

THE
CORNHILL
MAGAZINE.

VOL. XXXV.

JANUARY TO JUNE, 1877.

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE.

1877.

Folk-lore of the County Donegal.

THE FAIRIES.

THE belief in the "wee folk," or "gentry," is very much more widely spread in our picturesque and mountainous county than cursory inquirers have any idea of. Every old hawthorn tree, standing alone in the midst of a field, is supposed to be under their protection; and the old Danish forts, so common in the country, as well as the waste grounds or wildernesses, where dog-roses, brambles, woodbine, and hazels grow in a tangle together, are accounted their especial territories.

The elfin people of the Donegal legends do not in the least resemble the fairies of poetry and romance; neither Oberon, Titania, nor Ariel is to be discovered among them. Nor are they like the humorous and frolicsome sprites believed in by the Southern Irishman. The North of Ireland fairy is a practical, calculating being, very like the shrewd, semi-Scotch farmer and cottier, in whose land his wild territory stands.

"Who are the fairies?" we asked an old man who had told several quaint fairy tales, full of strange adventure, gravely vouching for their truth. The curious events described had all, he declared, happened to neighbours and friends of his own, or had been handed down from father to son in his family.

"The gentry is allowed to be the fallen angels," he replied. "When Satan and his angels were thrown over the battlements of heaven, the greater part of them fell down to hell; but some fell into the sea—those is the mermen an' mermaids; an' others fell on the earth—those is the fairies."

"Why are they now so rarely seen or heard?" we inquired.

"Weel, ma'am, there's them that says the wee folk is all awa' to Scotland; but others thinks there's as many o' them in Ireland as ever, only they canna get making themselves visible, because there's so much Scripture spread abroad over the country."

"Is that your own opinion?"

"It is not, ma'am. I think they know that the judgment-day is drawing near; an' so they're keeping very quiet, in the hope that, if they do no more mischief, they may be saved."

We thanked our old friend for his explanation, which was quite new to us. Our manifest interest in his conversation led him to tell grotesque stories of circumstances which had, he said, taken place at the beginning of the present century, when the elfin people had still the power of making themselves visible.

It was in the autumn of the year 1808 that Andy Donnel "flitted

from the old farm of Tubber-nagatte to that of Dirnahalle, near Letterkenny, accompanied by his mother, wife, and sister, who were mounted upon carts laden with their household plenishing. "Dear, but it's the decent flitting!" ejaculated the neighbours, watching these well-laden carts set forth. "Dear, send ye may have good luck in the new place!" The wish was a kindly one; but time passed over the heads of the tenants of Dirnahalle, and it did not seem likely to be fulfilled. It was not that any fault could be found with house or land; the former, though small, was in excellent repair, and the latter appeared worthy of the manure that Donnel lavished upon it. But his careful culture was fruitless. Very poor turnips and potatoes, miserable wheat, and oats much mixed with smut, alone rewarded his incessant toil. Year after year he and his wife and sister toiled to pay their rent; and the labour became harder each year, while they grew greyer and more wrinkled; and the old lady in the chimney-corner uttered many a lamentation over the departed ease and comfort of Tubber-nagatte. "We maun flit again, Peggy, but we'll hae nae roof over us this time; we'll be poor travellers looking for our bit," said Donnel, one gloomy September day.

He had thatched his miserable stacks, and from his seat in the garden could see the snug stackyards of some of his neighbours. Peggy had no comfort to offer; she sighed deeply, and walked into the house, leaving Donnel seated on a stone against the cottage wall, with his head sunk upon his hands.

He had sat in this dejected attitude for some time, when he became conscious of a sound near him, and, looking up, saw a little old man, wearing a three-cornered cocked-hat, coming towards him between the potato ridges.

"You're studying, neighbour," began the tiny man. "May I ax what it is ails you?" Surprise kept Donnel silent. "You needna be telling me," continued his visitor, "for I ken your trouble weel. Naething prospers that you put your hand till; an' you canna make up the rent, good nor bad."

