had never seen. There the mistress of the house, to whom she had been fetched, was awaiting her.

The midwife got through her duties successfully, and stayed there until the lady had completely recovered, nor had she spent any part of her life so merrily, for there naught but festivity went on day and night: dancing, singing, and endless rejoicing reigned there. But merry as it was, she found that she must go, and the nobleman gave her a large purse, with the order not to open it until she had got into her own house. Then he bade one of his servants escort her the same way that she had come. When she reached home she opened the purse, and, to her great joy, it was full of money.

She lived happily on those earnings to the end of her life.

- Source: John Rhys, [*Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*](#), vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), [pp. 98-99](#).

The Fairy Nurse

Ireland

There lived a woman in Innish Shark -- one of the group of islands on the eastern coast -- named Bidy Mannion, as handsome and likely a fisherman's wife as you would meet in a day's walk. She was tall, and fair in the face, with skin like an egg, and hair that might vie with the gloss of the raven's wing.

She was married about a twelvemonth, when the midwife presented her husband, Patsy-Andrew M'Intire, with as fine a man-child as could be found between Shark and America, and sure they are the next parishes, with only the Atlantic for a mearing between them. The young one throve apace, and all the women and gossips said the Bidy Mannion was the lucky woman, and the finest nurse seen in the island for many a day.

Now the king of the fairies had a child about the same age, or a little older. But the queen was not able to nurse it, for she was might weakly after her lying-in, as her husband had a falling-out with another fairy potentate that lives down one side of the Giant's Causeway, who, by the force of magic and *pishrogues*, banished the suck from the Connaught princess for spite.

The gentry had their eye upon Bidy Mannion for a long time, but as she always wore a *gospel* round her neck, and kept an *errub* and a bit of a burnt sod from St. John's Night sewed up in her clothes, she was proof against all their machinations and seductions. At long run, however, she lost this herb, and one fine summer's night the young *gaurlaugh* [infant], being mighty cross with the teeth, wouldn't sleep in the cradle at all, but was evermore starting and crying, as if the life was leaving him, so she got up at last, determined to take him to bed to herself, and she went down to the kitchen to light a candle.

Well, just as she was blowing a coal, three men caught a hold of her before she could bless herself, and she was unable to shout or say a word, so they brought her out of the house quite easy, and put her upon a pillion, behind one of themselves, on a fine black horse that was ready waiting outside the door. She was no sooner seated behind one of the men than away they all galloped, without saying a word. It was as calm and beautiful a night as ever came out of the sky, just before the moon rose "between day and dark," with the gloom of parting twilight softening every break upon the surrounding landscape, and not a breath of air was to be felt.

They rode on a long time, and she didn't know where they were going to; but she thought to herself they must be on the mainland, for she heard the frogs croaking in ditches. [There are no frogs in these small islands.] The *bunnaun lena* [bittern] was sounding away in the bogs, and the *minnaun airigh* [clocking snipe] was wheeling over their heads. [Neither of these birds are found in the small islands of the west.]

At last the horse stopped of itself all of a sudden before the gate of a big house at the butt of a great hill, with trees growing all round it, where she had never been before in her life. There was much light in the house, and presently a grand looking gentleman dressed all in scarlet, with a cocked hat on his head and a sword by his side, and his fingers so covered with rings that they shone like *lassar lena* [*ranunculus flamma*, a brilliant yellow flower] in a bog-hole, lifted her off the pillion as polite as possible, handed her into the house, and bid her a *cead mile failte*, just the same as if he had known her all his lifetime.

The gentleman left her sitting in one of the rooms, and when he was gone she saw a young woman standing at the *thrashal* of the door, and looking very earnestly at her, as if she wanted to speak to her.

"Troth, I'll speak, anyway," says Biddy Mannion, "for if I didn't, I'm sure I'd burst." And with that she bid her the time of day, and asked her why she was looking at her so continuously.

The woman then gave a great sigh, and whispered to her, "If you take my advice, Biddy Mannion, you'll not taste bit, bite, or sup, while you are in this house, for if you do you'll be sorry for it, and maybe never get home again to your child or husband. I ate and drank my fill, *forrior geraugh* [an expression denoting great regret], the first night I came, and that's the reason that I am left here now in this enchanted place, where everything you meet is bewitched, even to the meat itself. But when you go home, send word to them that's after me, Tim Conneely, that lives one side of the Killaries, that I am here, and may be he'd try what Father Pat Prendergast, the blessed abbot of Cong, could do to get me out of it."

Biddy was just going to make further inquiries, when in the clapping of your hand the woman was gone, and the man with the scarlet coat came back, and the same strange woman, bringing a young child in her arms. The man took the child from the woman, and gave it to Biddy to put it to the breast, and when it had drunk its fill he took it away, and invited her into another room, where the queen -- a darling, fine-looking lady as you'd meet in a day's walk -- was seated in an armchair, surrounded by a power of quality, dressed up for all the world like judges with big wigs, and red gowns upon them. There was a table laid out with all sorts of eating, which the man in the cocked hat pressed her to take. She made answer that she was no ways hungry, but that if they could give her a cure for a little girl belonging to one of her neighbors, who was

mighty *dauny*, and never well in herself since she had a fit of the *feur-gurtagh* [literally, "hungry grass," a weakness, the result of sudden hunger, said to come on persons in consequence of treading on a particular kind of fairy-enchanted grass], while crossing the Minaune Pass in Achill, and to send herself home to Shark, she would be forever obliged to them.

The king, for that was the gentleman with the cocked hat, said he had ne'er a cure.

"Indeed, then," said the mother of the child, "as I was the cause of your coming here, honest woman, you must get the cure; go home," says she, speaking for all the world like an Englishwoman, "and get ten green rishes from the side of the well of Aughavalla [a holy well in the barony of Murrisk, not far from Croagh Patrick]. Throw the tenth away, and squeeze the juice of the rest of them into the bottom of a teacup, and give it to the colleen to drink, and she will get well in no time."

The king then put a ring on her finger and told her not to lose it by any manner of means, and that as long as she wore this ring no person could hurt or harm her. He then rubbed a sort of an ointment on her eyes, and no sooner had he done so that she found herself in a frightful cave where she couldn't see her hand before her.

"Don't be any ways afraid," says he. "This is to let you know what kind of a people we are that took you away. We are the fallen angels that the people up above upon the earth call the fairies."

And then after a while she began to see about her, and the place was full of dead men's bones, and had a terribly musty smell. And after a while he took her into another room where there was more light, and here she found a wonderful sight of young children, and them all blindfolded, and doing nothing but sitting upon *pookauns* [mushrooms, fairy-stools, or puff-balls] These were the souls of infants that were never baptized, and are believed "to go into naught." After that he showed her a beautiful garden, and at the end of it there was a large gate, which he opened with a key that was hung to his watch chain.

"Now," says he, "you are not far from you own house," so he let her out; and then says he, "Who is that that is coming down the boreen?" And when she turned her back to look who it was, behold the man with the red coat and the cocked hat had disappeared.

Biddy Mannion could not see anybody, but she knew full well the place where she was in a minute, and that it was the little road the led down to the *annagh* [a cut away bog] just beside her own house, and when she went up to the door she met another woman the very *moral* of herself, just as fair as if she saw her in the looking-glass, who said to her as she passed, "What a *gomal* your husband is that didn't know the difference between you and me."

She said no more, but Bidy went in and found her child in a beautiful sleep, with his face smiling, like the buttercups in May.

- Source: W. R. Wilde, [*Irish Popular Superstitions*](#) (Dublin: James McGlashan, 1852), [pp. 131-35](#).
- Link to additional legends about the [Origin of Underground People](#).

The Fairy Nurse

Ireland

There was once a little farmer and his wife living near Coolgarrow. They had three children, and my story happened while the youngest was on the breast.

The wife was a good wife enough, but her mind was all on her family and her farm, and she hardly ever went to her knees without falling asleep, and she thought the time spent in the chapel was twice as long as it need be. So, begonies, she let her man and her two children go before her one day to mass, while she called to consult a fairy-man about a disorder one of her cows had. She was late at the chapel, and was sorry all the day after, for her husband was in grief about it, and she was very fond of him.

Late that night he was wakened up by the cries of his children calling out, "Mother, mother!" When he sat up and rubbed his eyes, there was no wife by his side, and when he asked the little ones what was become of their mother, they said they saw the room full of nice little men and women, dressed in white and red and green, and their mother in the middle of them, going out by the door as if she was walking in her sleep. Out he ran, and searched everywhere round the house, but neither tale nor tidings did he get of her for many a day.

We.. the poor man was miserable enough, for he was as fond of his woman as she was of him. It used to bring the salt tears down his cheeks to see his poor children neglected and dirty, as they often were, and they'd be bad enough only for a kind neighbor that used to look in whenever she could spare time. The infant was out with a wet nurse.

About six weeks after -- just as he was going out to his work one morning -- a neighbor, that used to mind women at their lying-in, came up to him, and kept step by step with him to the field, and this is what she told him:

Just as I was falling asleep last night I hears a horse's tramp in the bawn, and a knock at the door, and there, when I cam out, was a fine-looking dark man mounted on a black horse, and he told me to get ready in all haste, for a lady was in great want of me. As soon as I put on my cloak and things, he took me by the hand, and I was sitting behind him before I felt myself stirring.

"Where are we going, sir?" says I.

"You'll soon know," says he, and he drew his fingers across my eyes, and not a *stim* remained in them.

I kept a tight grip of him, and the dickens a knew I knew whether he was going backwards or forwards, or how long we were about it, till my hand was taken again, and I felt the ground under me. The fingers went the other way across my eyes, and there we were before a castle door, and in we went through a big hall and great rooms all painted in fine green colors, with red and gold bands and ornaments, and the finest carpets and chairs and tables and window curtains, and fine ladies and gentlemen walking about.

At last we came to a bedroom, with a beautiful lady in bed, and there he left me with her; and, bedad, it was not long till a fine bouncing boy came into the world. The lady clapped her hands, and in came *Fear Doircha* (Dark Man), and kissed her and his son, and praised me, and gave me a bottle of green ointment to rub the child all over.

Well, the child I rubbed, sure enough; but my right eye began to smart me, and I put up my finger and gave it a rub, and purshuin to me if ever I was so frightened.

The beautiful room was a big rough cave, with water oozing over the edges of the stones and through the clay. And the lady, and the lord, and the child, wizened, poverty-bitten creatures -- nothing but skin and bone, and the rich dresses were old rags.

I didn't let on that I found any difference, and after a bit says *Fear Doircha*, "Go before me to the hall door, and I will be with you in a few moments and see you safe home."

Well, just as I turned into the outside cave, who should I see but poor Molly. She looked round all frightened and says to me in a whisper, "I'm brought here to give suck to the child of the king and the queen of the fairies. But there is one chance of saving me. All the court will pass the cross near Templeshambo next Friday night on a visit to the fairies of Old Ross. If John can catch me by hand or cloak when I ride by, and has courage not to let go his grip, I'll be safe. Here's the king. Don't open your mouth to answer. I saw what happened with the ointment."

Fear Doircha didn't once cast his eye towards Molly, and he seemed to have no suspicion of me. When we came out I looked about me, and where do you think we were but in the dike of the Rath of Cromogue. I was on the horse again, which was nothing but a big *boolian bui* (ragweed), and I was in dread every minute I'd fall off. But nothing happened till I found myself in my own bawn.

The king slipped five guineas into my hand as soon as I was on the ground, and thanked me, and bade me good night. I hope I'll never see his face again. I got into bed and couldn't sleep for a long time. And when I examined my five guineas this morning, that I left in the table drawer the last thing, I found five withered leaves of oak -- bad scran to the giver!"

Well, you may all think the fright, and the joy, and the grief the poor man was in when the woman finished her story. They talked, and they talked, but we needn't mind what they said till Friday night came, when both were standing where the mountain road crosses the one going to Ross.

There they stood looking toward the bridge of Thuar, and I won't keep you waiting, as they were in the dead of the night, with a little moonlight shining from over Kilachdiarmid.

At last she gave a start, and "By this and by that," says she, "here they come, bridles jingling, and feathers tossing."

He looked, but could see nothing. And she stood trembling, and her eyes wide open, looking down the way to the ford of Ballinacoola. "I see your wife," says she, "riding on the outside just so as to rub against us. We'll walk on promiskis-like, as if we suspected nothing, and when we are passing I'll give you a shove. If you don't do *your* duty then, dickens cure you!"

Well, they walked on easy, and the poor hearts beating in both their breasts; and though he could see nothing, he heard a faint jingle, and tramping, and rustling, and at last he got the push that she promised. He spread out his arms, and there was his wife's waist within them, and he could see her plain, but such a hullabaloo rose as if there was an earthquake; and he found himself surrounded by horrible-looking things, roaring at him, and striving to pull his wife away. But he made the sign of the cross, and bid them be gone in God's name, and held his wife as if it was iron his arms were made of. Bedad, in one moment everything was as silent as the grave, and the poor woman lying in a faint in the arms of her husband and her good neighbor.

Well, all in good time she was minding her family and her business again, and I'll go bail, after the fright she got, she spent more time on her knees, and avoided fairy-men all the days of the week, and particularly Sunday.

It is hard to have anything to do with the good people without getting a mark from them. My brave midwife didn't escape no more nor another. She was one Thursday at the market of Enniscorthy, when what did she see walking among the tubs of butter but *Fear Doirche*, very hungry looking, and taking a scoop out of one tub and out of another.

"Oh, sir," says she, very foolish, "I hope your lady is well, and the young heir."

"Pretty well, thank you," says he, rather frightened like. "How do I look in this new suit?" says he, getting to one side of her.

"I can't see you plain at all, sir," says she.

"Well, now," says he, getting round her back to the other side.

"Musha, indeed, sir, your coat looks no better nor a withered dock-leaf."

"Maybe, then," says he, "it will be different now," and he struck the eye next him with a switch.

Begonies, she never saw a *stim* after with that one till the day of her death.

- Source: Patrick Kennedy, [*Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*](#) (London: Macmillan and Company, 1866), [pp. 106-10](#).
- This story is also found in Andrew Lang, [*The Lilac Fairy Book*](#) (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1910), [pp. 54-61](#).

The Midwife of Listowel

Ireland

"Why do you call the fairies 'good people?'" asked I.

"I don't call them the good people myself," answered Duvane, "but that is what the man called them who told me the story. Some call them the good people to avoid vexing them. I think they are called the good people mostly by pious men and women, who say that they are some of the fallen angels."

"How is that?"

"They tell us that when the Lord cast down the rebel angels the chief of them all and the ringleaders went to the place of eternal punishment, but that the Lord stopped His hand while a great many were on the way. Wherever they were when He stopped His hand there they are to this day. Some of these angels are under the earth; others are on the earth, and still others in the air. People say that they are among us at all times, that they know everything that is going on, that they have great hope of being forgiven at the day of judgment by the Lord and restored to heaven, and that if they hadn't that hope they would destroy this world and all that's in it."

At this juncture the mason called out, "I will not say whether I think the fairies are fallen angels or who they are, but I remember a case in which a woman lost an eye through the fairies."

"If you do," said I, "I hope you will tell it."

"I will indeed," said he.

There was an old woman, a midwife, who lived in a little house by herself between this and Listowel. One evening there was a knock at the door; she opened it, and what should she see but a man who said she was wanted, and to go with him quickly. He begged her to hurry. She made herself ready at once, the man waiting outside. When she was ready the man sprang on a fine, large horse, and put her up behind him. Away raced the horse then. They went a great distance in such a short time that it seemed to her only two or three miles.

They came to a splendid large house and went in. The old woman found a beautiful lady inside. No other woman was to be seen. A child was born soon, and the man brought a vial of ointment, told the old woman to rub it on the child, but to have a great care and not touch her own self with it. She obeyed him and had no intention of touching herself, but on a sudden her left eye itched. She raised her hand, and rubbed the eye with one finger. Some of the ointment was on her finger, and that instant she saw great crowds of people around her, men and women. She knew that she was in a fort among fairies, and was frightened, but had courage enough not to show it, and finished her work.

The man came to her then, and said, "I will take you home now."

He opened the door, went out, sprang to the saddle, and reached his hand to her, but her eye was opened now and she saw that in place of a horse it was an old plow beam that was before her. She was more in dread then than ever, but took her seat, and away went the plow beam as swiftly as the very best horse in the kingdom. The man left her down at her own door, and she saw no more of him.

Some time after there was a great fair at Listowel. The old midwife went to the fair, and there were big crowds of people on every side of her. The old woman looked around for a while and what did she see but the man who had taken her away on a plow beam. He was hurrying around, going in and out among the people, and no one knowing he was in it but the old woman.

At last the finest young girl at the fair screamed and fell in a faint -- the fairy had thrust something into her side. A crowd gathered around the young girl. The old woman, who had seen all, made her way to the girl, examined her side, and drew a pin from it. The girl recovered.

A little later the fairy made his way to the old woman. "Have you ever seen me before?" asked he.

"Oh, maybe I have," said she.

"Do you remember that I took you to a fort to attend a young woman?"

"I do."

"When you anointed the child did you touch any part of yourself with the ointment I gave you?"

"I did without knowing it; my eye itched and I rubbed it with my finger."

"Which eye?"

"The left."

The moment she said that he struck her left eye and took the sight from it. She went home blind of one eye, and was that way the rest of her life.

- Source: Jeremiah Curtin, [*Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World: Collected from Oral Tradition in South-West Munster*](#) (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1895), [pp. 42-45](#).
- Link to additional legends about the [Origin of Underground People](#).

