"Laden with Golden Grain."

THE

ARGOSY.

VOLUME LXIV.

July to December, 1897.

RICHARD BENTLEY & SON,
8, NEW BURLINGTON STREET, LONDON, W.
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty.

THE WEST-COUNTRY PIXIES.

By Archibald Ballantyne.

TENNYSON, when in Lincolnshire in 1855, found the talk of some of his friends there turning on education, and especially on scientific education.

"Yes," said Tennyson; "it is spreading, and it is crushing all the romance and poetry out of children's lives. It was only yesterday I was walking in the fields with one of my nephews—a little chap of eight or ten—when we came to a fairy-ring. 'Look,' I said; 'look here, my boy; here is a fairy-ring.'

"'A what, uncle?' he said.

"'Why, a fairy-ring. The old folks would tell you that these fairy-rings are so called because the fairies were dancing here last night.'

"'Oh, uncle,' he replied quite gravely, 'it is well known that these fairy rings, as you call them, are caused by a species of fungus.'"

Yes, it is true; and every child knows now what Tennyson's little nephew knew forty years ago. The ringlets, "whereof," as Shakespeare says, "the ewe not bites," ringlets which the English prettily call "fairy-rings," while the Germans and the French rather more tragically designate them *Hexenringe* and *Cercles de Sorcières*, are indeed formed by a species of fungus; and the learned will talk to you about the mycelium of the fungus; will tell you how the fungus-spawn extends year by year, thus making the rings larger and larger; and so forth, at endless learned length, till all the poetry is gone, and the fairies who dance in the moonlight are banished from children's nurseries, the ugly word "fungus" alone remaining.

Yet, even among "those who know" there are still to be met with here and there some who cherish lingering fancies that link themselves with these circles in the grass.

The late well-known Vicar of Morwenstow, the Rev. R. S. Hawker, had a strange superstition about fairy-rings. While walking once with a lady near his North Cornish parish, he espied one of these rings. His companion would have stepped into it, but he suddenly drew her back, saying, "Beware how you set foot within a fairy-ring; it will bring ill-luck."

"Oh, nonsense, Mr. Hawker; the circle is made by toad-stools. See! here is one, I will pick it."

"If you do, there will shortly be a death in your house." But the lady paid no heed to her friend's warning, and picked the fairy toadstool. Within a week she lost a little daughter.

We will leave the funguses behind, and keep firm hold of the poetry.

Among the busiest makers of fairy-rings and the merriest dancers in them, all over the pastures and meadow-lands of Devonshire and other counties of the South-west, reigned a little race of beings known by the pretty name of Pixies. These are the fairies of "A Midsummer-Night's Dream," who gather

> "On hill, in dale, forest, or mead,
> By pavèd fountain, or by rushy brook,
> Or on the beachèd margent of the sea,
> To dance [their] ringlets to the whistling wind."

The belief in their power was the most romantic of all Devonshire superstitions, and it faintly lingers even still in some parts of the county. Dartmoor was the favourite haunt of these little people. There they had an abode known to the West-country folk as the Pixies' Parlour. The roots of old trees formed its ceiling, trailing plants climbed about its entrance, and the river Otter flowed at the foot of the hill. Young Coleridge visited this recess more than once, and when a child cut his initials on one of the sides of the cavern. He used his verse to make the Pixies sing:—

> "Aye, from the fervent heat
> We to the cave retreat,
> O'ercanopied by huge roots, entwin'd
> With wildest texture, blackened o'er with age;
> Round them their mantles green the ivies bind,
> Beneath whose foliage pale
> Fann'd by th' infrequent gale,
> We shield us from the tyrant's mid-day rage."

From time immemorial another Dartmoor home of theirs was the Pixies' House at Sheepstor—a narrow, granite-walled chamber, covered in by an overhanging mass of moonstone. From such hidden haunts as these they came out to their cheerful revelries; for they loved the hills and pathless woods and mountain streams, where they danced hand in hand, singing in the moonlight, unseen by mortals. Daintily they dressed themselves in green, with a head-dress of little red caps, and with tiny red shoes. And while the grasshopper, the cricket, or even the frog would supply the needful music, on a toadstool would sit a little elf, holding a tiny lantern to shed a greenish-blue light over the frolic.