"You're right," cried Donnel, startled; "that was my study, sure enough."

"Didn't I tell you I knowed it?" rejoined the little man, pettishly. "But I'm sorry for you, an' I'll just tell you what you'll do. Go into the house an' bid your women folk never pour anither drop o' water into the sink, for it's just over my head, an' every drop they pour into that sink goes to put out my kitchen fire. If you take my advice you'll get the sink changed frae the front o' the house, where it is now, to the back, an' maybe things'll go better wi' you."

So saying, he nodded to the farmer, and, turning heels over head down the potato ridges, disappeared from sight.

Scratching his head with one hand, while he rubbed his eyes with the other, Donnel gazed after the active little man. He then got up, and went into the cottage, and threw himself on his knees over the sink,

"Gie me a cloth, an' never do you throw the potato-water in here again," cried he to his women folk, who looked on in utter astonishment, thinking he must have gone mad. But a few hurried words explained all. His next care was to send for a mason, and have the sink changed from the front to the back of the house, carefully closing up the crevice that lay right above his fairy neighbour's kitchen fire. The mason had the conscience to charge him two shillings for the job; but he was wont to say that it was, after all, a cheap morning's work. For from that hour everything prospered with him. The farm bore splendid crops, the cows yielded fabulous quantities of golden butter, the rent was paid with ease, and money was lodged in the bank against a rainy day, which, however, never came.

We have said that the old hawthorn trees are still looked upon as fairy property. Woe betide the foolhardy person who ventures to raise an axe against one of these "gentle bushes," as they are called. Indeed the man who, either to earn money, or to win his master's favour, cuts down a "gentle bush," is sure, the people think, to suffer for it. The large farmers, all tolerably well educated in these days, are naturally unwilling to lose good ground; and the gnarled hawthorns are disappearing from the fields where the superstition of former generations left them. But the farmer must often take the hatchet into his own hand, so reluctant are his labourers to help him.

Two curious instances of this superstition came lately under the writer's own observation. A poor man in the village of Carrigans, tempted by the offer of five shillings, cut down one of these trees; the season was very wet, and he soon afterwards had a severe attack of rheumatic fever, which some of his neighbours declared to be a judgment of the "gentry" upon him! The branches of the dishonoured tree lay long unregarded; but at length the mother of a large family, remembering that coals were very dear, plucked up courage to carry the branches home and burn them. Her husband, however, hurt his hand in a flax-mill next day, and one of her children fell out of bed and broke its arm—a punishment, she said, for her rash deed! But the fairies are not always malevolent and revengeful. Some of the quaintest Donegal legends represent them as being generously and kindly disposed towards their human neighbours.

Very long ago—years before the railroads were made, when tall trees were little saplings—there lived an old woman and her daughter in a tiny mud hovel by the wayside. An ancient hawthorn tree grew very close to the cabin, stretching its gnarled arms over the thatch, and striking its roots deep and far. The factories were not yet built, and spinning-wheels hummed in every chimney corner, and the girls sang sweet songs to their drowsy accompaniments.

Kitty spun all day long, but she could not sing. The birds, however, haunted the "gentle bush," whose branches lay upon the roof like a mass of snow in spring, and a crimson curtain in autumn, and there was the

blithest music in the cottage. Kitty was always alone, for her daughter worked in the fields. One evening, as she sat at her work, a little old woman in a red cloak appeared at the door.

"Come in, good woman, an' tak' an air o' the fire," said Kitty, stopping her wheel.

The visitor sat down on a stool in the chimney corner, and began to talk as any one of Kitty's acquaintances from the village might have done; but she could not recollect ever having seen her before.

"Will you be pleased to lend me the loan o' a little bowl of meal till to-morrow?" asked the stranger, rising to take leave.

"Ay, good woman, an' welcome," replied Kitty, going to the barrel in the corner of the kitchen, and filling a bowl with meal.