Fairy Ointment

England

Once upon a time there was, in this celebrated town [Tavistock], a Dame Somebody, I do not know her name, and as she is a real character, I have no right to give her a fictitious one. All I with truth can say, is, that she was old, and nothing the worse for that; for age is, or ought to be, held in honor as the source of wisdom and experience. Now this good old woman lived not in vain, for she had passed her days in the useful capacity of a nurse; and as she approached the term of going out of the world herself, she was still useful in her generation, by helping others into it -- she was, in fact, the *Sage-femme* of the village; for though I have the utmost dislike to mixing up French, or any foreign words, with the good, plain English of my native land, I here for once venture on a French expression, because it is, in certain particulars, considered as a refinement so much in fashion, that I must not venture to neglect it.

One night, about twelve o'clock in the morning, as the good folks say who tell this tale, Dame Somebody had just got comfortably into bed, when rap, rap, rap came on her cottage door, with such bold, loud, and continued noise, that there was a sound of authority in every individual knock. Startled and alarmed by the call, she arose from her bed, and soon learnt that the summons was a hasty one to bid her attend on a patient who needed her help. She opened her door; when the summoner appeared to be a strange, squint-eyed, little, ugly, old fellow, who had a look, as she said, very like a certain dark personage, who ought not at all times to be called by his proper name. Not

at all prepossessed in favor of the errand by the visage of the messenger, she nevertheless could not, or dared not resist the command to follow him straight, and attend upon "his wife."

"Thy wife!" thought the good dame. "Heaven forgive me; but as sure as I live I be going to the birth of a little divel."

A large coal-black horse, with eyes like balls of fire, stood at the door. The ill-looking old fellow, without more ado, whisked her up on a high pillion in a minute, seated himself before her, and away went horse and riders, as if sailing through the air, rather than trotting on the ground. How Dame Somebody got to the place of her destination she could not tell; but it was a great relief to her fears when she found herself set down at the door of a neat cottage, saw a couple of tidy children, and remarked her patient to be a decent-looking woman, having all things about her fitting the time and the occasion.

A fine, bouncing babe soon made its appearance, who seemed very bold on its entry into life, for it gave the good dame a box on the ear, as, with the coaxing and cajolery of all good old nurses, she declared the "sweet little thing to be very like its father."

The mother said nothing to this, but gave nurse a certain ointment with directions that she should "strike the child's eyes with it."

Now you must know that this word *strike* in our Devonshire vocabulary, does not exactly mean to give a blow, but rather what is opposite, to rub, smooth down, or touch gently.

The nurse performed her task, though she thought it an odd one; and as it is nothing new that old nurses are generally very curious, she wondered what it could be for; and thought that, as no doubt it was a good thing, she might just as well try it upon her own eyes as well as those of the baby; so she made free to strike one of them by way of trial; when, O! ye powers of fairyland, what a change was there!

The neat, but homely cottage, and all who were in it, seemed all on a sudden to undergo a mighty transformation; some for the better, some for the worse. The new-made mother appeared as a beautiful lady attired in white; the babe was seen wrapped in swaddling clothes of a silvery gauze. It looked much prettier than before, but still maintained the elfish cast of the eye, like his redoubted father: whilst two or three children more had undergone a metamorphosis as uncouth as that recorded by Ovid when the Cercopians were transformed into apes. For there sat on either side the bed's head, a couple of little flat-nosed imps, who with "mops and mows," and with many a grimace and grin, were "busied to no end" in scratching their own polls, or in pulling the fairy lady's ears with their long and hairy paws.

The dame, who beheld all this, fearing she knew not what in the house of enchantment, got away as fast as she could, without saying one word about "striking" her own eye with the magic ointment, and what she had beheld in consequence of doing so. The sour-looking old fellow once more handed her up on the coal-black horse, and sent her home in a *whip-sissa*. Now what a whip-sissa means is more than I can tell, though I consider myself to be tolerably well acquainted with the tongues of this "West Countrie." It may mean, perhaps, "Whip, says he," in allusion to some gentle intimation being feelingly given by the rider to the horse's sides with a switch, that he should use the utmost dispatch; but my derivation of the word, like that of some better etymologists on difficult occasions, may be a little far fetched. I, therefore, leave the point to be settled by the learned. Certain it is, the old woman returned home much faster than she went. But mark the event.

On the next market day, when she sallied forth to sell her eggs, who should she see but the same, wicked-looking old fellow, busied, like a rogue as he was, in pilfering sundry articles from stall to stall.

"O! ho!" thought the dame, "have I caught you, you old thief? But I'll let you see I could set master mayor and the two town constables on your back, if I chose to be telling."

So up she went, and with that bold free sort of air, which persons, who have learnt secrets that ought not to be known, are apt to assume when they address any great rogue hitherto considered as a superior, she inquired carelessly after his wife and child, and hoped both were as well as could be expected.

"What!" exclaimed the old pixy thief, "do you see me today?"

"See you! To be sure I do, as plain as I see the sun in the skies; and I see you are busy into the bargain."

"Do you so! " cried he. "Pray with which eye do you see all this?"

"With the right eye to be sure."

"The ointment! The ointment!" exclaimed the old fellow. "Take that for meddling with what did not belong to you -- you shall see me no more."

He struck her eye as he spoke, and from that hour till the day of her death she was blind on the right side; thus dearly paying for having gratified an idle curiosity in the house of a pixy.

- Source: Anna Eliza Bray, [*Traditions, Legends, Superstitions, and Sketches of Devonshire on the Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy*](#), vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1838), [pp. 183-88](#).

- Bray does not give this account a title.
- Footnote by Bray:

It has been the popular belief of all ages that no mortal can see a fairy without his eyes being rubbed with a magic ointment. Cornelius Agrippa, if I remember right, though it is long since I have seen his book, gives a very amusing receipt for compounding such a salve.
- This tale is retold by Joseph Jacobs in the following story.

Fairy Ointment

England

Dame Goody was a nurse that looked after sick people and minded babies. One night she was woke up at midnight, and when she went downstairs, she saw a strange squinny-eyed, little ugly old fellow, who asked her to come to his wife who was too ill to mind her baby. Dame Goody didn't like the look of the old fellow, but business is business; so she popped on her things, and went down to him. And when she got down to him, he whisked her up on to a large coal-black horse with fiery eyes, that stood at the door; and soon they were going at a rare pace, Dame Goody holding on to the old fellow like grim death.

They rode, and they rode, till at last they stopped before a cottage door. So they got down and went in and found the good woman abed with the children playing about; and the babe, a fine bouncing boy, beside her.

Dame Goody took the babe, which was as fine a baby boy as you'd wish to see. The mother, when she handed the baby to Dame Goody to mind, gave her a box of ointment, and told her to stroke the baby's eyes with it as soon as it opened them. After a while it began to open its eyes. Dame Goody saw that it had squinny eyes just like its father. So she took the box of ointment and stroked its two eyelids with it. But she couldn't help wondering what it was for, as she had never seen such a thing done before. So she looked to see if the others were looking, and, when they were not noticing, she stroked her own right eyelid with the ointment.

No sooner had she done so, than everything seemed changed about her. The cottage became elegantly furnished. The mother in the bed was a beautiful lady, dressed up in white silk. The little baby was still more beautiful than before, and its clothes were made of a sort of silvery gauze. Its little brothers and sisters around the bed were flat-nosed imps with pointed ears, who made faces at one another, and scratched their polls. Sometimes they would pull the sick lady's ears with their long and hairy paws. In fact, they were up to all kinds of mischief; and Dame Goody knew that she had got into a house of pixies. But she said nothing to nobody, and as soon as the lady was

well enough to mind the baby, she asked the old fellow to take her back home. So he came round to the door with the coal-black horse with eyes of fire, and off they went as fast as before, or perhaps a little faster, till they came to Dame Goody's cottage, where the squinny-eyed old fellow lifted her down and left her, thanking her civilly enough, and paying her more than she had ever been paid before for such service.

Now next day happened to be market-day, and as Dame Goody had been away from home, she wanted many things in the house, and trudged off to get them at the market. As she was buying the things she wanted, who should she see but the squinny-eyed old fellow who had taken her on the coal-black horse. And what do you think he was doing? Why he went about from stall to stall taking things from each, here some fruit, and there some eggs, and so on; and no one seemed to take any notice.

Now Dame Goody did not think it her business to interfere, but she thought she ought not to let so good a customer pass without speaking. So she ups to him and bobs a curtsy and said, "Gooden, sir, I hopes as how your good lady and the little one are as well as --"

But she couldn't finish what she was a-saying, for the funny old fellow started back in surprise, and he says to her, says he, "What! do you see me today?"

"See you," says she, "why, of course I do, as plain as the sun in the skies, and what's more," says she, "I see you are busy, too, into the bargain."

"Ah, you see too much." said he. "Now, pray, with which eye do you see all this?"

"With the right eye to be sure," said she, as proud as can be to find him out.

"The ointment! The ointment!" cried the old pixy thief. "Take that for meddling with what don't concern you. You shall see me no more."

And with that he struck her on the right eye, and she couldn't see him any more. And, what was worse, she was blind on the right side from that hour till the day of her death.

- Source: Joseph Jacobs, [*English Fairy Tales*](#), (London: David Nutt, 1890), [no. 40, pp. 211-14](#).
- Jacobs' source: "Mrs. Bray, *The Tamar and the Tavy*, i. 74 (letters to Southey), as quoted by Mr. Hartland in *Folk-Lore*, I, 207-208." Jacobs notes further: "I have christened the anonymous midwife and euphemized her profession." ([p. 251](#))
- Jacobs' source is reproduced in the [previous story](#) of the present collection.

Notes and Bibliography

"Midwife (or Godparent) for the Elves" tales are classified as type 476* tales in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale classification system, or as a migratory legend type 5070. For more information about folktale types see:

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Chapter III

Fairy Births and Human Midwives.

Stories of midwives who have been summoned to the birth of fairies--Human visitors to Fairyland must not eat there--The reason--Fairies' gratitude--The conditions of fairy gifts.

A TALE, the scene of which is laid near Beddgelert, runs, as translated by Professor Rhys, in this way:--"Once on a time, when a midwife from Nanhwynan had newly got to the Hafodydd Brithion to pursue her calling, a gentleman came to the door on a fine grey steed and bade her come with him at once. Such was the authority with which he spoke, that the poor midwife durst not refuse to go, however much it was her duty to stay where she was. So she mounted behind him, and off they went, like the flight of a swallow, through Cwmllan, over the Bwlch, down Nant yr Aran, and over the Gadair to Cwm Hafod Ruffydd before the poor woman had time even to say Oh! When they got there, she saw before her a magnificent mansion, splendidly lit up with such lamps as she had never before seen. They entered the court, and a crowd of servants in expensive liveries came to meet them, and she was at once led through the great hail into a bed-chamber, the like of which she had never seen. There the mistress of the house, to whom she had been fetched, was awaiting her. She got through her duties successfully, and stayed there until the lady had completely recovered, nor had she spent any part of her life so merrily; there was naught but festivity day and night: dancing, singing, and endless rejoicing reigned there. But merry as it was, she found she must go, and the nobleman gave her a large purse, with the order not to open it until she had got into her own house; then he bade one of his servants escort her the same way she had come, When she reached home she opened the purse, and, to her great joy, it was full of money; and she lived happily on those earnings to the end of her life."¹

It is a long leap from Carnarvonshire to Lapland, where this story is told with no great variation. A clergyman's wife in Swedish Lappmark, the cleverest midwife in all Sweden, was summoned one fine summer's evening to attend a mysterious being of Troll race and great might, called Vitra. At this unusual call she took counsel with her husband, who, however, deemed it best for her to go. Her guide led her into a splendid building, the rooms whereof were as clean and elegant as those of very illustrious folk; and in a beautiful bed lay a still more beautiful woman, for whom her services were required, and who was no other than Vitra herself. Under the midwife's care Vitra speedily gave birth to a fair girl, and in a few minutes had entirely recovered, and

¹ "Y Cymmrodor," vol. v. p. 70, translated from "Y Brython," vol. iv. p. 251.

fetches all sorts of refreshments, which she laid before her benefactress. The latter refused to eat, in spite of Vitra's reassuring persuasion, and further refused the money which the Troll-wife pressed upon her. Vitra then sent her home, bidding her look on the table when next she entered her cowherd's hut and see what she would find there. She thought no more of the matter until the following spring, when on entering the hut she found on the table half a dozen large spoons of pure silver with her name engraved thereon in neat letters. These spoons long remained an heirloom in the clergyman's family to testify the truth of the story. A Swedish book, published in 1775, contains a tale, narrated in the form of a legal declaration solemnly subscribed on the 12th April 1671 by the fortunate midwife's husband, whose name was Peter Rahm, and who also seems to have been a clergyman. On the authority of this declaration we are called on to believe that the event recorded actually happened in the year 1660. Peter Rahm alleges that he and his wife were at their farm one evening late when there came a little man, swart of face and clad in grey, who begged the declarant's wife to come and help his wife then in labour. The declarant, seeing that they had to do with a Troll, prayed over his wife, blessed her, and bade her in God's name go with the stranger. She seemed to be borne along by the wind. After her task was accomplished she, like the clergyman's wife just mentioned, refused the food offered her, and was borne home in the same manner as she had come. The next day she found on a shelf in the sitting-room a heap of old silver pieces and clippings, which it is to be supposed the Troll had brought her.²

Apart from the need of human aid, common to all the legends with which we are dealing, the two points emphasized by these Swedish tales are the midwife's refusal of food and the gratitude of the Troll. In a Swabian story the Earthman, as he is called, apologizes for omitting to offer food. In this case the midwife was afraid to go alone with her summoner, and begged that her husband might accompany her. This was permitted; and the Earthman showed them the way through the forest with his lantern, for it was of course night. They came first to a moss door, then to a wooden door, and lastly to a door of shining metal, whence a staircase went down into the earth, and led them into a large and splendid chamber where the Earthwife lay. When the object of their visit was accomplished the Earthman thanked the woman much, and said: "You do not relish our meat and drink, wherefore I will bestow something else upon thee." With these words he gave her a whole apronful of black coals, and taking his lantern again he lighted the midwife and her husband home. On the way home she slyly threw away one coal after another. The Earthman said nothing until he was about to take his leave, when he observed merely: "The less you scattered the more you might have." After he had gone the woman's husband remonstrated with her, bidding her keep the coals, for the Earthman appeared in earnest with his gift. When they reached home, however, she shook out her apron on the hearth, and behold! instead of coals,

² Poestion, p. 111; Grimm, "Teut. Myth." p. 457, note, quoting at length the declaration from Hülpher, "Samlingen om Jämtland." A translation will be found in Keightley, p. 122.

glittering true gold pieces. The woman now sought eagerly enough after the coals she had thrown away, but she found them not.³

Confining our attention for the moment to the refusal of food, it would seem that the Earthman's apology in the foregoing narrative is, as too many human apologies are, a mere excuse. The real reason for the midwife's abstention was not that fairy food was distasteful, but that she durst not touch it, under penalty of never again returning to the light of day. A Danish tradition tells of a woman who was taken by an elf on Christmas Eve down into the earth to attend his wife. As soon as the elf-wife was delivered her husband took the child away; for if he could find two newly married persons in the bridal bed, before they had repeated their Paternoster, he could, by laying the child between them, procure for it all the good fortune intended for the newly wedded pair. During his absence the elf-wife took the opportunity of instructing her helper as to her conduct when he returned; and the first and chief point of her advice was to eat nothing that was offered her. The elf-wife was herself a Christian woman who had been inveigled down into the dwellings of the elves, she had eaten, and therefore had never escaped again. On the elf's return, accordingly, the midwife refused food, and he said:

"They did not strike thee on the mouth who taught thee that." Late rabbinical writings contain a similar legend of a Mohel, a man whose office it was to circumcise, who was summoned one winter's night by a stranger to perform the ceremony upon a child who would be eight days old the following day. The stranger led him to a lofty mountain, into the bowels of which they passed, and after descending many flights of steps found themselves in a great city. Here the Mohel was taken to a palace, in one of whose apartments was the child's mother lying. When she saw the Mohel she began to weep, and told him that he was in the land of the Mazikin, but that she was a human being, a Jewess, who had been carried away when little from home and brought thither. And she counselled him to take good heed to refuse everything whether of meat or drink that might be offered him: "For if thou taste anything of theirs thou wilt become like one of them, and wilt remain here for ever."⁴

We touch here upon a very ancient and widespread superstition, which we may pause to illustrate from different parts of the world. A Manx tale, which can be traced back to Waidron, narrates the night adventure of a farmer who lost his way in returning home from Peel, and was led by the sound of music into a large hail where were a great number of little people feasting. Among them were some faces he seemed to know; but he took no notice of them until the little folk offered him drink, when one of them, whose features seemed not unknown to him, plucked him by the coat and forbade him, whatever he did, to taste anything he saw before him; "for if you do," he added, "you will be as I am, and return no more to your family."⁵

³ Meier, p. 59.

⁴ Thorpe, vol. ii. p. 128, from Thiele, "Danmark's Folkesagn"; Keightley, p. 506.

⁵ Waldron, p. 28.