But fairy circumstances were sometimes in a rather bad way. At such times the attire of the pixies might be rather ragged. They were sometimes said to appear like a bundle of rags. Yet whether they were dainty or whether they were poor, they were ever a cleanly little folk, keeping their own abodes scrupulously pure, and hating sluttery above all things.

"Wash your pails and cleanse your dairies,
Sluts are loathsome to the fairies,"

sings Herrick. This passion for cleanliness was one of their strongest points. When at midnight the King of the Pixies held his court—for they were a monarchical race of fairies—and assigned to each pixy his special work for that night, some of the little king's subjects were always despatched to see that the houses in the neighbourhood were clean and orderly. Slipping through the keyholes, these elves would examine everything. If all things were found right, they were not only gratified but grateful; for they would often leave behind them a coin for the trim and careful maids. Indeed, such servants would frequently find half their morning's work done for them by their invisible fairy friends. But if things down-stairs were left in disorder, the fairies would nimbly trip up-stairs to the servants' rooms, and pinch the lazy ones till they were black and blue. Well might they say of themselves, as Queen Mab's fairies said:—

"When mortals are at rest,
And snoring in their nest,
Unheard and unespied,
Through key-holes we do glide;
Over tables, stools, and shelves
We trip it with our fairy elves.

And if the house be foul
With platter, dish, and bowl,
Up-stairs we nimbly creep,
And find the sluts asleep;
There we pinch their arms and thighs;
None escapes, nor none espies.

But if the house be swept,
And from uncleanness kept,
We praise the household maid,
And duly she is paid;
For we use before we go
To drop a tester in her shoe."

For this reason, many of the good housewives of the West would carefully see that their houses were swept and put in order before they went to bed; and often they would leave a bowl of water beside the chimney-nook for the water-loving, cleanly little folk. If this water were forgotten, pixy vengeance was pretty sure to follow. A pixy story illustrates this. At Tavistock lived two servant-maids, who had been very kindly treated by the pixies; for these two girls had always remembered the bowl of water, and in the mornings had found small pieces of silver dropped into the bucket for them. But one night they forgot to leave the bowl in its usual place. The pixies went up to their room and reproached them. Immediately one of the two maids was ready to go down-stairs to remedy the mistake. But the other said that for her part she would not slip out of bed to please

all the pixies in Devonshire. The one good maid went down and filled the bucket, and next morning found many silver pennies in it.

Meanwhile the pixies were discussing the punishment which they must assign to the lazy one. They resolved that she should be lame for some years, and that then she should be cured by a herb that grew on Dartmoor. The name of the herb was a word of seven syllables, and the pixies clearly and distinctly told the girl what the word was.

Next morning the unfortunate servant awoke lame, remaining so for the seven appointed years. Unhappily, when her period of punishment was over, she could not remember the long name of the plant that was to cure her. But one day, while she was picking mushrooms on the moor, a strange-looking boy suddenly started up before her. He insisted on striking her leg with a plant which he held in his hand. As he did so, she was instantly cured, and became the best dancer in the town.

Many indeed are the stories of the pixies' kindness to the good maids, and of the mischievous tricks they will play upon the bad ones.

When they are in their most frolicsome humour they cannot resist teasing even the good ones too. Though they would churn the butter, clear the cupboards of cobwebs, and, if a penny were left on the table for them, would clean the whole house in the night, they would also make raids on the larders and dairies, plague the milkmaids, upset their pails, sour the cream, steal the butter, blow out the candles, and kiss the servants they had been tormenting. They are, when not in their kindliest moods, the very Robin Goodfellows of the country round. As the fairy asks Puck :—

> "Are you not he
> That frights the maidens of the villagery ;
> Skims milk ; and sometimes labours in the quern,
> And bootless makes the breathless housewife churn ;
> And sometime makes the drink to bear no barm ;
> Misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?"

The farmers, too, received much of the pleasant and the unpleasant attention of these busy little goblins. It was one of the pixies' favourite amusements to help the farmer by thrashing the corn in his barns in the night-time. Once a Dartmoor farmer, entering his barn in the early morning, found a whole troop of pixies busy with their flails. "Niver," said he, "did I see such drashers as they was. They were talking and laughing among themselves as busily as they were working. One said to another, 'I twit (sweat), don't you twit?' But suddenly perceiving the intrusion upon their privacy, they immediately vanished."