"I'll bring it back in the morning," said the little woman, taking leave, with smiles and thanks.

There was very little meal left—hardly enough to make Nell's breakfast next morning; and Kitty thought to herself, "I hope the wee woman 'ill come early wi' the meal."

Nell returned from her work soon afterwards, but her mother quite forgot to mention the visit she had received in her absence. But when the time came for making breakfast, the occurrence flashed upon her memory, and she went over to the barrel. What was her astonishment to find it half full of new oatmeal! "I ken her well enough, now," thought the old woman; "she's one of the gentry, an' I'll no speak of her fornenst Nell. She was a dainty, wee woman, an' she kept her word. We maun mak' the stirabout, an' I hope the meal's canny." Nell thought the meal so good that she asked where it had come from, saying she did not think Pat Ryan, of the shop, had laid in any new meal. Her mother made no reply.

It was about the same hour in the evening, that Kitty, still spinning, heard a voice which sounded as if from the top of the chimney, saying, "Bo-peep, Kitty; are you there?"

"Ay," said Kitty. "Is that you? I'm here. Come down, an' come in, an' sit down on the wee creepie fornenst me, an' we'll hae a crack."

The little woman obeyed, and remained until it was almost time for Nell's return home; and from that day forward she always appeared at the same hour. Plenty began to reign in the cabin. The meal barrel was frequently replenished; the tea canister was never empty; and saucers of cream and prints of butter were to be found upon the dresser when tea-time drew near.

Kitty, at this fortunate period of her life, was a fat and flourishing old woman. Pence and even sixpences were discovered in the most unexpected places—on the threshold, on the hearthstone, or in the tea-cups! This state of things lasted for two years; but Nell's curiosity had been greatly excited by the unwonted abundance, and the discovery of sixpence in her nightcap brought her wonder to its climax. She implored her mother to tell where the money came from, and at length

her importunity prevailed. From the day when the foolish woman betrayed her secret, no more supplies of meal, tea, butter, and cream were to be found in the cabin; and what was already there had vanished clean away,

“Like fairy gifts fading away;”

neither did the offended elfin benefactress ever after appear. The wee folk are very grateful for any kindness shown them.

The parish of Ray is a gentle place, and curious things have from time immemorial been happening to people dwelling therein. As turf bogs abound, the fires are replenished in the houses each night, that the fairies may come in to warm themselves, if it so please them. About twenty years ago, a man, named M'Ginty, was awakened by hearing a great commotion in his kitchen; he peeped down from the loft where his bed was, and saw a crowd of little creatures round the fire. There had probably been a fight among them, for one of their number lay upon the hearthstone covered with blood. M'Ginty listened to what they were saying, and found that they were in a difficulty because they had no linen to bind up the unfortunate creature's wounds; so, throwing his shirt down into the kitchen, he called out, “Tak' that, an' welcome, if it 'ill be any use to yous.” The little folk thanked him; and he, knowing that they cannot endure to be watched, lay down again. There was no trace next morning of what had happened, but M'Ginty found a shilling on the table; and from that time forth he was never without money. Sometimes it was in his boot; sometimes in his teacup, or lying on the threshold. He laid by a good deal of money—enough to support his family in comfort when a hard winter came and he was thrown out of work. But his wife wondered unceasingly where the funds came from, and tormented him to tell her. As she asked the same question day after day, he replied that, if he were to tell who gave him that money, he would most certainly get no more. Notwithstanding this, she persisted in wearying him with her entreaties, and at last he was so provoked that he revealed the secret. On visiting his hoard soon afterwards, he found a heap of dead leaves where the money had been.