It is necessary for the hero of a Picard story to go and seek the devil in his own abode. The devil of popular imagination, though a terrific ogre, is not the entirely Evil One of the theologians; and one of his good points in the story referred to is that he has three fair daughters, the fairest of whom is compelled by the hero to help him in overcoming her father. She accordingly instructs him to eat no meat and to drink no wine at the devil's house, otherwise he will be poisoned. This may remind us of Kan Púdâi, who in the Altaic ballad descends with his steed to the middle of the earth and encounters various monsters. There the grass and the water of the mountain forest through which he rode were poison. In both cases, what is probably meant is, that to eat or drink is to return no more from these mysterious abodes; and it may be to the intent to obviate any such consequence that Saint Peter, in sending a certain king's son down through a black and stinking hole a hundred noises deep underground, in a Gascon tale, to fetch Saint Peter's own sword, provides him with just enough bread in his wallet every morning to prevent his bursting with hunger. An extension of this thought sometimes even prohibits the hero from accepting a seat or a bed offered by way of hospitality on the part of the devil, or the sorceress, to whose dwelling his business may take him, or even to look at the fair temptress who may seek to entice him to eat.⁶

The meaning of the superstition is not easy to trace, but it should be remembered that in the lower stages of human civilization no distinction is drawn between supernatural or spiritual beings who have never been enclosed in human bodies, and the spirits of the dead. Savage philosophy mingles them together in one phantasmagoria of grotesquery and horror. The line which separates fairies and ogres from the souls of men has gradually grown up through ages of Christian teaching and, broad as it may seem to us, it is occasionally hardly visible in these stories. Every now and then it is ignored, as in the case of the old friends found among the "little people" by the Manx farmer. Less startling than these, but quite as much in point, are the women, like some already mentioned, who are carried off into Fairyland, where they become wives and mothers. They can never come back to their old life, though they retain enough of the "mortal mixture" to require the adventurous human midwife to relieve their pains. Accordingly, we need not be surprised if the same incidents of story or fibres of superstition attach at one time to ghosts and at another to the non-human creatures of imagination, or if Hades and Fairyland are often confounded. Both are equally the realm of the supernatural. We may therefore inquire whether eating is forbidden to the chance sojourner in the place of the dead equally as to the sojourner in Fairyland, if he wish to return to the upper air. And we shall find that it is.

Proserpine ate seven grains of a pomegranate which grew in the Elysian Fields, and so was compelled to remain in the Shades, the wife of "the grisly king." Thus, too, when Morgan the Fay takes measures to get Ogier the Dane into her power she causes him to be shipwrecked on a loadstone rock near to Avalon. Escaping from the sea, he

⁶ "Mélusine," vol. i. p. 446; Radloff, vol. i. p. 78; Bladé vol. 1. p. 161; Cosquin, vol. ii. p. 10; Cavallius, p. 281; "Revue des Trad. Pop." vol. iv. p. 222.

comes to an orchard, and there eats an apple which, it is not too much to say, seals his fate. Again, when Thomas of Erceldoune is being led down by the Fairy Queen into her realm, he desires to eat of the fruit of certain trees:

"He presed to pul the frute with his honde,
As man for fode was nyhonde feynte;
She seid, Thomas, lat them stande,
Or ellis the fiend will the ateynte.
If thou pulle the sothe to sey,
Thi soule goeth to the fyre of hell
Hit cummes never out til domusday,
But ther ever in payne to dwelle."

An old story preserved for us by Saxo Grammaticus describes the visit of some Danish heroes to Guthmund, a giant who rules a delightful land beyond a certain river crossed by a golden bridge. Thorkill, their conductor, a Scandinavian Ulysses for cunning, warns his companions of the various temptations that will be set before them. They must forbear the food of the country, and be satisfied with that which they had brought with them; moreover, they must keep apart from the natives, taking care not so much as to touch them. In spite, however, of Thorkill's warnings to them, and his excuses in their behalf to the king, some of the heroes fell and were left behind when their friends were at last allowed to depart.⁷ So far we see that the prohibition and the danger we found extant in the Fairyland of modern folk-tales apply also to the classic Hades; and we have traced them back a long way into the Middle Ages in French, British, and Danish traditions relating to fairies and other supernatural existences, with a special threat of Hell in the case of Thomas of Erceldoune.

On the other side of the globe the Banks' islanders believe, like the Greeks, in an underground kingdom of the dead, which they call Panoi. Only a few years ago a woman was living who professed to have been down there. Her object had been to visit her brother, who had recently died. To do this she perfumed herself with water in which a dead rat had been steeped, so as to give herself a death-like smell. She then pulled up a bird's nest and descended through the hole thus made. Her brother, whom of course she found, cautioned her to eat nothing, and by taking his advice she was able to return.

A similar tale is told of a New Zealand woman of rank, who was lucky enough to come back from the abode of departed spirits by the assistance of her father and his repeated commands to avoid tasting the disgusting food of the dead. Wäinämöinen, the epic hero of the Finns, determined to penetrate to Manala, the region of the dead. We need not follow in detail his voyage; it will suffice to say that on his arrival, after a long parley with the maiden daughter of Tuoni, the king of the island, beer was brought to him in a two-eared tankard.

⁷ Child, vol. i. p. 319; "Thomas of Erceldoune," p. ii (Cambridge Text); Saxo, "Gesta Dan." l. viii.

"Wäinämöinen, old and trusty,
Gaz'd awhile upon the tankard;
Lo! within it frogs were spawning,
Worms about its sides were laying.
Words in this wise then he utter'd:
'Not to drink have I come hither
From the tankard of Manala,
Not to empty Tuoni's beaker;
They who drink of beer are drowned.
Those who drain the can are ruin'd."⁸

The hero's concluding words might form a motto for our teetotallers; and in any case his abstinence enabled him to succeed in his errand and return. A point is made in the poem of the loathsome character of the beverage offered him, which thus agrees with the poison referred to in some of the narratives I have previously cited. The natives of the Southern Seas universally represent the sustenance of spirits as filthy and abominable. A most remarkable coincidence with the description of Tuoni's beer occurs in a curious story told on one of the Hervey Islands, concerning a Mangaian Dante. Being apparently near death, this man directed that, as soon as the breath was out of his body, a cocoa-nut should be cracked, and its kernel disengaged from the shell and placed upon his stomach under the grave-clothes.

Having descended to the Shades, he beheld Mini, the horrible hag who rules them, and whose deformities need not now be detailed. She commanded him to draw near. "The trembling human spirit obeyed, and sat down before Mini. According to her unvarying practice she set for her intended victim a bowl of food, and bade him eat it quite up. Miru, with evident anxiety, waited to see him swallow it. As Tekanae took up the bowl, to his horror he found it to consist of living centipedes. The quick-witted mortal now recollected the cocoa-nut kernel at the pit of his stomach, and hidden from Miru's view by his clothes. With one hand he held the bowl to his lips, as if about to swallow its contents; with the other he secretly held the cocoa-nut kernel, and ate it--the bowl concealing the nut from Miru. It was evident to the goddess that Tekanae was actually swallowing something: what else could it be but the contents of the fatal bowl?"

Tekanae craftily contrived whilst eating the nourishing cocoa-nut to allow the live centipedes to fall on the ground one or two at a time. As the intended victim was all the time sitting on the ground it was no difficult achievement in this way to empty the bowl completely by the time he had finished the cocoa-nut. Mini waited in vain to see her intended victim writhing in agony and raging with thirst. Her practice on such occasions was to direct the tortured victim-spirit to dive in a lake close by, to seek relief. None that dived into that water ever came up alive; excessive anguish and quenchless thirst so distracting their thoughts that they were invariably drowned. Miru would afterwards cook and eat her victims at leisure Here was a new event in her

⁸ *Journal of Anthropol. Inst.* vol. x. p. 282; Shortland, p. 150; "Kalewala," rune xvi. l. 293.

history: the bowl of living centipedes had been disposed of, and yet Tekanae manifested no sign of pain, no intention to leap into the cooling, but fatal, waters. Long did Miru wait; but in vain. At last she said to her visitor, 'Return to the upper world' (i.e., to life). 'Only remember this--do not speak against me to mortals.

Reveal not my ugly form and my mode of treating my visitors. Should you be so foolish as to do so, you will certainly at some future time come back to my domains, and I will see to it that you do not escape my vengeance a second time!' Tekanae accordingly left the Shades, and came back to life"; but he, it is needless to say, carefully disregarded the hag's injunction, or we should not have had the foregoing veracious account of what happens below.⁹

The tortures reserved for Miru's victims cast a weird light on the warning in the Picard story against eating and drinking what the devil may offer. But whether poisoning in the latter case would have been the preliminary to a hearty meal to be made off the unlucky youth by his treacherous host, or no, it is impossible to determine. What the tales do suggest, however, is that the food buried with the dead by uncivilized tribes may be meant to provide them against the contingency of having to partake of the hospitality of the Shades, and so afford them a chance of escaping back to the upper air. But, putting this conjecture aside, we have found the supposition that to eat of fairy food is to return, no more, equally applicable to the world of the dead as to Fairyland. In seeking its meaning, therefore, we must not be satisfied without an explanation that will fit both. Almost all over the earth the rite of hospitality has been held to confer obligations on its recipient, and to unite him by special ties to the giver. And even where the notion of hospitality does not enter, to join in a common meal has often been held to symbolize, if not to constitute, union of a very sacred kind. The formation of blood relationship, or brotherhood, and formal adoption into a tribe or family (ceremonies well known in the lower culture), are usually, if not always, cemented in this way. The modern wedding breakfast, with its bridecake, is a survival from a very ancient mode of solemnizing the closest tie of all; and when Proserpine tasted a pomegranate she partook of a fruit of a specially symbolic character to signify acceptance of her new destiny as her captor's wife. Hence to partake of food in the land of spirits, whether they are human dead, or fairies, is to proclaim one's union with them and to renounce the fellowship of mortals.

The other point emphasized in the Swedish tales quoted just now is the Troll's gratitude, as evidenced by his gifts to the successful midwife. Before considering this, however, let us note that these supernatural beings do not like to be imposed upon. A German midwife who was summoned by a Waterman, or Nix, to aid a woman in labour, was told by the latter: "I am a Christian woman as well as you; and I was carried off by a Waterman, who changed me. When my husband comes in now and offers you money, take no more from him than you usually get, or else he will twist

⁹ Gill, p. 172.

your neck. Take good care!" And in another tale, told at Kemnitz of the Nicker, as he is there called, when he asks the midwife how much he owes her, she answers that she will take no more from him than from other people. "That's lucky for thee," he replies; "hadst thou demanded more, it would have gone ill with thee!" But for all that he gave her an apron full of gold and brought her safely home.¹⁰

A Pomeranian story marks the transition to a type of tale wherein one special characteristic of elfin gifts is presented. For in this case, when the mannikin asked the midwife what her charge was, she modestly replied: "Oh, nothing; the little trouble I have had does not call for any payment." "Now then, lift up thy apron!" answered he; and it was quickly filled with the rubbish that lay in the corner of the room. Taking his lantern, the elf then politely guided her home. When she shook out the contents of her apron, lo! it was no rubbish which fell on the ground, but pure, shining minted. gold. Hitherto she and her father had been very poor; thenceforth they had no more want their whole lives long. This gift of an object apparently worthless, which turns out, on the conditions being observed, of the utmost value, is a commonplace of fairy transactions. It is one of the most obvious manifestations of superhuman power; and as such it has always been a favourite incident in the stories of all nations. We have only to do here with the gift as it appears in the group under analysis; and in these cases it presents little variety. In a tale told on the lake of Zug the dwarf fills the woman's apron with something at which he bids her on no account look before she is in her own house. Her curiosity, however, is uncontrollable; and the moment the dwarf vanishes she peeps into her apron, to find simply black coals. She, in a rage, flings them away, keeping only two as evidence of the shabby treatment she had met with; but when she got home these two were nothing less than precious stones. She at once ran back to where she had shaken out the supposed coals; but they were all gone. So a recompense of straws, dust, birch leaves, or shavings becomes, as elsewhere told, pure gold, pure silver, or thalers. Nor is the story confined to Europe. In Dardistan it is related that a boy, taken down by a Yatsh, or demon, into an underground palace, is allowed to be present at a Yatsh wedding. He finds the Yatshes assembled in great force and in possession of a number of valuables belonging to the dwellers in his own village. On his return his guide presents him with a sack full of coals, which he empties as soon as he is out of sight. One little piece, however, remains, and is transformed into a gold coin when he reaches home.¹¹

Conversely, when the midwife is rewarded with that which seems valuable it turns out worthless. An Irish-woman, in relating a professional experience among the Good People, wound up her story as follows: "The king slipped five guineas into my hand as soon as I was on the ground, and thanked me, and bade me good-night. I hope I'll

¹⁰ Keightley, p. 261; Kuhn and Schwartz, p. 93.

¹¹ Jahn, p. 72; Keightley, p. 275, quoting Müller, "Bilder und Sagen aus der Schweiz," p. 119; Birlinger, "Volksthümliches," vol. i. p. 42; Kuhn, p. 82; Thorpe, vol. ii. p. 128; vol. iii. p. 54, quoting Mullenlioff, "Sagen, &c., der Herzogthümer Schleswig, Holstein und Lauenburg"; Kuhn and Schwartz, p. 173; Wratislaw, p. 40; Wenzig, p. 198; Liebrecht, p. 100, citing "Resultsof a Tourin Dardistan," part iii. p.3.

never see his face again. I got into bed, and couldn't sleep for a long time; and when I examined my five guineas this morning, that I left in the table-drawer the last thing, I found five withered leaves of oak--bad scran to the giver! " This incident recalls the Barber's tale of his fourth brother in the " Arabian Nights." This unlucky man went on selling meat to a sorcerer for five months, and putting the bright new money in which the latter paid him into a box by itself; but when he came to open the box he found in it nothing but a parcel of leaves, or, as Sir Richard Burton has it, bits of white paper cut round to look like coin. Chinese folklore is full of similar occurrences, which we cannot now stay to discuss. But, returning to western traditions, there is a way of counteracting the elves' transforming magic. The wife of a farmer named Niels Hansen, of Uglerup, in Denmark, was summoned to attend a troll-wife, who told her that the troll, her husband, would offer her a quantity of gold; "but," she said, "unless you cast this knife behind you when you go out, it will be nothing but coal when you reach home." The woman followed her patient's advice, and so continued to carry safely home a costly present of gold.¹²

The objection of supernatural beings to iron, and its power of undoing their charms, will be considered in a future chapter. The good luck of Niels Hansen's wife offers meantime another subject of interest; for it was due to her own kindness of heart. A short time before she had been raking hay in a field, when she caught a large and fat toad between the teeth of her rake. She gently released it, saying: "Poor thing! I see that thou needest help; I will help thee." That toad was the troll-wife, and as she afterwards attended her she was horrified to see a hideous serpent hanging down just above her head. Her fright led to explanations and an expression of gratitude on the part of the troll-wife. This incident is by no means uncommon; but a very few examples must suffice here. Generally the woman's terror is attributed to a millstone hanging over her head. At Grammendorf in Pomerania, a maid saw, every time she went to milk the cows, a hateful toad hopping about in the stable. She determined to kill it, and would have seized it one day had it not, in the very nick of time, succeeded in creeping into a hole, where she could not get at it. A few days after, when she was again busy in the stable, a little Ulk, as the elves there are called, came and invited her to descend with him into Fairyland. On reaching the bottom of a staircase with her conductor, she found her services were required for an Ulkwife, whose time was at hand. Entering the dwelling she was frightened to observe a huge millstone above her, suspended by a silken thread; and the Ulk, seeing her terror, told her she had caused him exactly the same, when she chased the poor toad and attempted to kill it. The girl was compelled to share in the feast which followed. When it was over she was given a piece of gold, that she was carefully to preserve; for so long as she did so she would never be in want of money. But her guide warned her at parting never to relate her experience, otherwise the elves would fetch her again, and set her under the millstone, which would then fall and crush her. Whether this was indeed the

¹² Kennedy, p. 106; Thorpe, vol. ii. p. 130, quoting Thiele, "Danmark's Folkesagn."

consequence of her narrating this very true story we do not know. After some of the beliefs we have been considering in the foregoing pages it is, however, interesting to note that no iii attended her eating and drinking in Fairyland, and that the gold she received did not turn to dross, though it possessed other miraculous qualities which might very well have led her to the bad end threatened by the Ulk. Perhaps a portion of the story has been lost.¹³

Sometimes a different turn is given to the tale. A Swabian peasant-woman was once in the fields with her servant-maid, when they saw a big toad. The woman told her maid to kill it. The latter replied: "No; I won't do that, and I will stand sponsor for it yet once more." Not long afterwards she was sent for to become sponsor, and was conducted into the lake, where she found the toad now in guise of a woman. After the ceremony was over, the lake-woman rewarded her with a bushel of straw, and sent by her hand a girdle for her mistress. On the way home the girl tried the girdle on a tree to see how it would look, and in a moment the tree was torn into a thousand pieces. This was the punishment devised by the lake-woman for her mistress, because she had wished to put her to death while in the form of a toad. The straw was, of course, pure gold; but the girl foolishly cast it all away except a few stalks which clung to her dress. So a countryman who accidentally spilt some hot broth on a witch, disguised as a toad, is presented by her another day with a girdle for his little son. Suspecting something wrong, he tries it on his dog, which at once swells up and bursts. This is a Saxon saga from Transylvania; an Irish saga brings us to the same catastrophe. There a girl meets a frog which is painfully bloated, and kicks it unfeelingly aside, with the words: "May you never be delivered till I am midwife to you!" Now the frog was a water-fairy dwelling in a lake, into which the girl soon after was conveyed and compelled to become the fairy's midwife. By way of reward she is presented with a red cloak, which, on her way home, she hangs up in admiration on a tree. Well was it for her that she did so, for it set the tree on fire; and had she worn it, as she meant to do, on the following Sunday at Mass, the chapel itself would have been in a blaze.¹⁴

The fairies' revenge here missed its mark, though calculated on no trifling scale. Indeed, the rewards they bestowed were never nicely balanced with the good or ill they intended to requite, but were showered in open-handed fashion as by those who could afford to be lavish. Of this we have already had several instances; a few more may be given. At Palermo a tale is told of a midwife who was one day cooking in her own kitchen when a hand appeared and a voice cried: "Give to me!" She took a plate and filled it from the food she was preparing. Presently the hand returned the plate full of golden money. This was repeated daily; and the woman, seeing the generous payment, became more and more free with her portions of food. At the end of nine

¹³ Jahn, p. 64; cf p. 74, where there are two maidens, one of whom had saved the toad when the other desired to kill it. They stand sponsors for the fairy child, and are rewarded with sweepings which turn to gold; also Bartsch, vol. i. p. 50, where a sword is suspended.