For it is one of the special characteristics of these little people that if they are watched when at their elfin labours or elfin tricks, they disappear and never return. They do not like to be seen by mortal eyes; they do not like that their good or evil deeds should be talked over by mortal tongues. Neither would they ever take any reward

from those whom they helped. If a farmer, grateful to his little assistants, hung up for them a new suit of green, he would never see them in his barn again. They were deeply offended if they were ever thanked for any kindly act of theirs. One of these little thrashing imps, whose fortunes seem to have been, for the moment, at low-water mark in the pixy-world, did indeed once, and even thankfully, accept a small gift; but that pixy never again re-visited that barn. The story is this:—

A farmer's young wife was neglected by her husband, who took to drink and laziness. Unable to bear his idleness and unkindness, she put on his clothes and went to the barn to thrash the corn herself. But on the second morning she found much corn thrashed, and she knew she had not done this. Morning after morning there was the same tale. In her bewilderment she determined to watch. Sitting up one night she saw a pixy come into the barn. With a little flail which it carried it thrashed away very vigorously, and while it thrashed it sang—

"Little pixy, fair and slim,
Without a rag to cover him."

And so the woman made a tiny suit of clothes for the little worker, and hung them up in the barn. On the next morning the visitor came as usual. Seeing the clothes, it gladly put them on, and singing—

"Pixy fine and pixy gay!
Pixy now will fly away,"

departed, and was never seen again.

Concerning the apple-crop, too, the pixies were supposed to be the farmers' friends. There was a curious ceremony connected with this belief. On Twelfth Night, farmers, hoping for a favourable yield of fruit, would place a bowl of hot cider and toast among the branches of one of their apple-trees as an offering to the pixies; and, when the apple-gathering season came round, one apple, known as the "pixies' hoard," was left hanging on every tree for them. For apples and cider the pixies seem to have had a considerable weakness. One Twelfth Night, when a farmer's party returned home, after having duly placed the cider-bowl in the tree, it was found that all the cider from the hogshead in the kitchen had disappeared. Suddenly a pixy slipped into the middle of the wondering company, and crying out, "I sipped once," instantly vanished.

But the pixies could plague the farmers as well as help them.

It was one of their special joys to ride the colts furiously by night, and in their mad gallops to tangle their manes with seed-vessels of the burdock, and to plait them so tightly that no mortal man could comb them out again. Sometimes the farmer would find his horses in his fields covered with foam and in a state of extreme terror. If he saw them going at a faster rate than usual, he would say, "They

pixies: if they ban't at they colts again! Zee 'ow they be a-tearing acrüss tha moor!"

One of the Dartmoor peasants told Sir John Bowring that—

"'Twarn't only dree yers agone when he zeed how the pixies did tangle the manes of the horses in a way that no mortal hand and no machine could do; and that once he drived thirty-five colts from the moor, and that vive ov 'em had their manes traced [dressed], and wor turn'd into a horchard, and his mane was cort in the branch of a happle-tree; and he tared hisself away, and left the mane, and most butivall it was, and he took it and gived it to his master, and he was sorry for it; for if he had it now he wid'n sell it for vive shillings."

"'D'ye see that 'ere hoss thare?' said a Liskeard farmer, to a West-country miner. 'What ov it?' asked the miner. 'Well, that 'ere hoss he'n been ridden to death a'most by the pigsies again.' 'Pigsies,' said the miner; 'thee don't b'leve in they, do 'ee?' 'Ees I do; but a specks you're a West-country bucca, ain't 'ee? (Bucca is the name of a spirit that it was once thought necessary to propitiate in Cornwall. It now simply means a fool.) If you'd a had yourn hosses wrote to death every night, you'd tell another tale, I reckon. But as sure as I'se living, the pigsies do ride on 'em whenever they've a mind to.'" *

To be "pixy-led" was a common woe of farmers coming home late at night from the too-generous market-table. But, indeed, all belated travellers were led astray among the bogs and mists of Dartmoor by the impartial pixies; for while these elves were at their sport, the case of wanderers who lost their way in the bewildering Dartmoor mists was well-nigh hopeless. The pixies would lead the baffled wayfarer up and down, and round and round, making his well-known road a wilderness to him, and mocking him all the while with shrill laughter, and with the "tacking" (clapping) of their tiny hands. Like Will-o'-the-Wisp, they would take the traveller over hedges and ditches, or bewilder him as he tried in vain to escape from a field which he had known from childhood. Yet the wanderer could always see the path close at hand; for the pixies could make narrow lanes look like turnpike roads, and, when they chose, the glowworms' lights in the hedges seemed like candles shining through cottage windows.