Stephen Murphy's wife was a much more sensible woman. Her husband was one who endeavoured to live on good terms with the gentry; he never went to bed without putting on a good fire, sweeping up the hearth, and leaving bread, milk, and butter on the table. The food was always gone in the morning, but liberal payment was lying in its place. Mrs. Murphy knew better than to make a remark or ask a question; indeed, on one occasion hearing an unusual stir in the kitchen, and thinking that some evil-disposed person might have broken into the house, she got up, opened the bed-room door very softly, and peeped in. A number of tiny beings, some dressed in red, others in green, were clustered round the fire. She retreated noiselessly, and never until she was on her death-bed mentioned what she had seen to either husband or neighbour.

A middle-aged man living in Carrigans, the village before referred to,

declares that he has been under the protection of the fairies since his boyhood, but does not know how he was so fortunate as to gain their good-will. As he was employed in making the railroad between Londonderry and Strabane, he went one morning rather early to his work, and, arriving before the other men, sat down in the shed where the spades and crowbars were kept, and lit his pipe. He heard a cough, and, looking up, perceived a red-haired woman standing in the doorway, who said to him, "The bank will fall in to-day and kill two men close beside you ; it 'ill take you to be on your guard and watch well." So saying, she disappeared. The bank did fall in, and the two men who worked beside James M'Alister were crushed to death ; he escaped by springing backwards at the first sign of danger. On two other occasions his companions met with fatal accidents—once while blasting a rock ; another time while cutting a road—and he escaped unhurt. These latter escapes, as well as the first, he attributes to fairy guardianship.

The Banshee, or white fairy, seems to be very closely related to the " gentry ;" but she is always connected, in the minds of our peasantry, with mourning and death.

A poor man was seated at his fireside one summer evening, when he heard something resembling a mournful cry, or, still more, the sorrowful exclamation of a very old person. At the same moment a little woman, bent almost double and leaning on a stick, crossed his threshold. She looked at him fixedly, and, turning about again, went away sighing and groaning heavily. " Ally," called the man to his wife, " did you see that ? Did you hear that sore crying ? There'll be a death among us, for that was something that follows our family." The wife had caught sight of the ill-omened stranger, and she ran out into the street of Rathmullan, and looked up and down, but there was no trace of her to be seen. Next day Tom Sweeney and some of his neighbours went to bathe. All were in good spirits as they walked down to the shore together ; but a sudden melancholy struck Tom, and he remarked, " I wonder which of us will live to go home again ?" He was seized with cramp while bathing, and sank. Poor Ally knew then that the Banshee's lamentations had been for him.

There is a good deal of sameness in the stories of Banshee warnings ; the one above related is very like a number of others which have been told to the writer.

By far the greater number of our fairy legends relate to changelings. The wee folk are said to covet a beautiful infant ; and, if it be not constantly and carefully watched, will steal it away, leaving a fairy in its place. The elf looks exactly like the stolen child ; but no sooner is it left in the cradle than it begins to wail, and, as it grows more and more cross and evil tempered, so also does it become paler and more miserable in appearance. The people had several means by which they decided whether the crying baby was a changeling or not. The following cruel test was actually tried, in the neighbourhood of Raphoe, some sixteen years ago.

A mother was nursing a crying "backgone" child of eighteen months old, when an old beggarwoman entered the house, and was hospitably invited to rest and warm herself. As the child bit, scratched, and made itself otherwise disagreeable, the crone observed it attentively.

"That's a bad wean you have there," she remarked. The child stopped its angry wail to scowl at her. "Ah, wad you girm at me? God be between you an' me!" said she, shaking her withered hands at the baby.

"For God's sake, good woman, tell me what you mean!" cried the frightened mother.

"Was thon wean aye the way he is now, ma'am?"

"Na, na; he was the bonniest an' best o' childer, till he was more nor a quarter old, an' he turned like this all of a sudden. I ha' nae peace wi' him night nor day."

"Weel, I'm afear'd he's no what he ought to be, an', if you tak' my bidding, you'll get foxy leaves (digitalis, or foxglove), an' boil them, an' bathe him three times in the water, an' then weigh him in the scales. If he's your ain child he'll live, but if he's what I think he is he'll die."