¹⁴ Meier, p. 69; Muller, p. 140; "N. and Q.," 7th ser. vol. v. p. 501.

months a knocking was heard at the door; and, descending, she found two giants, who caught her up on their shoulders, and unceremoniously ran off with her. They carried her to a lady who needed her offices, and she assisted to bring into the world two fine boys. The lady evidently was fully alive to her own dignity, for she kept the woman a proper human month, to the distress of her husband, who, not knowing what had become of her, searched the city night and day, and at last gave her up for dead. Then the lady (a fairy princess she was) asked her if she wished to go, and whether she would be paid by blows or pinches. The poor midwife deemed her last hour was come, and said to herself that if she must die it would be better to die quickly; so she chose blows. Accordingly the princess called the two giants, and sent her home with a large sack of money, which enabled her to relinquish business, set up her carriage, and become one of the first ladies in Palermo. Ten years passed; and one day a grand carriage stopped at her door. A lady alighted and entered her palace. When she had her face to face, the lady said; "Gossip, do you know me?" "No, madam." "What! do you not remember that I am the lady to whom you came ten years ago, when these children were born? I, too, am she who held out her hand and asked for food. I was the fairies' captive; and if you had not been generous enough to give me to eat, I should have died in the night. And because you were generous you have, become rich. Now I am freed, and here I am with my sons." The quondam midwife, with tears in her eyes, looked at her, and blessed the moment she had done a generous act. So they became lifelong friends.¹⁵

I have given the foregoing tale almost at full length because it has not, so far as I know, appeared before in any other than its native Sicilian dress, and because analogous stories are not common in collections from Mediterranean countries. This rarity is not, I need hardly say, from any absence of the mythological material, and perhaps it may be due to accident in the formation of the collections. If the story were really wanting elsewhere in Southern Europe, we might be permitted the conjecture that its presence in Sicily was to be accounted for by the Norman settlements there.

One such story, however, is recorded from the Island of Kimolos, one of the Cyclades, but without the human captivity in Effland, without the acts of charity, and without the gratitude. The Nereids of the Kimoliote caves are of a grimmer humour than the kindly-natured underground folk of Celtic and Teutonic lands, or than the heroine of Palermo. The payment to their human help is no subject of jest to them. A woman whom they once called in was roundly told: "If it be a boy you shall be happy; but if it be a girl we will tear you in four parts, and hang you in this cave." The unhappy midwife of course determined that it should be a boy; and when a girl arrived she made believe it was a boy, swaddled it up tightly, and went home. When, eight days afterwards, the child was unpacked, the Nereids' rage and disappointment were great;

¹⁵ Pitré, vol. v. p. 23. The story in its present form does not say that the human food enabled the lady to return from Fairyland, but only that it saved her life. Probably, however, an earlier version may have shown the incident in a more primitive form.

and they sent one of their number to knock at her door in the hope that she would answer the first summons. Now to answer the first summons of a Nereid meant madness. Of this the woman was fully aware; and her cunning cheated them even of their revenge.¹⁶

Sometimes these supernatural beings bestow gifts of a more distinctly divine character than any of the foregoing. A midwife in Strathspey, on one such occasion, was desired to ask what she would, and it should be granted if in the power of the fairies. She asked that success might attend herself and her posterity in all similar operations. The gift was conferred; and her great-grandson still continued to exercise it when Mr. Stewart was collecting the materials for his work on the superstitions of the Highlanders, published in 1823. In like manner the Mohel, to whose adventure I have already referred, and who was originally an avaricious man, received the grace of benevolence to the poor, which caused him to live a long and happy life with his family, a pattern unto the whole world. The gift was symbolized by the restoration to him of his own bunch of keys, which he found with many others in the possession of his uncanny conductor. This personage had held the keys by virtue of his being lord over the hearts of those who never at any time do good: in other words, he was the demon of covetousness. Here we have an instance, more or less conscious, of the tendency, so marked in Jewish literature, to parable. But the form of the parable bears striking testimony to its origin in a myth common to many races. The keys in particular probably indicate that the recompense at one time took the shape of a palladium. This is not at all uncommon in the tales. The Countess Von Ranzau was once summoned from her castle of Breitenburg in Schleswig to the help of a dwarf-woman, and in return received, according to one account, a large piece of gold to be made into fifty counters, a herring and two spindles, upon the preservation of which the fortunes of the family were to depend. The gifts are variously stated in different versions of the tale, but all the versions agree in attaching to them blessings on the noble house of Ranzau so long as they were kept in the family. The Frau Von Hahnen, in a Bohemian legend, receives for her services to a water-nix three pieces of gold, with the injunction to take care of them, and never to let them go out of the hands of her own lineage, else the whole family would fall into poverty. She bequeathed the treasures to her three sons; but the youngest son took a wife, who with a light heart gave the fairy gold away. Misery, of course, resulted from her folly; and the race of Hahnen speedily came to an end.¹⁷

It is quite possible that the spoons bestowed by Vitra upon the clergyman's wife in Lappmark were once reputed to be the subject of a similar proviso. So common, forsooth, was the stipulation, that in one way or other it was annexed to well-nigh all fairy gifts: they brought luck to their possessor for the time being. Examples of this are

¹⁶ Bent, p. 46.

¹⁷ Keightley, p. 388, citing Stewart; Thorpe, vol. iii. p. 50 *et seq.*, quoting Müllenhoff and Thiele; Grohmann, p. 145; see also Thorpe, vol. III. P. 51.

endless: one only will content us in this connection; and, like Vitra's gift, we shall find it in Swedish Lappmark. A peasant who had one day been unlucky at the chase, was returning disgusted, when he met a fine gentleman who begged him to come and cure his wife. The peasant protested in vain that he was not a doctor. The other would take no denial, insisting that it was no matter, for if he would only put his hands upon the lady she would be healed. Accordingly the stranger led him to the very top of a mountain, where was perched a castle he had never seen before. On entering it he found the walls were mirrors, the roof overhead of silver, the carpets of gold-embroidered silk, and the furniture of the purest gold and jewels. The stranger took him into a room where lay the loveliest of princesses on a golden bed, screaming with pain. As soon as she saw the peasant she begged him to come and put his hands upon her. Almost stupefied with astonishment he hesitated to lay his coarse hands upon so fair a dame. But at length he yielded; and in a moment her pain ceased, and she was made whole. She stood up and thanked him, begging him to tarry awhile and eat with them. This, however, he declined to do, for he feared that if he tasted the food which was offered him he must remain there. The stranger whom he had followed then took a leathern purse, filled it with small round pieces of wood, and gave it to the peasant with these words: "So long as thou art in possession of this purse money will never fail thee. But if thou shouldst ever see me again, beware of speaking to me; for if thou speak thy luck will depart." When the man got home he found the purse filled with dollars; and by virtue of its magical Property he became the richest man in the parish. As soon as he found the purse always full, whatever he took out of it, he began to live in a spendthrift manner and frequented the ale-house. One evening as he sat there he beheld the stranger with a bottle in his hand going round and gathering the drops which the guests shook from time to time out of their glasses. The rich peasant was surprised that one who had given him so much did not seem able to buy himself a single dram, but was reduced to this means of getting a drink. Thereupon he went up to him and said: "Thou hast shown me more kindness than any other man ever did, and I will willingly treat thee to a little." The words were scarce out of his mouth when he received such a blow on his head that he fell stunned to the ground; and when again he came to himself the stranger and his purse were both gone. From that day forward he became poorer and poorer, until he was reduced to absolute beggary.¹⁸

This story exemplifies every point that has interested us in this discussion the need of the Trolls for human help, the refusal of food, fairy gratitude, and the conditions involved in the acceptance of supernatural gifts. It mentions one further characteristic of fairy nature--the objection to be recognized and addressed by men who are privileged to see them. But the consideration of this requires another chapter.

¹⁸ Poestion, p. 119.

Chapter IV

Fairy Births and Human Midwives (continued)

The magical ointment--Human prying punished by fairies, and by other supernatural beings--Dame Berchta--Hertha--Lady Godiva--Analogous stories in Europe--In the East--Religious ceremonies performed by women only--Lady Godiva a pagan goddess.

BEFORE we quit the subject of fairy births, we have a few more stories to discuss. They resemble in their general tenor those already noticed; but instead of one or other of the incidents considered in the previous chapter we are led to a different catastrophe by the introduction of a new incident--that of the Magical Ointment. The plot no longer hinges upon fairy gratitude, but upon human curiosity and disobedience.

The typical tale is told, and exceedingly well told--though, alas, not exactly in the language of the natives--by Mrs. Bray in her Letters to Southey, of a certain midwife of Tavistock. One midnight, as she was getting into bed, this good woman was summoned by a strange, squint-eyed, little, ugly old fellow to follow him straight-way, and attend upon his wife. In spite of her instinctive repulsion she could not resist the command and in a moment the little man whisked her, with himself, upon a large coal-black horse with eyes of fire, which stood waiting at the door. Ere long she found herself at the door of a neat cottage; the patient was a decent-looking woman who already had two children, and all things were prepared for her visit. When the

Child--a fine, bouncing babe--was born, its mother gave the midwife some ointment, with directions to "strike the child's eyes with it." Now the word strike in the Devonshire dialect means not to give a blow, but to rub, or touch, gently; and as the woman obeyed she thought the task an odd one, and in her curiosity tried the effect of the ointment upon one of her own eyes. At once a change was wrought in the appearance of everything around her. The new mother appeared no longer as a homely cottager, but a beautiful lady attired in white; the babe, fairer than before, but still witnessing with the elvish cast of its eye to its paternity, was wrapped in swaddling clothes of silvery gauze; while the elder children, who sat on either side of the bed, were transformed into flat-nosed imps, who with mops and mows were busied to no end in scratching their own polls, or in pulling the fairy lady's ears with their long and hairy paws. The nurse, discreetly silent about what she had done and the wonderful metamorphoses she beheld around her, got away from the house of enchantment as quickly as she could; and the sour-looking old fellow who had brought her carried her back on his steed much faster than they had come. But the next market-day, when she sallied forth to sell her eggs, whom should she see but the same ill-looking scoundrel busied in pilfering sundry articles from stall to stall. So she went up to him, and with a nonchalant air addressed him, inquiring after his wife and child, who, she hoped, were

both as well as could be expected. "What!" exclaimed the old pixy thief, "do you see me to-day?" "See you! to be sure I do, as plain as I see the sun in the skies; and I see you are busy into the bargain," she replied. "Do you so?" cried he; "pray, with which eye do you see all this?" "With the right eye, to be sure." "The ointment! the ointment!" exclaimed the old fellow; "take that for meddling with what did not belong to you: you shall see me no more."

He struck her eye as he spoke, and from that hour till the day of her death she was blind on the right side, thus dearly paying for having gratified an idle curiosity in the house of a pixy.¹⁹

In this tale the midwife acquired her supernatural vision through gratifying her curiosity; but perhaps in the larger number of instances it is acquired by accident. Her eye smarts or itches; and without thinking, she rubs it with a finger covered with the Magical Ointment. In a Breton variant, however, a certain stone, perfectly polished, and in the form of an egg, is given to the women to rub the fairy child's eyes. In order to test its virtue she applies it to her own right eye, thus obtaining the faculty of seeing the elves when they rendered themselves invisible to ordinary sight. Sometimes, moreover, the eye-salve is expressly given for the purpose of being used by the nurse upon her own eyes. This was the case with a doctor who, in a north country tale, was presented with one kind of ointment before he entered the fairy realm and another when he left it. The former gave him to behold a splendid portico in the side of a steep hill, through which he passed into the fairies' hall within; but on anointing one eye with the latter ointment, to that eye the hill seemed restored to its natural shape. Similarly in Nithsdale a fairy rewards the kindness of a young mother, to whom she had committed her babe to suckle, by taking her on a visit to Fairyland. A door opened in a green hillside, disclosing a porch which the nurse and her conductor entered. There the lady dropped three drops of a precious dew on the nurse's left eyelid, and they were admitted to a beautiful land watered with meandering rivulets and yellow with corn, where the trees were laden with fruits which dropped honey. The nurse was here presented with magical gifts, and when a green dew had baptized her right eye she was enabled to behold further wonders. On returning, the fairy passed her hand over the woman's eye and restored its normal powers; but the woman had sufficient address to secure the wonder-working balm. By its means she retained for many years the gift of discerning the earth-visiting spirits but on one occasion, happening to meet the fairy lady who had given her the child, she attempted to shake hands with her. "What ee d' ye see me wi'?" whispered she. "Wi' them baith," answered the matron. The fairy accordingly breathed on her eyes; and even the power of the box failed afterwards to restore their enchanted vision. A Carnarvonshire story, probably incomplete, makes no mention of the ointment conferring supernatural sight; but when the midwife is to be dismissed she is told to rub her eyes with a certain salve, whereupon she at once finds herself sitting on a tuft of rushes, and not in a palace:

¹⁹ Mrs. Bray, vol i. p. 174.

baby and all had disappeared. The sequel, however, shows that by some means she had retained the power of seeing fairies, at least with one eye; for when she next went to the town, lo and behold! busily buying was the elf whose wife she had attended. He betrayed the usual annoyance at being noticed by the woman; and on learning with which eye she saw him he vanished, never more to be looked upon by her. A tale from Guernsey attributes the magical faculty to some of the child's saliva which fell into the nurse's eye. And a still more extraordinary cause is assigned to it in a tradition from Lower Brittany, where it is said to be due to the sacred bond formed between the woman and a masculine elf when she became godmother and he godfather to the babe.²⁰

The effect of the wonder-working salve or water is differently described in different tales. The fairy maiden Rockflower speaks of it to her lover, in a Breton tale from Saint Cast, as "clearing his eyes like her own." And this is evidently to be understood in all cases. Accordingly, we find the invariable result is that the favoured mortal beholds swarms of fairies who were invisible before. But their dwellings, their clothing, and their surroundings in general suffer a transformation by no means always the same. A hovel or a cavern becomes a palace, whose inhabitants, however ugly they may be, are attired like princesses and courtiers, and are served with vessels of silver and gold. On the other hand a castle is changed by the magical balm into "a big rough cave, with water oozing over the edges of the stones, and through the clay; and the lady, and the lord, and the child, weazened, poverty-bitten crathurs--nothing but skin and bone, and the rich dresses were old rags." This is an Irish picture; but in the north of England it is much the same. Instead of a neat cottage the midwife perceives the large overhanging branches of an ancient oak, whose hollow and moss-grown trunk she had before mistaken for the fireplace, where glow-worms supplied the place of lamps. And in North Wales, when Mrs. Gamp incautiously rubbed an itching eye with the finger she had used to rub the baby's eyes, "then she saw with that eye that the wife lay on a bundle of rushes and withered ferns, in a large cave of big stones all round her, with a little fire in one corner of it; and she also saw that the lady was only Eilian, her former servant-girl, whilst with the other eye she beheld the finest place she had ever seen." More terrible still, in another story, evidently influenced by the Welsh Methodist revival, the unhappy woman beheld "herself surrounded by fearful flames; the ladies and gentlemen looked like devils, and the children appeared like the most hideous imps of hell, though with the other parts of her eyes all looked "grand and beautiful as before."²¹

²⁰ "Revue Celtique," vol. i. p. 231; Keightley, p. 312, citing "The Local Historian's Table-Book," by M. A. Richardson. Cromek, p. 242; "Y Cymmrodor," vol. iv. p. 209; "Revue des Trad. Pop." vol. iii. p. 426; "Revue Celtique," vol. i. p. 232.

²¹ Sébillot, "Contes," vol. II. p. 34 "Revue des Trad. Pop." vol. III. p. 428; Sébillot, "Litt. Orale," p. 21; Kennedy, p. 106; Keightley, p. 311; "Y Cymmrodor," vol. vi. p. 166; Wirt Sikes, p. 87. This story purports to be quoted from Howells, p. 349--an impossible reference, seeing 'that the volume in question only contains 194 pages. The peculiarities of Mr. Sikes' authorities, however, need very little comment.