A Cornish farm-hand told a questioner that "he will declare, and offer to take his Bible oath upon it, that, as sure as ever he's alive to tell it, whilst his head was running round like a mill-wheel, he heard with his own ears they bits of pigsies a-laughing and a-tacking their hands, all to see he led astray, and never able to find the right road, though he had travelled it scores of times long agone, by night or by day, as a body might tell." Thus they misled night-wanderers, till dawn appeared, when they themselves must vanish among the tors and the morasses.

* Robert Hunt's *Popular Romances of the West of England.*

But there was a charm against this particular wickedness of the pixies. These neat little folk hated anything like untidiness in dress. Let but a traveller be at all unseemly in his attire, the pixies, who otherwise would have sadly tormented him, would have nothing whatever to do with him. And so the wiser traveller, wishing to avoid unwelcome fairy attentions, would turn a stocking or a jacket or a pocket inside out before starting on a journey in the dark; or if he should forget to do this, would sit down as soon as the moorland mist came upon him and instantly repair his mistake. A Devonshire girl, who had often heard of the pixies, though she had never seen one, told Mr. Thoms that she knew a man who one night, in spite of all that he could do, could not find his way out of his own field. Suddenly he remembered that he must turn his coat. As soon as he did so, he heard the pixies all fly away up into the trees. There they sat and laughed; but the man soon found his way out of his field.

So recently as the 6th of June, 1890, the following story appeared in the *Western Daily Mercury*:—

"A few days ago a party of men were ripping bark in a wood about four miles from Torrington. In the evening, when it was time to pick up the tools, one of the men had occasion to separate himself from the party to fetch an iron which he had been using in another part of the wood. He avers that, on stooping to pick up the tool, a strange feeling came over him, and while totally unable to raise himself, he heard peals of discordant laughter all around. It flashed across his mind that he was being *pixie-led*. . . . . This was about half-past five in the afternoon. At seven o'clock his wife became uneasy at his non-appearance, and started off to look for him. Happening to meet one of the rippers, she inquired whether he had seen her husband. 'Yes,' replied the man; 'he left work when we did.' This added to her troubles, and when ten o'clock came, and still no husband, she was greatly alarmed. When she arrived near the place where the men had been working, she met her husband dripping wet. 'Where have you been?' said she. 'I have been pixy-led,' he replied, and told his story. It appears from his account the pixies held him under their spell for nearly five hours, and at the end of the time he was able to crawl away on his hands and knees, scarce knowing where he was creeping, tumbling head over heels into a stream. Directly he rose he knew where he was, and made the best of his way home. 'You girt fule, why didden 'ee turn your pockets inside out?' was all the comfort he received from his better half; 'then you would have been able to come away tu wance.' . . . It may be said the man was drunk, but it can be proved on the best authority that no intoxicating liquor was drunk that day by any of the party."

It is a little difficult to make out whether the kindly or the mischievous element was the stronger in the pixies' little ways. Perhaps the kindly element really had the upper hand; for, roguish as many of their frolicsome freaks undoubtedly were, it was a good-natured, laughing roguishness, as if the imps were taking their fun just for the fun of the thing, amusing themselves by a little innocent teasing, and delighting in some harmless mischief merely for harmless mischief's sake. They revelled in laughter; to "laugh like a pixy" was

a Cornish saying. They never injured those who took their merry mischief in good part, and to those who propitiated them they always brought good fortune.

In parts of Cornwall it was a custom to leave holes in the walls of the houses, that so the pixies might have easy admission; to block up these entrances would drive away all good luck and prosperity. An old cottager living near Launceston was asked, not so very long ago, why he allowed a hole in the wall of his house to remain unrepaired. He said that he would not have it stopped up on any account, as he left it open purposely that the "piskies" might come in and out as they had done for many years. Even when the more mischievous pixies were sent out by their monarch on one of their worst errands—to change children in their cradles—things were not so very bad after all. Mothers, of course, were terrified, and would pin their children to their sides, or lay a prayer-book under the infant's pillow as a charm against the little thieves. But just as the mortal mother treated the pixy changeling, so would the pixies treat the stolen infant. A Tavistock mother lost her child in this way, and almost broke her heart over it; but she took great care of the changeling. This so pleased the pixy that it soon restored the child to its mother, and was careful to see that it should have a specially prosperous life.