However disturbing these visions may have been, the nurse was generally discreet enough to maintain perfect silence upon them until she got back to the safety of her own home. But it is not very surprising if her tongue sometimes got the better of her, as in a story obtained by Professor Rhys at Ystrad Meurig. There the heroine said to the elf-lady in the evening, as she was dressing the infant: "You have had a great many visitors today." To this the lady sharply replied: "How do you know that? Have you been putting the ointment to your eyes?" Thereupon she jumped out of bed, and blew into her eyes, saying: "Now you will see no more." The woman could never afterwards see the fairies, nor was the ointment entrusted to her again. So in the Cornish tale of Cherry of Zennor, that young damsel, being hired by a fairy widower to keep house for him, has the assurance to fall in love with him. She touches her own eyes with the unguent kept for anointing the eyes of her master's little boy, and in consequence catches her master kissing a lovely lady. When he next attempts to kiss Cherry herself she slaps his face, and, mad with jealousy, lets slip the secret. No fairy widower with any self-respect could put up with such conduct as this; and Cherry has to quit Fairyland. Her parents had supposed her dead; and when she returned they believed at first it was her ghost. Indeed, it is said she was never afterwards right in her head; and on moonlight nights, until she died, she would wander on to the Lady Downs to look for her master.²²

The earliest writer who mentions a story of this type is Gervase of Tilbury, marshal of the kingdom of Arles, who wrote about the beginning of the thirteenth century. He professes to have himself met with a woman of Arles who was one day washing clothes on the banks of the Rhone, when a wooden bowl floated by her. In trying to catch it, she got out of her depth and was seized by a Drac. The Dracs were beings who haunted the waters of rivers and dwelt in the deep pools, appearing often on the banks and in the towns in human form. The woman in question was carried down beneath the stream, and, like Cherry of Zennor, made nurse to her captor's son. One day the Drac gave her an eel pasty to eat. Her fingers became greasy with the fat; and she happened to put them to one of her eyes. Forthwith she acquired a clear and distinct vision under the water. After some years she was allowed to return to her husband and family; and going early one morning to the market-place of Beaucaire, she met the Drac. Recognizing him at once, she saluted him and asked after the health of his wife and child. "With which eye do you see me?" inquired the Drac. The woman pointed to the eye she had touched with the eel-fat; and thrusting his finger into it, the Drac vanished from sight.²³

The only punishment suffered in these cases is the deprivation of the power of seeing fairies, or banishment from their society. This seems mild enough: much more was generally inflicted. The story first quoted relates what seems to be the ordinary form of vengeance for disregard of the prohibition to use the fairy eye-salve, namely, loss of

²² "Y Cymmrodor," vol. vi. p. 194 Hunt, p. 120.

²³ Gerv. Tilb. *Dec.* iii. c. 85.

sight in the offending eye. Spitting or striking is usually the means adopted by the elves to effect this end. Sometimes, however, the eye is torn from its socket. Whether there is much to choose between these different ways of undergoing the punishment is doubtful; but it should be noted that the last-mentioned mode is a favourite one in Brittany, and follows not so much on recognition as on denunciation by the virtuous mortal of the elf's thieving propensities. "See what thieves these fairies are!" cried a woman who watched one of them putting her hand into the pocket of a country woman's apron. The fairy instantly turned round and tore out her eye. "Thieves!" bawled another on a similar occasion, with the same result. In a Cornish tale a woman is entrusted in her own house with the care of an elf-child. The child brought remarkable prosperity to the house, and his foster-mother grew very fond of him. Finding that a certain water in which she was required to wash his face made it very bright, she determined to try it on her own, and splashed some of it into her eye. This conferred the gift of seeing the little people, who played with her boy, but had hitherto been invisible to her; and one day she was surprised to meet her nursling's father in the market--stealing. Recognition followed, and the stranger exclaimed:

" Water for elf, not water for self,
You've lost your eye, your child, and yourself."

From that hour she was blind in the right eye. When she got home the boy was, gone; and she and her husband, who had once been so happy, became poor and wretched.²⁴

Here poverty and wretchedness, as well as the loss of an eye, were inflicted. In a Northumbrian case the foster-parent lost his charge and both eyes. So in a story from Guernsey, the midwife, on the Saturday following her attendance on the lady, meets the husband and father in a shop filling his basket to right and left. She at once comprehends the plenty that reigned in his mysterious dwelling. "Ah, you wicked thief, I see you!" she cried. "You see me; how?" he inquired. "With my eyes," she replied. "In that case I will soon put you out of power to play the spy," he answered. So saying, he spat in her face, and she became blind on the spot. A Danish story also relates that a midwife, who had inadvertently anointed her eyes with the salve handed to her by the elf-folk for the usual purpose, was going home afterwards and passed by a rye-field. The field was swarming with elves, who were busy clipping off the ears of rye. Indignantly she cried out: "What are you doing there?" The little people thronged round her, and angrily answered: "If thou canst see us, thus shalt thou be served;" and suiting the action to the word, they put out her eyes.²⁵

²⁴ Sébillot, "Contes," vol. ii. p. 42; "Litt. Orale," p. 23; "Trad. et Super." p. 109. But in these cases the operation was performed painlessly enough, for the victims were unaware of their loss until they came to look in the glass. In one of Prof. Rhys' stories the eye is pricked with a green rush; "Y Cymmrodor," vol. vi. p. 178 Hunt, p. 83. See also Sébillot, "Contes," vol. i. p. 119.

²⁵ Keightley, p. 310; "Revue des Trad. Pop." vol. iii. p. 426 Thorpe, vol. ii. p. 129, quoting Thiele. In another Danish tale given on the same page, the woman's blindness is attributed to her having divulged what she had seen in Fairyland.

Human beings, however, betray their meddling with fairy ointment in other ways than by speech. The following curious story was related as current at his native place, by Dr. Carré of St. Jacut-de-la-Mer, to M. Sébillot. A fisherman from St. Jacut was the last to return one evening at dusk from the scene of his labours; and as he walked along the wet sand of the seashore, he suddenly came upon a number of sea-fairies in a cavern, talking and gesticulating with vivacity, though he could not hear what they said. He beheld them rub their eyes and bodies with a sort of pomade, when, lo! their appearance changed, and they, were enabled to walk away in the guise of ordinary women. Hiding carefully behind a large rock, he watched them out of sight; and then, impelled by curiosity, he made straight for the cave. There he found what was left of the pomade, and taking a little on his finger, he smeared it around his left eye. By this means he found himself able to penetrate the various disguises assumed by the fairies for the purpose of robbing or annoying mankind. He recognized as one of that mischievous race a beggar-woman whom he saw a few days afterwards going from door to door demanding charity. He saw her casting spells on certain houses, and peering eagerly into all, as if she were seeking for something to steal. He distinguished, too, when out in his boat, fish which were real fish from fish which were in reality "ladies of the sea," employed in entangling the nets and playing other tricks upon the seamen.' Attending the fair of Ploubalay, he saw several elves who had assumed the shapes of fortune-tellers, showmen, or gamblers, to deceive the country folk; and this permitted him to keep clear of their temptations. But as he smiled to himself at what was going on around him, some of the elves, who were exhibiting themselves on a platform in front of one of the booths, caught sight of him; and he saw by the anger in their looks that they had divined his secret. Before he had time to fly, one of them, with the rapidity of an arrow, struck his clairvoyant eye with a stick and burst it. That is what happened to him who would learn the secrets of the sea-fairies.²⁶

Such was the punishment of curiosity; nor is it by fairies alone that curiosity is punished. Cranmere Pool on Dartmoor is, we are told, a great penal settlement for refractory spirits. Many of the former inhabitants of the parish are supposed to be still there expiating their ghostly pranks. Of the spirit of one old farmer it is related that it took seven clergymen to secure him. They, however, succeeded at last in transforming him into a colt, which was given in charge to a servant-boy with directions to take him to Cranmere Pool, and there on the brink of the pool to slip off the halter and return instantly without looking round. He did look round, in spite of the warning,, and beheld the colt in the form of a ball of fire plunge into the water. But as the mysterious beast plunged he gave the lad a parting kick, which knocked out one of his eyes, just as the Calender was deprived of his eye in the "Arabian Nights." Still worse was the fate that overtook a woman, who, at midnight on New Year's Eve, when all water is turned into wine, was foolhardy enough to go to a well. As she bent over it to draw, one came and plucked out her eye, saying:

²⁶ Sébillot, "Litt. Orale," p. 24.

"All water is wine,
And thy two eyes are mine."

A variant of the story relates that the woman herself disappeared, and gives the rhyme as

All water is wine,
And what is thereby is mine."²⁷

At the end of the last chapter we noted as a characteristic of fairy nature the objection to be recognized and addressed by men who are privileged to see them. We are now able to carry the generalization a step further. For, from the instances adduced in the foregoing pages, it is obviously a common belief that supernatural personages, without distinction, dislike not merely being recognized and addressed, but even being seen, or at all events being watched, and are only willing to be manifested to humanity at their own pleasure and for their own purposes. In the stories of the Magical Ointment it is not so much the theft as the contravention of the implicit prohibition against prying into fairy business that rouses elfin anger. This will appear more clearly from the fuller consideration of cases like those mentioned in the last paragraph, in which punishment follows directly upon the act of spying. In Northamptonshire, we learn that a man whose house was frequented by fairies, and who had received many favours from them, became smitten with a violent desire to behold his invisible benefactors. Accordingly, he one night stationed himself behind a knot in the door which divided the living-room of his cottage from the sleeping-apartment. True to their custom, the elves came to disport themselves on his carefully-swept hearth, and to render to the household their usual good offices. But no sooner had the man glanced upon them than he became blind; and so provoked were the fairies at this breach of hospitality that they deserted his dwelling, and never more returned to it. In Southern Germany and Switzerland, a mysterious lady known as Dame Berchta is reputed to be abroad on Twelfth Night. She is admittedly the relic of a heathen goddess, one of whose attributes was to be a leader of the souls of the dead; and as such she is followed by a band of children. For her the peasants on Twelfth Night set a repast, of which, if she be pleased, she and her troop partake. A servant boy at a peasant's farm in the Tirol on one such occasion perceived Lady Berchta's approach, and hid himself behind the kneading-trough to watch what she would do. She immediately became aware of his presence as he peeped through a chink, and called to one of her children to go and stop that chink. The child went and blew into it, and the boy became stark-blind. Thus he continued for a year, nor could any doctor help him, until an old experienced man advised him to go to the same place on the following Twelfth-tide, and falling down on his knees behind the kneading-trough, to bewail his curiosity. He accordingly did so. Dame Berchta came again, and taking pity on him, commanded one of her children

²⁷ "Choice Notes," p. 170; Thorpe, vol. iii. p. 8. The latter form of the story seems more usual., See Gredt, pp. 28, 29, where we are plainly told that the hapless mortals are fetched away by the devil.

to restore his sight. The child went and blew once more through the chink, and the boy saw. Berchta, however, and her weird troop he saw not; but the food set out for them had disappeared.²⁸

The tradition of the goddess Hertha lingered until recently, and perchance lingers still, in the island of Rugen. She had her dwelling, it is believed, in the Herthaburg; and often yet, in the clear moonlight, out of the forest which enfolds that hill, a fair lady comes surrounded by her maids to bathe in the lake at its foot. After awhile they emerge from the waters, and, wrapt again in their long white veils, they vanish flickering among the trees. But to the belated wanderer, if any such there be, who looks upon this scene, it is a vision of dread; for he is drawn by irresistible might to the lake wherein the white lady is bathing, to be swallowed up in its depths. And it is said that every year the lady must lure one unhappy mortal into the flood. So in the classic mythology, if Ovid report aright, Actaeon met the fearful fate of transformation into a stag by "gazing on divinity disrobed," and was torn in pieces by his own hounds. Hertha was, indeed, according to Tacitus, more terrible than Diana, since death was the penalty even when duty called her slaves to the awful sight.²⁹

These traditions have led us away from the Magical Ointment, which thus appears to be only one aspect of the larger theme of the objection on the part of supernatural beings to human prying. Nor need we regret having strayed; for we are brought naturally to one of the most interesting of our national legends, namely, that of Lady Godiva; and it will well repay a little consideration. As generally told today it bears an unmistakable resemblance to the foregoing stories; but there seems some difficulty in classing it with them, because Peeping Tom is wanting in the most ancient version known to us.

Godiva, properly Godgifu, was an undoubted historical personage, the wife of Leofric, Earl of the Mercians, and mother of the Earls Morcar and Edwin, and of Edith, wife first of Gruffydd, Prince of North Wales, and afterwards of King Harold the Second. The earliest mention of her famous ride through Coventry is by Roger of Wendover, who wrote in the beginning of the thirteenth century, or a hundred and fifty years or thereabout after her death. His account of the matter is as follows:

"The countess Godiva, who was a great lover of God's mother, longing to free the town of Coventry from the oppression of a heavy toll, often with urgent prayers besought, her husband, that from regard to Jesus Christ and His mother, he would free the town from that service, and from all other heavy burdens; and when the earl sharply rebuked her for foolishly asking what was so much to his damage, and always forbade her evermore to speak to him on the subject; and while she, on the other hand, with a woman's pertinacity, never ceased to exasperate her husband on that matter, he

²⁸ Sternberg, p. 132 (see also Thorpe, vol. ii. p. 52); Von Alpenburg, p. 63. See a similar story in Grimm, "Teut. Myth." p. 276, from Börner, "Folk-tales of the Orlagau." In the latter case, however, the punishment seems to have been inflicted for jeering.

²⁹ Jahn, p. 177, quoting Temme, "Volkssagen "; Ovid, "Metam." l. iii. fab. 3; Tacitus, "Germ." c. 40.

at last made her this answer: 'Mount your horse, and ride naked before all the people, through the market of the town from one end to the other, and on your return you shall have your request.' On which Godiva replied: 'But will you give me permission if I am willing to do it?' 'I will,' said he. Whereupon the countess, beloved of God, loosed her hair and let down her tresses, which covered the whole of her body like a veil, and then mounting her horse and attended by two knights, she rode through the market place without being seen, except her fair legs; and having completed the journey, she returned with gladness to her astonished husband, and obtained, of him what she had asked, for Earl Leofric freed the town of Coventry and its inhabitants from the aforesaid service, and confirmed what he had done by a charter."³⁰ According to the more modern version, the inhabitants were enjoined to remain within doors, and, in the Laureate's words:

"one low churl, compact of thankless earth,
The fatal byword of all years to come,
Boring a little auger-hole in fear,
Peep'd--but his eyes, before they had their will,
Were shrivell'd into darkness in his head,
And dropt before him. So the powers who wait
On noble deeds, cancell'd a sense misus'd."

It is not my business now to prove that the legend is untrue in fact, or I should insist, first, that its omission by previous writers, who refer both to Leofric and Godgifu and their various good deeds, is strong negative testimony against it; and I should show, from a calculation made by the late Mr. M. H. Bloxam, and founded on the record of Domesday Book, that the population of Coventry in Leofric's time could scarcely have exceeded three hundred and fifty souls, all in a greater or less degree of servitude, and dwelling probably in wooden hovels each of a single story, with a door, but no window.³¹ There was, therefore, no market on the scale contemplated by Roger of Wendover,--hardly, indeed, a town through which Godgifu could have ridden; and a mere toll would have been a matter of small moment when the people were all serfs. The tale, in short, in the form given by the chronicler, could not have been told until after Coventry had risen to wealth and importance by means of its monastery, whereof Godgifu and her husband were the founders. Nobody, however, now asserts that Roger of Wendover's narrative is to be taken seriously. What therefore I want to point out in it is that Godgifu's bargain was that she should ride naked *before all the people*. And this is what the historian understands her to have done; for he states that she rode through the market-place without being seen, *except her fair legs*, all the rest of her body being covered by her hair like a veil. He tells us nothing about a proclamation to the inhabitants to keep within doors; and of course Peeping Tom is an impossibility in this version of the tale.

³⁰ Roger of Wendover, "Flowers of History," sub anno 1057. I quote from Dr. Giles' translation.

³¹ See his Presidential Address to the Warwickshire Naturalists' and Archaeologists' Field Club 1886.

Coventry has for generations honoured its benefactress by a periodical procession, wherein she is represented by a girl dressed as nearly like the countess on her ride as the manners of the day have permitted. When this procession was first instituted, is unknown. The earliest mention of it seems to be in the year 1678. Its object then was to proclaim the Great Fair, and Lady Godiva was merely an incident in it. The Lansdowne MSS. in the British Museum contain an account of a visit to Coventry by the "captain, lieutenant, and ancient" of the military company of Norwich, who travelled in the Midland Counties in August 1634. These tourists describe St. Mary's Hall as adorned at the upper end "with rich hangings, and all about with fayre pictures, one more especially of a noble lady (the Lady Godiva) whose memory they have cause not to forget, for that shee purchas'd and redeem'd their lost infringed liberties and ffreedomes, and obtained remission of heavy tributes impos'd upon them, by undertaking a hard and unseemly task, w'ch was to ride naked openly at high noone day through the city on a milk-white steed, w'ch she willingly performed, according to her lord's strict injunction. It may be very well discussed heere whether his hatred or her love exceeded. Her fayre long hayre did much offend the wanton's glancing eye." In this record we have no additional fact except the mention of "high noone day" as the time of the journey; for the allusion to "the wanton's glancing eye" is too vague to be interpreted of Peeping Tom, and the writer does not refer to any commemorative procession. It has been supposed, therefore, that the carnival times of Charles the Second both begot the procession and tacked Peeping Tom to the legend. But it is more likely that the procession is as old as the fair, which was held under a charter of Henry the Third, granted in 1217. Such pageants were not uncommon in municipal life, and were everywhere to the taste of the people Whether. Lady Godiva was a primitive part. of it is another question. The mention of the procession in 1678 occurs in a manuscript volume of annals of the city, in a handwriting of the period. The entry in question is as follows "31 May 1678 being the great Fair at Coventry there was an extraordinary " ere the bottom of the page is reached; and in turning over the chronicler has omitted a word, for on the top of the next page we read:] "Divers of the Companies" [i.e., the City Guilds] "set out each a follower, The Mayor Two, and the Sheriffs each one and 2 at the publick charge, there were divers Streamers with the Companies arms and Ja. Swinnertons Son represented Lady Godiva."³²

³² MS. marked D. This entry is an interpolation in a list of mayors and sheriffs in a different handwriting. There are several such interpolations in the volume. Coventry possesses a number of MS. volumes of annals, one of which (see below) seems to date from the latter part of the sixteenth century, and the rest from the latter part of the seventeenth. In the MS. marked F. (considered by Mr. W. G. Fretton, F.S.A., to be in the handwriting of John Tipper, of Bablake, Coventry, a schoolmaster and local antiquary at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries), and also in the MS. in the British Museum (Additional MSS. 11,364), the entry runs simply:--"1678 Michaell Earle (Mercer) Mayor; Francis Clark, George Allatt, Sherriffs. This year ye severall Companies had new streamers, and attended ye Mayor to proclaim y' faire, and each company cloathed one boy or two to augment ye show." The latter MS. elsewhere speaks of the story of Godiva's ride as "comonly known, and yearly comemorated by the Mayor, Aldermen, and ye severall companies."

This brief entry is by no means free from ambiguity. Perhaps all that we are warranted in inferring from it is that the annual procession was, that year, of unusual splendour. Whether, as has been conjectured, it was the first time Lady Godiva had ever made her appearance, there seems more doubt. Apart from any evidence, there is no improbability in supposing that she may have formed part of earlier processions; though it may be that during the period of Puritan ascendancy the show had been neglected and the lady in particular had been discountenanced. If this be so, however, it is difficult to account for the manner in which her figure is referred to by the writer, unless there were some personal reason connected with James Swinnerton, or his son, undiscoverable by us at this distance of time.

But whatever doubt may exist as to Godiva's share in the early processions, there appears no less as to the episode of Peeping Tom. Looking out of an upper story of the King's Head, at the corner of Smithford Street, is an oaken figure called by the name of the notorious tailor. It is in reality a statue of a man in armour, dating no further back than the reign of Henry the Seventh; and, as a local antiquary notes, "to favour the posture of his leaning out of window, the arms have been cut off at the elbows."³³ This statue, now generally believed to have been intended for St. George, could not have been thus appropriated and adapted to its present purpose until its original design had been forgotten and the incongruity of its costume passed unrecognized. This is said to have been in 1678, when a figure, identified with the one in question, was put up in Grey Friars Lane by Alderman Owen.

It must not be overlooked that there may have been from the first more than one version of the legend, and that a version rejected by, or perhaps unknown to, Roger of Wendover and the writers who followed him may have always included the order to the inhabitants to keep within doors, of which Peeping Tom would seem to be the necessary accompaniment. Unfortunately, we have no evidence on this point. The earliest record of such a version appears in one of the manuscript volumes already alluded to. It has not been hitherto printed and it is so much at variance, alike with the legend preserved in the thirteenth century, and the poem of the nineteenth century, that I quote it entire:--"The Franchisement and Freedome of Coventry was purchased in manner Following. Godiuia the wife of Leofric Earle of Chester and Duke of March requesting of her Lord freedome for this That Towne, obtained the same upon condition that she should ride naked through the same; who for the Love she bare to the Inhabitants thereof, and the perpetuall remembrance of her Great Affection thereunto, performed the same as Followeth. In the forenoone all householders were Comanded to keep in their Families shutting their doores and windows close whilst the Dutchess performed this good deed, which done she rode naked through the midst of the Towne, without any other Coverture save only her hair. But about the midst of

³³ This statue used to be decked out on the occasion of the procession in the long peruke and neckcloth of the reign of Charles II. See T. Ward, "Collections for the Continuation of Dugdale's Antiquities of Warwickshire" (2 vols., fol. MS., Brit. Mus., Additional MSS., Nos. 29, 264, 29,265), vol. ii. fol. 143.

the Citty her horse neighed, whereat one desirous to see the strange Case lett downe a Window, and looked out, for which fact or for that the Horse did neigh, as the cause thereof, Though all the Towne were Franchised, yet horses were not toll-free to this day."³⁴

The manuscript in which this passage occurs is copied from an older manuscript which appears to have been compiled in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, however, the latter is imperfect, a leaf having been torn out at this very point. We cannot, therefore, say with certainty that the account of the famous ride was ever comprised in it. But the expressions made use of imply that the windows were closed with shutters rather than glass, and that they were opened by letting down the shutters, which were either loose or affixed by a hinge to the bottom sills. It is a question exactly at what period glass came into general use for windows in the burgesses' houses at Coventry. Down' almost to the middle of the fifteenth century all glass was imported and consequently it was not so common in the midlands as near the coast, especially the south-eastern coast. We shall probably be on the safe side if we assume that in the early years of the sixteenth century, at all events, the ordinary dwelling-house at Coventry was no longer destitute of this luxury. It would seem, therefore, that the story, in the form here given, cannot be later, and may be much earlier, than the latter years of the fifteenth century.

Failing definite evidence to carry us back further, it becomes of importance to inquire whether there are any traditions in other places from which we may reason. In the "History of Gloucestershire," printed by Samuel Rudder of Cirencester in 1779, we read that the parishioners of St. Briavels, hard by the Forest of Dean, "have a custom of distributing yearly upon Whitsunday, after divine service, pieces of bread and cheese to the congregation at church, to defray the expenses of which every householder in the parish pays a penny to the churchwardens; and this is said to be for the privilege of cutting and taking the wood in Hudnolls. The tradition is that the privilege was obtained of some Earl of Hereford, then lord of the Forest of Dean, at the instance of his lady, upon the same hard terms that Lady Godiva obtained the privileges for the citizens of Coventry." It appears that Rudder, while in the main accurately relating both custom and tradition, has made the mistake of supposing that the payment was made to the churchwardens, whereas it was in all probability made to the constable of the castle of St. Briavels as warden of the Forest of Dean. The custom is now in a late stage of decadence, and local inquiries have failed to elicit any further details throwing light on the point under consideration.³⁵

³⁴ MS. marked E, Coventry, seventeenth century. A careful examination of the language of Roger of Wendover, Matthew Paris, John of Brompton, and Matthew of Westminster, shows that Roger of Wendover's account is the source of the other three, Matthew Paris copying most closely, and John of Brompton and Matthew of Westminster omit the escort. Their state. meat as to Godiva's being unseen refers to the hair which covered her; and the latter informs us, with a touch of rhetoric, that Leofric regarded it as a miracle.

³⁵ Rudder, p. 307. The Rev. W. Taprell Allen, M.A., Vicar of St. Briavels, has been kind enough to supply me with the correction from local inquiries and intimate acquaintance with the traditions and affairs of the parish extending over many years. See also "Gent. Mag. Lib. (Manners and Customs), p. 230.

I am not aware of any other European tradition that will bear comparison with that of Godiva, but Liebrecht relates that he remembers in his youth, about the year 1820, in a 'German newspaper, a story according to which a countess frees her husband's subjects from a heavy punishment imposed by him. She undertakes to walk a certain course clad only in her shift, and she performs it, but clad in a shift of iron.³⁶ The condition is here eluded rather than fulfilled; and the point of the story is consequently varied. It would be interesting to have the tale unearthed from the old newspaper, and to know where its scene was laid, and whether it was a genuine piece of folklore.

Eastern tales, however, furnish us repeatedly with incidents in which a lady parades the streets of a city, and during her progress all folk are bidden to close their shops and withdraw into their houses on pain of death. The example of the Princess Badroulboudour will occur to every reader of the "Arabian Nights." This, however, is by no means a solitary example. In the story of Kamar Al-Zaman and the Jeweller's Wife, one of the stories of the "Nights" rejected on moral grounds by Lane, but translated by Burton, a dervish relates that he chanced one Friday to enter the city of Bassorah, and found the streets deserted. The shops were open; but neither man nor woman, girl nor boy, dog nor cat was to be seen. By and by he heard a sound of drums, and hiding himself in a coffee-house, he looked out through a crevice and saw forty pairs of slave girls, with uncovered heads and faces displayed, come walking through the market, and in their midst a lady riding unveiled and adorned with gold and gems. In front of her was a damsel bearing in baldrick a great sword with haft of emerald and tassels of jewel-encrusted gold. Pausing close to the dervish, the lady said to her maidens: "I hear a noise of somewhat within yonder shop; so do ye search it, lest haply there be one hidden there, with intent to enjoy a look at us while we have our faces unveiled." Accordingly they searched the shop opposite the coffee-house, and brought forth a man. At the lady's command the damsel with the sword smote off his head, and leaving the corpse lying on the ground, the procession swept on. It turned out that the lady was the wife of a jeweller to whom the King of Bassorah was desirous of granting a boon, and at her request the boon obtained was a proclamation commanding that all the townsfolk should every Friday enter the mosques two hours before the hour of prayer, so that none might abide in the town, great or small, unless they were in the mosques or in the houses with the doors locked upon them; but all the shops were to be left open. Then the lady had permission to ride with her slave-women through the heart of the town, and none were to look on her from window or lattice; and every one whom she found abroad she was at liberty to kill. A similar incident is related in the life of Kurroglil, the robber-poet of Persia, where a beautiful princess passes in state through the bazaars every Friday on her way to the mosque, while all the men are banished.³⁷

³⁶ Liebrecht, p. 504.

³⁷ Burton, "Nights," vol. ix. p. 255; Burton, "Supp. Nights," vol. iii. p. 570 (Appendix by Mr. W. A. Clouston). Kurroglü flourished in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Here, again, some one was of course found playing the spy.

A version of the incident, which can be traced further back in literary form than either of the foregoing, occurs in the "Ardshi-Bordshi." This book is a Mongolian recension of a Sanskrit collection of stories concerning Vikramaditya, a monarch who, if he ever lived, seems to have flourished about the beginning of the Christian era. He was celebrated, like Solomon, for his wisdom and his might; and his name became the centre of a vast accretion of legends. Some of these legends were translated into Mongolian late in the Middle Ages, and formed a small collection called after Ardshi-Bordshi, the nominal hero. In the story to which I wish to direct attention, a certain king has a daughter bearing the name of Sunshine, of whom he was so jealous that if any one looked upon her his eyes were put out, and the man who entered her apartments had his legs broken. Naturally, the young lady got tired of being thus immured, and complained to her father that, as she had no opportunity of seeing man or beast, the time hung heavily on her hands; and she begged him to let her go out on the fifteenth of the month and look about her. The king agreed to this; but, the sly old rascal! nothing was further from his intention than to gratify his daughter's longing for masculine converse. Wherefore he issued a decree that all objects for sale were to be exposed openly to the view, all cattle to be left indoors, the men and women were to withdraw into their houses and close their doors and windows, and if any one came forth he should be severely punished. On the appointed day, Sunshine, surrounded by her ladies, and seated in a brand-new chariot, drove through the town, and viewed the merchandise and goods exposed for sale. The king had a minister, named Moon, who could not restrain his curiosity; and he peeped at her from a balcony. The princess, as he did so, caught sight of him and made signs to him, which were interpreted by the penetration of his wife to be an invitation to meet her clandestinely. The wife hardly displayed what most ladies would deem "a proper spirit" in advising compliance; and the consequence of taking that advice would have been serious trouble both to himself and to the princess, had it not been for the ready wit of the two women, who got over the difficulty by contriving an ingenious equivocation not unknown in other stories, by which the princess cleared herself and her lover on oath.³⁸

It is true that in these tales the lady who rides forth is not naked; but to ride openly and unveiled would be thought almost as immodest in countries where strict seclusion is imposed upon women. All these tales include the Peeping Tom incident; and it appears, indeed, so obvious a corollary to the central thought of Lady Godiva's adventure that it is hardly likely to have required centuries for its evolution. From some traditions, however, it is absent. A story belonging to the Cinderella cycle, found at Smyrna, relates that when a certain king desired to marry his own daughter, the

³⁸ This story is edited by Jülg in Mongolian and German (Innsbruck, 1867). Miss Busk gives a free adaptation rather than a translation of the German version, "Sagas," p. 315. Prof. De Gubernatis, "Zool. Myth." vol. i. p. 138, of course interprets it as a sun-myth--an interpretation to which the names Sunshine and Moon, and the date of the adventure (the fifteenth of the month), lend themselves.

maiden, by the advice of her Fate, demanded as the price of compliance three magnificent dresses. Having obtained these, she asked permission to go unseen (like Badroulbador) to the bath. The king, to gratify her, forbade his subjects on pain of death to open their shops or to show themselves in the streets while she passed by. She thus got an opportunity of escaping from the city, of which she did not fail to make use,--greatly, no doubt, to her unnatural father's disgust. An Indian tradition also tells us that the inhabitants of Chamba were under the necessity of digging a canal for irrigation, but when it was dug, owing to the enchantments of an evil spirit, not a drop of water could be got to flow along its course. A magician at last found out that the spell could be dissolved if the beautiful and virtuous young princess of Chamba would consent to traverse a given distance of the plain entirely naked, in full view of the populace, and to lose her head when the journey was accomplished. After much hesitation, her compassion triumphed over her shame; and she undertook the task. But lo! as she advanced, a thick line of young trees arose to right and left, completely hiding her from cynical eyes. And the shady canal is shown today by the good people of Chamba as one of the most authentic monuments of their history.³⁹

So far the stories. Concerning which it must be observed that they are evidence that the myth of Lady Godiva is widely diffused in the East, and that the spy is usually, though not always, part of the tale. The Smyrncian version must probably be thrown out of the reckoning. It is, as I have already mentioned, a variant of the Cinderella cycle. The problem of the plot is how to get the heroine unseen out of her father's clutches. This is commonly effected by the simple mechanism of a disguise and a night escape. Other methods, I need not now detail, are, however, sometimes adopted; and the excuse of going to the bath, with the order to the people to close their shops and keep within doors, would seem to reveal nothing more than the unconscious influence of Aladdin or some other of the Eastern stories. Throwing this out, then, as accidental, an overwhelming proportion of the analogues cited contains the spy. It would be dangerous to reason on the supposition that the proportions of all the Asiatic variants extant correspond with those of the variants cited; but we are at liberty to assume that a large number, if not the majority, comprise the incident of Peeping Tom. None of them was known in Europe until Galland published his translation of the "Arabian Nights" in the year 1704--upwards of two centuries later than the latest period at which the story as given in the Coventry manuscript can have come into existence.

But the stories, though they may go a little way to help us in regard to the incident of Peeping Tom, throw no light on the origin of the legend, or of the procession. Let us therefore turn to one or two curious religious ceremonies, which may have some bearing upon it. A potent spell to bring rain was reported as actually practised during the Gorakhpur famine of 1873--4 It consisted of a gang of women stripping themselves perfectly naked, and going out by night to drag the plough across a field.

³⁹ Von Hahn, vol. ii. p. 225; "Tour du Monde," vol. xxi. p. 342, quoted by Liebrecht, p. 105.

The men were kept carefully out of the way, as it was believed that peeping by them would not only vitiate the spell, but bring trouble on the village. It would not be a long step from this belief to a story in which peeping was alleged to have taken place with disastrous effects, either to the village, or (by favour of the deities intended to be propitiated) to the culprit himself. At the festival of the local goddess in the village of Serdr, in the Southern Mahratta country, the third and fourth days are devoted to private offerings. Many women, we are told, on these days walk naked to the temple in fulfilment of vows, "but they were covered with leaves and boughs of trees, and surrounded by their female relations and friends."⁴⁰

The performance of religious rites by women alone, when men are required under heavy penalties to absent themselves, is, indeed, not very uncommon in savage life. Nor is it confined to savage life. When Rome was at the height of her civilization and her triumphs, the festival of the Bona Dea was rendered notorious by the divorce of Caesar's wife and by legal proceedings against an aristocratic scoundrel, who, for the purposes of an intrigue with her, had violated the sacred ceremonies. The Bona Dea, or Good Goddess, was a woodland deity, the daughter and wife of Faunus. Her worship had descended from a remote antiquity; and her annual festival was held in the month of December, and was attended only by women. The matrons of the noblest families of Rome met by night in the house of the highest official of the state to perform the traditional ceremonies of the goddess, and to pray for the well-being of the Roman people. Only women, and those of the most unsullied character, were permitted to attend; and the breach of this rule by Clodius, disguised in woman's garb, constituted a heinous offence against the state, from the penalties of which he only escaped, if we may believe Cicero, by bribing the judges.⁴¹

At the village of Southam, not far from Coventry, another procession in honour of Godiva formerly took place. Very little is known about it now, save one singular fact, namely, that there were two Godivas in the cavalcade, and one of them was black. Southam was part of the property possessed by Earl Leofric; and it has been suggested that this is enough to account for the commemoration of Godgifu. It would no doubt be an excellent reason for affixing her renowned name to a periodical ceremony already performed there. But it would hardly be a reason for commemorating her extortion of privileges in which the inhabitants of Southam did not share; and it would leave the black lady unexplained. She may, indeed, have been a mere travesty, though the hypothesis would be anything but free from difficulty. Here, again, if we have recourse to the comparison of ceremonies, we may obtain some light.

Among the tribes of the Gold Coast of Africa the wives of men who have gone to war make a daily procession through the town. They are stark naked, painted all over with white, and decorated with beads and charms. Any man who is found in the town is

⁴⁰ "Panjab N. and Q." vol. iii. pp. 41, 115; "Journal Ethnol. Soc. London," N.S., vol. i. p. 98.