The stories told of some of the pixies and their children are curious.

A farmer one day discovered close to his home in Cornwall a wretched-looking little creature, very small, though human in appearance, and seemingly almost dead through cold and hunger. The countryman remembered that the pixies at times sought human protection for their children, and he knew that their revenge would be very terrible if their wishes were disregarded. He knew also that if he treated the little being kindly, he would not fail to meet with good fortune. So he took the imp home with him, warmed it and fed it. The little thing soon recovered from its melancholy condition, and amused the whole family, of whom it was made one, by its tricks and pleasant ways. Its little oddities were willingly put up with, for what else could one expect from a pixy? And the good people of the house prospered, hoping that the foundling would never leave them. But the capricious mite had its own ideas on that matter. It was playing one day about the kitchen of the farm. A voice from the outside suddenly called, "Coleman Gray, Coleman Gray!" Up sprang the pixy, and with laughter and hand-clapping, and little shouts of "Ho, ho, ho!" exclaimed, "Aha, my daddy is come," and so vanished through the keyhole, never to be seen again.

There are at least two variants of the story of the birth of a pixy child. At Tavistock, on the borders of Dartmoor, there once lived a certain nurse. One midnight, just as the good woman was preparing to go to bed, she was summoned by an old and ugly little squint-eyed pixy—the bad pixies always squint—to follow him immediately

and attend upon his wife. "Thy wife!" thought the good woman. "Heaven forgive me, but as sure as I live I be going to the birth of a little devil." But the pixy hurried the woman away with him, and they arrived at a neat little cottage situated in the realms of pixydom. A child was soon born to the tiny woman who lay there. The mother immediately gave the nurse a box of green ointment, and told her to anoint the child's eyes with it. The woman, though thinking the task a strange one, did as she was ordered. Out of curiosity she touched her own eye with the ointment. The result was startling; for the cottage at once became a mansion, the diminutive mother was changed into a beautiful woman, and the pixy infant appeared as a mortal child. Nothing more, however, happened, and the nurse soon made her way back to her own home.

Now, if a woman, either by underhand dealing, or, as in this case, quite naturally, became possessed of the mysterious box and touched her eye with the green ointment, she could see the pixies by daylight and watch all their doings, though the fairies themselves thought they were unespied. And the pixies, who hated to be seen even in the moonlight when they were in their merry mood and their most brilliant dress, hated above all things to be seen in the daylight, for then they looked old and grey and withered. But mortal women who had received mysterious power from the magical box of ointment could not—for they were women—keep the secret to themselves. By some alarmed exclamation or other indiscretion, they never failed to betray themselves when they saw the pixies in broad daylight at any of their mischievous tricks. For this they very soon paid the penalty. The anointed eye was suddenly struck by the enraged pixy's fist, and was blinded for ever. The pixies "can't abear those whom they can't abide."

It was the custom of this particular nurse to attend Moreton Market, to sell her eggs. A few days after she had been present at the birth of the pixy-child, she went to market as usual. There she beheld the pixy-father, who, invisible to all except herself, was coolly helping himself from the different stalls to such goods as took his fancy. She could not restrain her curiosity, and it was her ruin. She went up to the pixy, and actually questioned him about the health of his wife and child. The startled pixy gazed at her, and asked her if she actually *saw* him.

"See you, sir," said she; "to be sure I do, as plain as I see the sun in the skies, and I see what you are busy about in the bargain."

"And pray," said the pixy, "with which eye do you see all this?"

"With the right eye to be sure!"

"The ointment! the ointment!" cried the pixy, as he struck her upon the eye. "Take that for meddling with what did not belong to you; you shall see me no more." And the poor woman was blind of that eye till the day of her death.

There is another version of what is evidently the same story,

though it varies considerably in details. This tells how a good woman of St. Ives was visited one night by a stranger whom she had never seen before. He had marked all her good qualities, he said, and he wished to entrust to her care a child of his own. He showed her much gold, and told her that she should be well rewarded. She agreed to go with the stranger to fetch the child. They had only gone a little way, when the woman was told that she must be blindfolded. Thinking that it must be some rich man's child to whom she was summoned, and that the mother's house was not to be known, she submitted. When the bandage was removed, she was in a splendid apartment, with a luxurious table spread before her. That so splendid a meal should have been spread for her master and herself only seemed to her strange. When she had feasted on such dainties as she had never touched before, servants bore in a light satin-covered cot in which was lying the child that was to be committed to her care.