⁴¹ The information relating to the Bona Dea has been collected by Preller, "Röm. Myth." vol. 1. p. 398; and see the authorities he has cited.

attacked and driven away. And on the occasion of a battle the women imitate the actions the men are thought to be performing, with guns, sticks, and knives. The Gold Coast is a long way off; but not only do black women there paint themselves white in their sacred rites, white women in Britain have painted themselves, if not black, at least a dark blue. Pliny records that both matrons and unmarried girls among the Britons in the first century of the Christian era were in the habit of staining themselves all over with the juice of the woad; and he adds that, thus rivalling the swarthy hue of the .Aethiopians, they go on these occasions in a state of nature. We are sometimes taught that when the English invaded Britain, the natives whom they found here were all driven out or massacred. There are, however, many reasons for doubting that this wholesale destruction was as complete as has been imagined. The name of Coventry betrays in its termination a Celtic element; and this could hardly have entered into it had there not been in the neighbourhood a considerable British-speaking population. What is more likely than that at Southam this population continued and preserved its customs, and that one of such customs was that very religious rite of which Pliny speaks? Unhappily he tells us nothing about the rite itself, nor the deity in whose honour it was performed. But it would not involve a great stretch of fancy to suppose that in the black lady of Southam we have a survival of the performance. It is not too much to say that this explanation would have the merit of being intelligible and adequate.⁴²

In all countries ceremonies of a special character are usually dramatic. They represent, or are believed to represent, actions of the divinities in whose honour they are performed. The rites of the Bona Dea, we know, were of this kind; and they consequently degenerated into orgies of a shameful character. The Coventry procession is admittedly a representation of Godgifu's ride. It is not now, nor has it been so long as we have any records of it--that is to say for two hundred years--connected with any professed act of worship; but this is not incompatible with its being the long-descended relic of some such observance as those I have described. The introduction of Christianity did not annihilate the older cults. The new religion incorporated some of them; and although the rest were no longer regarded as sacred, the feeling of obligation remained attached to them for centuries. They were secularized, and ultimately degraded for the most part into burlesque. Such as were connected with municipal life, or, as we shall see in a future chapter, with family life, retained a measure of solemnity long after it had passed away from rites which had been abandoned to an unorganized mob. This is well illustrated by the contrast, between the ceremonial at Coventry (whatever its origin) and that at St. Briavels. The stronger hand of a municipality would have a restraining power wanting to that of a village community, or a parish--especially if the latter had been governed by a lord, who in later times had been shorn of his authority, or had ceased to reside among, or

⁴² Ellis, p. 226; Pliny, "Nat. Hist." I. xxii. c. i. For the information as to the procession at Southam I am indebted to Mr. W. G. Fretton, who formerly lived there.

take an interest in the affairs of his tenantry. Something like this I take to have been the history of St. Briavels. There does not appear from Rudder's account to have been, in his time at least, any pageant commemorative of the achievement of the lady to whom the parishioners reckoned themselves to owe their privileges; nor have I been able to trace one by local inquiries.. But the tradition is at St. Briavels unmistakably connected with a religious and social rite. The distribution of food on a day of high and holy festival in the church to the congregation, and paid for by a levy upon every householder in the parish, can point to nothing else than a feast of the whole community as a solemn act of worship. Its degeneracy in more recent times has been thus described to me by the Rev. W. Taprell Allen:--"For many years it was customary to bring to the church on Whitsun-day afternoon baskets of the stalest bread and hardest cheese, cut up into small pieces the size of dice. Immediately after the service the bread and cheese were scrambled for in the church, and it was a custom to use them as pellets, the parson coming in for his share as he left' the pulpit. About 1857, or perhaps a year or two later, the unseemly custom was transferred from the church to the churchyard, the bread and cheese being thrown down from the church tower. Later on it was transferred to the road outside the church gates. It now lasts but a few minutes. A few years ago all the roughs of the Forest used to come over, and there was much drinking and fighting but now it is very different. The custom has in fact been dying out." From these later stages of decay the Godiva pageant was saved by becoming 'a municipal festival. And while at St. Briavels we can watch the progress of degeneration from a point at which the religious character of the ceremony had not quite vanished, down to the most unblushing burlesque, and to its ultimate expulsion from consecrated precincts,--at Coventry we see but one phase, one moment, at which the rite, if it ever had any title to that name, seems to have been photographed and rendered permanent.

It is obvious, however, that a feast is not a dramatic representation of a ride; and the point requiring elucidation is the intimate relation of the feast at St. Briavels with a story apparently so irrelevant as that of the countess' ride. To explain this, we must suppose that the feast was only part--doubtless the concluding part--of a ceremony, and that the former portion was a procession, of which the central figure was identical with that familiar to us at Coventry. But such a procession, terminating in a sacred feast, would have had no meaning if the naked lady represented a creature merely of flesh and blood. It is only explicable on the hypothesis that she was the goddess of a heathen cult, such as Hertha (or Nerthus), whose periodical progress among her subject tribes is described in a well-known passage by Tacitus,⁴³ and yet survives, as we have seen, in the folklore of Rugen. Now the historian tells us that Hertha was, Mother Earth, the goddess of the soil, whose yearly celebration would appropriately take place in the spring or early summer. To her the produce of the land would be ascribed; and in her name and by her permission would all agricultural operations be

⁴³ "Germania," c. 40; cf. c. 9.

performed. Such a goddess it must be who is honoured by the ceremonies already noticed in India. Such a goddess, at any rate, was the Bona Dea; and to such a goddess we may readily believe would be ascribed the privilege of cutting wood. It is quite consistent with this that the payment by every household at St. Briavels should be made to the warden of the forest, and that it should be spent by him on the goddess' festival. We are left to surmise what were the tolls and burdens at Coventry, so vaguely referred to by Roger of Wendover. Pigs and horses, we learn from two different sources, were not included in the exemptions obtained by the countess; and the reason for this in the latter case is accounted for by the incident of Peeping Tom.

One other point is worthy of mention: both at St. Eriavels and at Coventry the commemoration takes place nearly at the same time of year. The Great Fair at Coventry opens on the day after Corpus Christi Day--that is to say, the Friday after Trinity Sunday. Corpus Christi Day itself was the day on which the celebrated Coventry Miracle Plays were performed; and the Fair opened the next morning. At the same time of year too--namely, on Ascension Day--a custom, for which there is no explanation in any record, was observed at St. Michael's Church, York, when ale and bread and cheese were yearly given away in the church to the poor of the parish.⁴⁴ Although Ascension Day is separated by three weeks from Corpus Christi, the movable character of the feasts would bridge this gulf without any difficulty; and heathen observances of the same nature, and referring to the same season, when they had to be reconciled to the Christian calendar, might easily find places in some instances on one day and in others on another day. Godgifu and her husband were honoured as founders of the Benedictine monastery at Coventry, which rose upon the ruins of an earlier house of Benedictine nuns founded by Osburg, a lady of the royal house, nearly two hundred years before. This nunnery had been destroyed in the Danish wars about the year 1016. Consequently, if any legend, or ceremony, was known or practised at Coventry in connection with some traditional patroness, the name of Godgifu was ready to hand to be identified with it. Through the monastery Coventry first rose to wealth and repute; and the townsfolk on this score owed a debt of gratitude to the foundress, though there is no record whether any special day was set apart in her honour.

On the whole, then, there is ground for supposing that the legend and procession of Lady Godiva are survivals of a pagan belief and worship located at Coventry; that the legend was concerned with a being awful and mysterious as Dame Berchta, or Hertha herself; and that the incident of Peeping Tom was from the first, or at all events from an early date, part of the story. The evidence upon which these conclusions rest may be shortly recapitulated thus

1. The absence of historical foundation for the tradition.

⁴⁴ Nicholson, p. 32.

2. The close resemblance between the tradition and other stories and superstitions which unquestionably deal with heathen goddesses, such as Berchta and Hertha.
3. The equally close analogy between the procession and that described in Eastern stories, which, so far as we know, could not have reached England at the latest period when the procession could possibly have been instituted; and between the procession and certain heathen rites practised not only in the East, but as near home as Rome and Germany,--nay, in Britain itself.
4. The occurrence of a similar procession at Southam, in the same county, having the special feature of a black lady, best explained as a survival of certain rites practised by the ancient Britons.
5. The connection between the analogous legend at St. Briavel's and the remains of a sacred communal feast that can hardly be anything else than the degraded remnant of a pagan observance.

The want of historical evidence cannot, of course, be overlooked; but we must remember that in investigating traditions and traditional observances we are dealing with a phase of civilization of which history only yields rare and indirect glimpses. It is the absence of direct evidence that, not only in the science of Folklore, but also in the physical sciences, causes resort to the evidence afforded by comparison of other structures and processes. On the validity of this evidence, and the reasoning based upon it, nearly all our scientific learning depends. In spite, therefore, of the defects in the historical evidence, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it can scarcely be denied that the analogies in both custom and legend here brought together amount to a fairly strong presumption in favour of the conclusions I have ventured to draw from them.

If I may formulate my conjecture as to the course of development actually pursued, it would be something like this. The ceremony at Coventry is a survival of an annual rite in honour of a heathen goddess, from which men were excluded. This rite, like all such, would have been a part of the tribal cult, and intimately associated with the tribal life and organization. Side by side with it a myth would have been evolved, accounting for the performance as a dramatic representation of an event in the goddess' career. This myth would have been similar in outline to those recited above, and would have comprised an explanation of the exclusion of men. When Christianity spread through the district the inhabitants would still cling to their old custom and their old myth, as we know was done elsewhere, because it was bound up with their social life. But, if not violently put down by the rulers of the land, both custom and myth would, little by little, lose their sacred character as the new religion increased in influence, and would become transformed into municipal ceremonies. This process would be slow, centuries being required for its completion; but it would be aided by the gradual development of the tribe first into a settled village community, and thence into a medieval township. With the loss of sanctity the reason for prohibiting the attendance of men would

vanish; but the tradition of it would be preserved in the incident of the story which narrated Peeping Tom's treachery.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ I am indebted to Mr. Samuel Timmins, F.S.A., and to Mr. W. G. Fretton, F.S.A., for a great amount of local information and other assistance which they have spared no pains to render me, and to the Town Clerk of Coventry for permission to inspect the invaluable local manuscripts belonging to the Corporation.

Seeing Fairies

Over the centuries there have been thousands of fairy sightings. Women and girls have reported by far the majority that I have collected in my own research that began twelve years ago with investigation into children's psychic experiences. This may be because women have traditionally been more open to psychic phenomena and also because they are more willing to talk about their experiences.

For example Lilian, now a healer and clairvoyant in her sixties, told me that when she was a child:

'I used to see fairies in our garden in Cheshire, but especially in the woods. They were semi-transparent and tiny with wings. I found myself looking at the little people in shadowy forms. They all looked different according to whether they belonged to a tree, a flower or a bush. Each species were the same colour and even the same texture and would merge into the tree or flower.'

Lilian still sees nature essences in the lovely gardens she creates as does Julie, a medium who described a particular place in Devon, where as an adult she shared her fairy visions with her own children:

'They (fairies) are very fleeting, like butterflies, but not as small, about the size of squirrels'

What is more, fairies have come into the cities. Layla who is in her early twenties and as a child lived in a council house in a northern industrial town, explained what she saw in her back garden:

'Faces and forms would appear at the sides of my vision. They would appear only for a fraction of a second, and when I looked again they wouldn't be there.-----The Tree Men ----were very strange indeed. For a second it would look as if somebody was entering or leaving through an invisible door on a tree trunk The somebody would be very indistinct and transparent but definitely there. On one occasion a head poked out of a tree, saw me and promptly disappeared back inside.'

Fairies in Folk Lore

As well as sightings, accounts of interactions with fairies (some very frightening) are found in folklore spanning hundreds of years, from the Celtic world, from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Many are remarkably consistent in content over the centuries and thousands of miles. Some recent Alien abduction accounts by women bear remarkable similarities to these earlier tales of fey kidnappings. But for now I will concentrate on the folk tales that form the background.

Women who act as midwives to the fairies

Midwives were themselves surrounded by magical and mystical associations and were in Greek and Roman times regarded as seers; these wise women/healers were

usually requested to attend fairy births rather than being taken against their will. Though they were frequently accused of witchcraft from the fifteenth century onwards, in remote places especially those where Celtic peoples predominated, some of these wise women did continue practising in secret, which may account for them being fetched in the dead of night.

But the myths may be even older and the fairy people the midwives ministered to may have been descendants of the tiny dark Neolithic peoples, who lived in remote forest, marshland or mountain communities. According to Gillian Tyndall, author of a Handbook of Witches a number of these might have existed in the United Kingdom until the end of the Middle Ages when the forests were cut down and the marshlands drained. Others were undoubtedly communities of outlaws or dispossessed peasants living in the forests.

There are still vast tracts of Northern Scandinavia and the Slavic lands that are deeply forested or mountainous and largely unexplored and here the legends persist. In these cases where there was a difficult birth one of the settlers might come into a town or large village to seek the help of a midwife who would be taken in the dead of night perhaps blindfolded to a secret destination. Secrecy is major feature of the legends, but locals would have known of these settlements.

But in the case of inexperienced women who agreed to assist a fairy delivery or who became curious about the fairy folk came salutary tales of the human midwife rubbing one of her own eyes accidentally or deliberately with the oil with which the fairy baby was washed. Afterwards she could see fairy people in the everyday world, a gift that normally resulted in the brutal putting out of the offending eye, when she acknowledged the fairy mother or relatives at market, days or weeks later. This again may be a folk memory of women who revealed the location of the outlaw community to which they had ministered. Of course the stories may be true.

The fairy abduction of young mothers

Nursing mothers were, according to folklore, in great demand to suckle fairy babies both because of their milk which was said to be richer than that of fairy mothers and in the hope of transmitting to the fairy baby a soul that it lacked. They also suckled mortal babies abducted to fairyland. Again there is a direct parallel with accounts by abductees of nurseries filled with extra terrestrial babies.

The time of giving birth was traditionally regarded as very magical and dangerous not only for mother and child, but all who came into contact with her, a peril that persisted from child-birth until the churching or purification ceremony of women in church *forty* days later.

In Europe until the nineteenth century nails were hammered into the mother's bed and the cradle, since fairies were supposed to fear iron. A fire would be kept burning at all times and milk from a cow fed with straw from the childbed (which also increased the fertility of the cow) would be given to the mother and child. No

new mother would leave home after dark before the christening for fear of being spirited away.

It was believed in a variant of the changeling myth that the fairies might substitute the mother with a block of wood disguised by *glamour* or illusion to resemble her human form but which would be constantly crying and moaning. Many a woman suffering from postnatal depression might have been treated harshly by superstitious relatives, believing the fairies had enchanted her. Beating was one recommended method of revealing the changeling form in wives as well as children.

Sometimes the baby was left behind when the *true* mother was kidnapped and if he or she failed to thrive the father might blame it on the changeling wife who was not taking care of it, rather than natural causes.

Infant mortality remained high until after the First World War. What is more infanticide, cruelty to wives (and to a lesser extent undetected wife murder) was common until Victorian times.

A wife who consistently produced sickly boys who did not survive or girl children for a man who desperately needed an heir, might suddenly disappear, *spirited away forever by the fairies* was the official and often unquestioned explanation. In our own age have come horrific cases of bride burnings by husbands and relatives among the Asian community and of young women killed during exorcisms of evil spirits. There are still parts of the world where the value of a woman except as a bearer of sons is low and this is a reminder that it has not that long been otherwise in westernised society.

Brigit Cleary

Records are obviously sparse and fairy abduction as an excuse for wife murder or beating may sound pure speculation. But we do know that in Tipperary in Ireland in 1895 Brigit Cleary was tortured and burned to death by her husband Michael. He claimed that the fairies had stolen his wife and a changeling substituted. Michael insisted that by destroying the enchanted form of his wife, the true Brigit herself would return.

Seven of her neighbours and relatives, including Brigit's father and aunt, were involved and later convicted.

A hundred years later Angela Bourke, a professor at University College, Dublin and author of *The Burning of Brigit Cleary*, stated, that the case demonstrated the clash *between two different world views, two ways of dealing with troublesome people, two ways of accounting for the irrational, at a time of profound social, economic, and cultural change.*

The case revealed that after Brigit became ill, her father Patrick and husband as well as her uncle Jack and various other extended family members decided her apparently seriously worsening bronchial condition was caused by a fairy dart and that she had been replaced by a fairy possessed body. The tragedy culminated on

March 15 when after a week of torture Michael set fire to her nightgown, throwing lamp oil on it to make it burn more fiercely, insisting that the real Brigit would appear riding a white horse at a ruined hill fort the following evening. Michael was found guilty of manslaughter and imprisoned for fifteen years. Four of the co-defendants were convicted of wounding.

Brides in Fairyland

A woman on her wedding day or night was also considered a great prize by the fairies as she was still a virgin but at peak fertility. For this reason until mediaeval times a woman would be accompanied to the church by identically dressed bridesmaids, so that watching fairies could not identify the true bride.

Some of these abductions may have been quite genuine, though the culprits more worldly. For in parts of Europe in the Middle Ages the local Lord was allowed the use of his serfs' brides on their wedding night.

Rape by wealthy landowners and their sons was a real threat for country women even in Victorian times, especially among servants in big houses. It could be that the traditional return of the abducted bride from the fairies after a year and a day bearing a babe several months old, was an acceptable way for a husband not to appear cuckolded.

She might have been placed in a distant workhouse during the pregnancy, with the collusion of the husband or a father in the case of an unmarried girl.

Unlikely? In the UK during the earlier decades of the twentieth century, unmarried mothers as well as those with post natal depression were routinely assigned to mental hospitals and in some cases disappeared for the rest of their lives.

A typical bride abduction story made into a ballad was of the Scottish Colin whose wife was taken by the fairies, but whom it was said returned invisibly each day to milk to cows and do the chores. Only her singing could be heard. In other versions she returns after a year and a day with a baby. Was Colin keeping his bride locked away because he discovered on the wedding night she was pregnant by someone else, albeit by rape? Did he let her out to do her housework, but allowed no one to see her, only hear her voice? Or was she truly a bride of the fairies?

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Lancashire Fairies

In Bashall Eaves there's a bridge which is said to have been built in a single night, in order to help a local man escape from witches. At Rowley Hall, by the stream which runs close to the Hall, people have sometimes found pieces of fairy clothes. And in Goosnargh, one night, long ago, a happy band of fairies was seen in a field. They were dressed in full hunting gear, dancing and clapping and having fun. Fairies dressed in green and red were seen dancing at Cat Steps in Grindleton and at Dinkling Green they were often seen on the White Stone.