Strict and strange orders were given to the nurse. The child was not to be taught the Lord's Prayer; it was not to be washed after sundown; every morning it was to be bathed in water from a white ewer which would be found in its room; but the nurse was never to wash her own face in this same water. And so the good woman, with the child in her arms, was led to her home again. Her husband and she kept the child for years, and everything that heart could wish was provided for all of them. The boy grew up active and strong, caring much for his "big mammy," as he called her. And when to mortal eyes he seemed to be alone, he would play and run and dance as though numberless companions were with him.

Through all the years that the child had stayed with her, she had never again seen his father. But one day, when washing the boy, she noticed, as she had often noticed before, how very bright and beautiful the magical water made the child's face. She wondered if it would not make her own face beautiful too. She touched her face with it, and a drop entered her eye. Then at once she saw that the child was a pixy, and that troops of little fairies were playing round about him. She did not venture to speak to the elves, but kept a sacred silence.

Needs must that she should take her wares to St. Ives market. No one had been able to find out who it was who had been committing countless robberies there. But this good wife detected the pixy at once, just at the moment when he was in one of his choicest acts of thievery. She spoke to him. "So, thou seest me, dost thou?" "To be sure I do, and know 'ee too," replied the woman. The pixy put his finger on her left eye and said, "Shut this eye. Can'st thou see me now?" "Yes, I tell 'ee, and know 'ee too." The pixy revenged himself:

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

The pixy's prophecy proved true, the fairy child disappeared, and the husband and wife lived for the rest of their lives in wretchedness.

These are not very pleasant stories, but if the pixies could be revengeful, they could also be grateful.

"An old woman who lived near Tavistock had in her garden a splendid bed of tulips. To these the pixies of the neighbourhood loved to resort, and often at midnight might they be heard singing their babes to rest among them. By their magic power they made the tulips more beautiful and more permanent than any other tulips, and they caused them to emit a fragrance equal to that of the rose. The old woman was so fond of her tulips that she would never let one of them be plucked, and thus the pixies were never deprived of their floral bowers.

"But at length the old woman died; the tulips were taken up, and the place converted into a parsley-bed. Again, however, the power of the pixies was shown; the parsley withered, and nothing would grow even in the other beds of the garden. On the other hand, they tended diligently the grave of the old woman, around which they were heard lamenting and singing dirges. They suffered not a weed to grow on it; they kept it always green, and evermore in spring-time spangled with wild flowers." *

Other stories about the pixies tell how mortals, answering the fairies' cries, might be whisked away to distant regions in a few moments, only to find themselves safe and sound again at home after all.

But not always. The fairies once came upon a farmer who was making his way home very unsteadily after a too festive dinner. He was clever enough when he heard the fairies' calls to repeat the names of the different places of revelry to which the pixies were going. To all these he found his way easily enough. At last they called: "Ho, and away for Squire Tremain's cellar!" There the farmer tasted so much of the contents of the cellar that he was unable to answer his little friend's final appeal to return. In the cellar he was left, till he was discovered by the butler in the morning, and sentenced to death for burglary. But when the day of execution came, a strange thing happened. For a little lady forced the crowd to open a way for her, and clearly and sweetly cried out: "Ho, and away for France!" The prisoner repeated the words, and immediately vanished, a free man.

A similar story is told of a farmer's lad who lived in the small fishing-town of Polperro, on the south coast of Cornwall. Near it was a little hamlet called Portallow. As the boy was making his way home one dark night, he heard a voice cry out: "I'm for Portallow Green." The boy was pleased to think that he might have company on his way through the gloom, and repeated the words. Immediately he found himself on the Green, with a crowd of pixies laughing round about him. Answering their repeated calls, he was mysteriously hurried away to several of the fairies' haunts, till at last the cry was raised: "I'm for the King of France's cellar!" The boy went on with his guides, and soon was tasting the rarest wines in an

* T. Keightley: *The Fairy Mythology.*

enormous cellar. With his magic companions he passed through splendid rooms where tables were royally laid out for feasting.