Calf Hey Well, in the Roggerham Gate area of Briercliffe, was anciently known to be a haunt of fairies. The water from this well had healing properties and came to be regarded as holy; on holy days, a veritable market would gather, selling jugs of well-water and also food and religious mementos. Sadly, Calf Hey Well was such a sure source of water that it was redirected to a reservoir to serve the town of Burnley. After this upheaval, the fairies who had so often visited the place were never seen again.

Close to Roggerham Gate is a place called Brownside, the name itself thought to come from the many sightings of Brownies (fairies) here. Very early in the 19th century a local woman had cause to travel to Burnley in the middle of the night to fetch a doctor. At the stream, by the ford, she saw a Brownie smoking a pipe.

At Warton, near Carnforth, there's a Fairy Hole on the east face of Warton Crag. The cave extends far into the rock and tales are told of piles of silver and gold, and sightings of the fairies washing their linen. At Whitewell, in a wooded landscape, a large cave and two smaller ones are known as the Fairy Holes. Stone tools and some bones found here have been dated as Bronze Age. The ambience of these caves is doubtless what led to their picturesque name. At Mellor Moor, it has long been believed that there is a fairy city, underground, proven by reports from people who have heard bells sounding forth. The fairies have also been seen, at least once. A man was walking near the Roman camp on Mellor Moor when he saw a fairy dressed for hunting. His description was full and detailed; the little man wore a green jacket, a red cap, boots with spurs and he carried a whip.

A farm near the Roggerham Gate Inn, called High Halstead, is the scene of the legend of the 'Halstead Changeling'. One day the farmer's wife left her child asleep in its cot whilst she went to fetch some water and came back to find instead an ugly creature, looking like a wrinkled little man. Not knowing what to do, she went to speak with a local wise man, who announced that the thing she had found in the cot was probably a fairy and that she could find out by performing some unusual household tasks.

Back at home, she set an eggshell filled with cold water on the fire and when the water came to the boil, the little creature was so intrigued that it called out, 'What are you going to do with that?' She replied, 'I'm going to make a brew!' And the creature commented, 'Well, I'm three score and ten and I've never seen that done

before!’ That statement, that he was three score and ten, was the proof the woman needed; she picked up the creature and took him down to the stream, intending to leave him there. Nearing the stream, she heard the sound of her own child crying and found him in the arms of a very old woman – the mother of the creature she had found in the cot. The children were exchanged, but no words were spoken, as both mothers were so pleased to have their own children back again.



In Fairy Land (1870) by Richard Doyle

Another water-source connected to fairies is a small spring between Hardhorn and Staining, known in old times as Fairies Well. It was well-known for its miraculous healing powers and visited by people from far and near seeking relief of their ailments. One story tells of a Preston woman, a poor widow, who came here one day to collect water to bathe her baby’s eyes, for the water was known for its curative properties and her child was losing its sight. While she was thus engaged she was disturbed by a good-looking little man in green, who gave her some ointment which he said was a sure cure for what ailed her child. The woman may have been poor but she was not stupid, for she first applied the ointment to one of her own eyes to make sure there was no danger.

No ill befell her and so she anointed her baby's eyes and was delighted to find that her baby's eyes healed and her sight was restored.

Some time later, the woman saw the same little man – this time in Preston Market. There he was, clear as day, helping himself to corn from an open sack. The woman approached him, meaning to thank him for the magical ointment, but the little man was shocked that she could see him at all, as he was a fairy and was certain of being invisible. When he questioned her, she confessed that she had used some of the ointment on herself, just to make sure it was safe. As she spoke, she pointed to the eye she had anointed. The fairy was very angry, for it was the ointment which had allowed the woman to see him. He jumped up and hit her on that eye and the poor woman found she was now half-blind. The woman's daughter, however, could see the fairies all her life – but she never spoke to them, for fear of what might happen.

Another fairy story, similar to the one at Staining, takes place in a cave in the Hodder Gorge, where one day a midwife was brought from Clitheroe to attend a woman in labour. The woman's husband said that secrecy was paramount but that she would be rewarded handsomely, so she agreed to wear a blindfold so that she would not see her destination. She was taken into a tidy little cottage at Hodder Gorge where she assisted at the birth of a fine baby.

When the baby was born, an old woman gave the midwife a box of ointment and asked her to anoint the baby all over – but to be careful not to get any of it in her eyes. The midwife did as she was told, until her eye started to itch and she could not avoid rubbing it and a little of the ointment thus made its way into her eye. Then she saw the place differently; the tidy cottage was actually a bare cave and the mother, the husband and the old woman were clearly fairies. The midwife managed to stay calm. She was paid in fairy gold, blindfolded once again and taken home.

Some time later, the midwife was at market one day when she realised that someone was trying to steal apples from her basket. It was none other than the fairy husband! When the midwife shouted at him, the fairy husband looked at her hard. 'Which eye do you see me with?' he asked – and when she told him, the fairy touched it and from that time on, the midwife never saw the fairies again.

There's another story which is 'owned' by two Lancashire towns – Houghton and Barley – it tells of two poachers, who once caught a couple of fairies. The poachers had been caught poaching once too often and their dogs and nets had been taken from them, but one night they went rabbit-hunting again, with only a ferret and a couple of sacks in which to store their booty. It wasn't long before their ferret had rooted out the inhabitants of a warren and with their sacks over the entrance holes, it was a simple job to catch their quarry. However, they

could not see exactly what they had caught. They were walking home, with the sacks over their shoulders, when one of them heard a voice from his sack calling out, 'Dick, wheer artta?' At once another voice called out from the other sack; 'In a sack, on a back, riding up Hoghton Brow!' (Or Barley Brow, depending on which town is telling the tale.) Shocked, the poachers dropped their sacks and ran away. Next day, they retraced their steps and found their abandoned sacks, neatly folded by the side of the road.



In Fairy Land (1870) by Richard Doyle

Another story from Staining tells of an old farmer who was ploughing at the break of day when no-one else was awake, when suddenly he heard a little voice crying. 'I've broken mi speet!' The farmer turned to see a tiny

girl, who was certainly a fairy. In one hand she held a tiny broken spade and in the other some tiny nails and a hammer. She held out the spade and hammer towards the farmer who gently took them from her and mended the tiny spade. When he had finished, the fairy gave him a handful of silver. That was the only time the old farmer ever saw a fairy, but he never tired of telling the story...

And at Thornton there's another story of fairy silver, which tells how a milkmaid was milking her master's cow when an invisible hand suddenly placed a jug and a sixpenny piece carefully at her side. It was clear that the sixpence was meant as payment for a full jug of milk, so the milkmaid filled the jug and tucked the sixpence in her pocket, telling no-one. A few days later the invisible hand once again placed a jug and a sixpence at her side. Once again, she filled the jug and kept the sixpence but said nothing to anyone about how she came by it. Over the next few weeks, more jugs and sixpences were brought to her and as it became a regular occurrence, the young milkmaid found it harder and harder to keep it to herself.

Her downfall came when her boyfriend asked her to marry him. She was thrilled and could not help but tell him about the fine nest-egg she had built up from the fairy sixpences. And that was her mistake – for once she had spoken about the friendly fairy and its generous gifts, the fairy never came to buy milk from her again.

By now it's obvious that those who see fairies should never tell, but there's a story from Penwortham that comes with a dire warning – be wary of laying eyes on a Fairy Funeral, for such a sighting forecasts your death!

One night, two men were walking down the lane beside St Mary's Church at the dangerous hour of midnight. One was old and one was young, but neither was happy to hear the church clock chime twelve times. They were even less happy to then hear another bell tolling, a bell which they recognised as the passing-bell. They stopped and counted the number of times the bell rang out, for they knew it would toll once for each year of the life of the poor departed. The poor departed, it turned out, was exactly the same age as the younger man and this saddened them, for he was no great age at all. But as there was nothing to be done at that hour, they set off again on their journey home.

They had not walked far before they saw a tiny man dressed in blue approaching, chanting as he walked. The older man immediately recognised that this was a fairy and guessed he must be leading a fairy funeral. He told the younger man to hide against the hedge with him, for if they were not seen, no harm would come to them. They stood quietly, watching a procession of tiny fairies pass by, bearing with them an open coffin. They caught a glimpse of the coffin as it passed and, to their horror, they saw that the face on the corpse was that of

the younger man! The man ran forward, calling to the fairies to tell him how long he had left to live, but he received no answer, for as soon as they heard his voice, they vanished away.

Every day after that the younger man grew more and more morose, expecting that his life would soon end, as indeed it did, about a month later when he fell hard from a haystack. His funeral passed along the same route where the two men had seen the fairy funeral that night, and the older man was one of his pall-bearers.

Melanie Warren

Melanie Warren has collected British folk tales and ghost stories for almost four decades. For many years, she was a paranormal investigator and took part in innumerable ghost-hunts but never saw a ghost, although she did have several experiences she finds hard to explain... She was also BBC Radio Lancashire's resident "paranormal expert" and co-authored two collections of ghost stories, which were broadcast on BBC local radio stations. Melanie is now concentrating on turning her extensive collection of stories and tales into a series of books, one county at a time. Melanie lives in Lancashire and has done so all her life. Her book, *Lancashire Folk*, is available from booksellers including online, but also directly from the distributor, [Gazelle Books](#). Read more on [Melanie's website](#).

- See more at: <http://folklorethursday.com/regional-folklore/lancashire-fairies/#sthash.XxdHxBpy.dpuf>

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Don't mention the tail! A look into the hidden world of the Huldrefolk.

For the Orkney Storytelling Festival this year, I had the good fortune to be asked to do a talk about the Huldrefolk – an otherworld community that I know well from Norwegian folk belief, but which has many parallels in the folklore of other countries, too, including here in Orkney. “Huldrefolk” is actually not their true name, but a taboo name meaning “the hidden people” as if it’s dangerous to say their true name.

The huldrefolk are invisible, so most people don't actually know what they look like. Accounts from those who have seen them say that huldre women are very beautiful: Tall, healthy and fair, with very long hair that hangs in a plait down their back – or is it their tail? There are also other, and uglier, reports:

Some say that the beautiful huldre maiden has a strange cavity in her back. Huldre men often have a very long nose, so long that when they ride it touches the saddle or even the tail of the horse in front! It is also sometimes reported that they wear blue or grey, and that when exposed they can transform themselves into little grey balls that just roll away and disperse.

The huldrefolk are commonly believed to live in glorious invisible farms existing in parallel to the human habitation. Humans can't normally see them, but certain people with special gifts can, or they may reveal themselves to ordinary people now and then, very suddenly, before disappearing out of sight again. It doesn't have to be very far from human habitation and people who see a huldre-farm are inevitably surprised to come upon a farm they have never seen before.

Alternatively, their parallel existence consists of sharing human dwellings by complementing their yearly cycle: While farmers in Orkney banished their cattle outside of the hill-dyke while crops and pastures were growing in the summer, farming folk in Norway moved their cattle to mountain shielings where young girls were in charge of looking after the kye, milking and producing cheese and other dairy products. For that reason, you are not meant to stay at the shieling after the autumn flitting day. There are stories about people who just needed to finish some work, such as get the last of the cheese made or finish a fabric they were weaving, or finish chopping some

wood, but if the work goes on after the set date the huldrefolk get angry: they have the shieling booked!

In other stories, their parallel world is underground and may in fact be located directly below human farms. In these stories, they are called “underjordiske” – subterraneans. Like trolls, huldrefolk are also reputed to live inside mountains and also inside smaller knowes and hills. In that sense, they are not unlike the fairies that live in mounds in Scotland and Ireland.

There are also magical huldre islands, come-and-go islands that you suddenly see like the Celtic Tir-nan-Ogh or the famous Heather Blether west of Rousay. These islands are known as “Huldreland” and each one may have a specific name as well, such as the one outside the outermost island of the Lofoten archipelago, which is called Utrøst. Sometimes people sail through a mysterious fog before the island suddenly appears, sometimes the island is a welcome life-saver for sailors or fishermen caught in storms – but once you are there, you might not return to the world of humans. These islands are like the Orcadian Finfolkaheem. The most famous Orcadian isle of this sort is of course Hildaland, and I like to speculate that Hildaland is the same as Huldreland and that it means the hidden land, just as huldrefolk means the hidden folk – and if that is the case, we may also think that the Orcadian word “hill-folk” for some otherworldly people that live in the hills is not actually as plain as it seems. Perhaps it corresponds to huldrefolk and means the hidden people?

Huldrefolk can be helpful to humans if they wish, helping with the harvest or building dykes, as long as you are polite to them – and they enjoy a reward of good food and beer. Sometimes the huldrefolk warn humans if there is something going on with the kye. For example, once a cow had gone missing and the farmer was out looking for her when he heard someone calling from the forest: Here is your cow! He followed the voice and there was his cow right enough. Huldrefolk can even help humans fight wars. You don’t see them, but you know they are fighting for you because you hear their drums! In all these stories I have just told of huldrefolk helping humans, they remain invisible but can be detected by their voices and other sounds.

Occasionally, huldrefolk need help from humans, too. A story which is told all over Norway is about a woman who helps a huldre woman give birth. After delivering the child safely, the midwife accidentally rubs some potion in her eye which was meant for the baby. It gives her the permanent ability to see the

huldrefolk. This tale is also told in Britain and Ireland, and the tale type is known as “midwife to the faeries”.

Huldrefolk can even marry humans. Because women traditionally moved to the husband’s home, girls are taken into the mountain or into the invisible huldre farm if married to a huldre man. However, when a man is married to a huldre wife, she moves out to the human world, becomes visible and may even lose her tail if she is baptised – although often the huldra doesn’t wish to be baptised. Such huldre wives are very beautiful and good workers, but the husband must be good to her, or horrible things may happen! First of all, it is best not to mention her tail. There is a story about huldra going to a dance, and she lets a boy dance with her because he is tactful: He sees her tail, but instead of saying so he says “look what a beautiful plait of hair she has. It is so long it hangs right down to the floor.” Another man always delayed doing jobs that his huldre wife gave him. One day she was fed up of this, and took a red hot horse shoe in her bare hands and bent it straight. The man got scared and did the job right away. But the wife cried and said that being angry had made her uglier.

These stories are of course reminiscent of stories you get in Orkney about selkie wives, selkie men and fin men. However, these often contain an element of abandonment that you don’t see very much in the huldre spouse stories. The selkie wife like the huldre wife stays and is a good worker, but unlike the huldre wife she leaves after some years – as soon as she finds where her husband has hidden her seal skin.

The huldre wife, on the other hand, must permanently stay when she has been cut away from her world and brought into the world of humans by means of steel, so by cutting above or around her with a knife for example. Fishing hooks are made of steel, too, and have the same effect: There is a story about a man who was fishing for trout in a mountain lake, and naturally he was swinging his fishing rod behind him to throw. What he didn’t see, was that there was an invisible hulder girl standing right behind him, and when the metal fishing hood passed over her head, she became visible! The fisherman was startled to see a beautiful young girl behind him, and she came with him and became his girlfriend.

Huldre farms and huldre cattle can be made to stay by cutting around them or shooting above them. Such farms are known as a “finnegard”. Anything Christian such as prayers, soil from the churchyard or the sign of the cross are

also effective protections against the huldrefolk. One method for bringing back people who had been abducted into the mountain by the huldrefolk or by trolls was to ring the church bells. But they had to be near enough to be heard inside the mountain, so sometimes they would even take the church bell down and carry it up to the foot of the mountain where the missing person was believed to be. I don't doubt this would be effective: If they really had lost their way in the wilderness, hearing church bells would be a good navigation aid.

The huldrefolk had the power to cause illness in humans if they wished. Children with chronic illnesses or disabilities were believed to be Huldrefolk children that had replaced the original child. This belief is also well known from the Celtic world and from Orkney. The way to deal with this was to make the changeling expose itself for what it was. Changelings were often older than they looked, so one might for example do something absurd like pour whisky in an egg shell or serve a tiny portion of porridge in a huge bowl, which would make the changeling forget it was supposed to behave like a baby and exclaim "I've never seen anything like this before!" or similar. Once exposed, it would return to its own people and if you were lucky you would get your own baby back.

A precaution that was observed both in Norway and Orkney was to put something anti-demonic in the cradle. In Norway it was often scissors and although in later times it was said that it should make sure the baby grew up to be a good worker, the original intention was to ward off huldrefolk - as we know, steel has power over them and when open it also resembles a cross. In Orkney, a knife and the Bible went into the cradle for the same reason.

It is wise to take your precautions so that you don't run into conflict with the huldrefolk. In the old farming community in Norway, people always used to say "watch out!" before they threw a bucket of dirty water out of the window, in case there were invisible people standing underneath.

It's always best to ask the huldrefolk before you build! It might be that your new byre happens to stand right on top of an underground or invisible huldre building. There is one story about a farmer who hadn't asked, and it turned out he had built his byre right above the huldrefolk's sitting room. The muck was dripping down through their ceiling and right into their food! He had to take the byre down and move it.

There was also the danger that the huldrefolk could take your cattle or milk them. You would know if the huldrefolk had been at the kye, because their milk would run dry or even worse: Turn to blood! To prevent this kind of misfortune, when it was time to let the cattle out in the spring, people used to throw fire over their backs.

A similar custom was also observed in Orkney: Ernest Marwick records that in Sandwick, when a cow was calving, they would light a fire in the byre and in Eday it was the custom to take fire from the hearth and quickly take it into the byre and throw it several times back and forth over the cow's back.

So there are many similarities between beliefs in the Huldrefolk in Norway and the "hill folk" and "trows" and "selkies" in Orkney. These beliefs and stories are also connected to folklore further afield in Britain, Ireland and the rest of Europe. It is fascinating to discover how stories are shared, but still develop a myriad of local variations.

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