To prove to those at the farm that his travels were real, he took a silver cup from one of the tables, and very soon, repeating the fairies' cry, found himself back at his home. There he was praised by the farmer's wife for his early return. "You'd say so, if you only knowed where I've been," said he; "I've been with the pixies to Seator Beach and to the King o' France's cellar; and all in five minutes." The good-wife thought the boy was mazed. "I thought you'd say I was mazed, so I brought away this mug to show you it." When the farmer's family saw the cup, they believed the boy's story. That cup is no longer to be found.

Who were the pixies? The Devonshire peasant would tell you that they were the souls of infants who died before they were christened. But many of the Cornish folk maintained that they were the "old people," inhabitants of the country before the present race of mortals lived. The traditions about their origin are indeed endless. For some would hold that they were Druids, condemned to live as pixies because they did not believe in Christ; others, that they were the more innocent of the fallen angels; others again, that they were half-witted people, who had committed no mortal sin, but were not good enough to go to heaven when they died. But whatever they were, it was generally believed that they had gradually gone through many transformations, becoming smaller and smaller at every change, till at last they turned into ants, in which shape they were lost. On account of these legends, it was considered unlucky to destroy an ant's nest; and the superstition ran that if a piece of tin was placed in one of these nests at a certain change of the moon it would soon be changed into silver through the pixy power.

Are the pixies the only spirits who ever held fairs and markets? In the belief of the west-country folk these fairies undoubtedly did so. A writer of the seventeenth century says—

"The place near which they most ordinarily showed themselves was on the side of a hill, named Black Down, between the parishes of Pittminster and Chestonford, not many miles from Taunton. Those that have had occasion to travel that way have frequently seen them there, appearing like men and women, of a stature generally near the smaller size of men. Their habits used to be of red, blue, or green, according to the old way of country garb, with high-crowned hats. One time, about fifty years since, a person . . . was riding towards his home . . . and saw, just before him, on the side of the hill, a great company of people, that seemed to him like country-folks assembled as at a fair. There were all sorts of commodities, to his appearance, as at our ordinary fairs: pewterers, shoemakers, pedlars, with all kinds of trinkets, fruit, and drinking-booths. He could not remember anything which he had usually seen at fairs but what he saw there. . . . He was under very great surprise, and wondered what the meaning of what he saw could be. At length it came into his mind what he had heard concerning the Fairies on the side of that hill; and it being near the road he was to take, he resolved to ride in amongst them, and see what they were. Accordingly he put on his horse that

way, and, though he saw them perfectly all along as he came, yet when he was upon the place where all this had appeared to him, he could discern nothing at all, only seemed to be crowded and thrust, as when one passes through a throng of people. All the rest became invisible to him, until he came to a little distance, and then it appeared to him again as at first. He found himself in pain, and so hastened home; where, being arrived, lameness seized him all on one side, which continued on him as long as he lived . . . and this relation I had from a person of known honour, who had it from the man himself. . . . Both the man, his wife, and divers of the neighbours assured me they had, at many times, seen this *fair-keeping* in the summer-time as they came from Taunton market; but they durst not adventure in amongst them, for that everyone that had done so had received great damage by it." *

Though belief in the existence of these strange little people is even now not quite dead, it is surely dying out, even in the remotest and loneliest parts of the West-Country. Faith in them grows ever and ever weaker; the pixies are leaving Dartmoor.

"I've yerd tell on 'em," said a Dartmoor peasant recently, "but they be all gone now . . . They used to play all sorts of tricks, and trouble and carry away the children . . . I believe they have all left the country now. There was a great many here formerly."

"I never zeed but one," said another, "and I du think they've gone to some other part of the world."

An old Dartmoor woman was asked if she ever saw a pixy. "Well," said she, with a smile, "I did zee one once, when I was a little maid—I did zee a pixy man."

"How big was he?"

"Jist so high," said she, putting her right hand about eighteen inches from the ground.

"And how was he dressed?"

"He had a little odd hat, and a pipe in his mouth, and he had an old jug in his hand—not like the jugs we uses now. They gived a great deal of trouble and plague, as I've yerd tell on. I never zeed but that one, and I du think they've gone to some other part of the world."

And so farewell to these little Devonshire fairies.

* Richard Bovet's *Pandaemonium* (1684)