The child was duly bathed in foxglove water, and died a few hours after.

A tailor, working in a farmer's kitchen, was tormented by one of these wailing infants. He wondered at its unceasing cries and at its mother's patience. These cries went on always while she was in the room, but stopped if she were called away. On one occasion, when the servant summoned her mistress into the yard, the child said to the tailor, "Will I play you a tune?" The man nodded; and the little creature took a fiddle from behind his pillow, and, sitting up in his cradle, played reels and jigs in a masterly manner. "But we maun stop now, for here comes the old witch. Don't tell;" and the child hid the fiddle, and began to cry again as the mistress opened the door. The tailor told her what had taken place in her absence, and recommended her to put the child on a sieve and shake him above the fire. She very reluctantly consented; the elf was shaken in the smoke, and, grinning and muttering, flew up the wide chimney, and was gone.

Quite as well known in Donegal is the legend of Crohan Hill. Jack Martin and his wife Katey rented a good farm in the townland of Crohan. All the land was of excellent quality except half an acre of rocky ground, which was "allowed" to be a very "gentle place." No farmer had ever been so rash as to blast a rock or cut a bramble there, and Jack Martin always gave Crohan Hill a wide berth when he guided his plough—he was not the man to live on bad terms with the fairies. Everything prospered on the farm. His cows, horses, sheep, and poultry were the finest in the country, but he had no child to inherit his savings. At length a happy day came when he and Katey had a son—a dear, lovely infant with blue eyes, lint white locks, and rosy cheeks.

"Dear, but he's bonnie!" said the women who had assembled in the farm kitchen. "You maun keep your eye upon him, Mrs. Martin, an',

if you hae to leave him his lane in the house, be sure you put the tongs across the cradle."

Mrs. Martin followed this advice carefully for some time; but it happened one day that she was called out to look at a sick cow, and forgot to put the tongs across the cradle. She was greeted on her return by a fretful, feeble wail, and from that day her healthy, good-humoured child seemed to dwindle and pine away. He cried continually; he scratched, he bit, he refused to sleep; none but a mother could have nursed and loved him still. "He's the cross wean, sure enough; but he'll be all right when he gets his teeth," said the poor woman to herself.

Three years passed without bringing any change for the better; but the "backgone" child, though small, and fractious, and sickly, was as wise as an old man.

"Katey," said the farmer, coming into the kitchen one morning, "I maun gae down to the forge wi' these plough irons."

"Weel, dear," said Katey.

"Father," said the child, who had ceased his wail to listen, "you needna be going to the smith, for I'll tell you what he'll do. He'll put the plough irons in the fire, and he'll tak' them out, an' throw them on the floor, an' say, 'There, I've missed my heat! Tak' them an' use them—they'll do you a wee while, anyway.'"

"Will he, my man?" said the farmer, laughing.

The smith did exactly as the child said he would. He put the irons into the fire, but took them out in a few minutes and threw them on the floor, crying, "There! I've missed my heat! Tak' them an' use them—they'll do you a wee while, anyway."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Martin, "that's what my little boy said you'd do."

"What little boy is that?"

"Just my wee boy that I hae at hame."

"That's a boy!" said the smith. "Now, shall I tell you what to do with that little boy of yours? Have you ever a big pot in the house?"

"Ay, sure," returned the farmer, open-mouthed—there's the pot the pig's meat is made in."

"Weel, throw these irons into the pot, wi' as big a clash an' jingle as you can make, an' clap your hands, an' cry, 'Crohan Hill's on fire!' an' you'll see what that little boy o' yours will do."

Poor Martin walked home with the plough irons. He was annoyed at the smith's insinuations; but thought he would do as he recommended, if only to prove him wrong about the child. He entered the kitchen, flung the irons into the great pot, and cried out, "Crohan Hill's on fire!"

The child no sooner heard this cry than he started up, exclaiming, "Oh! my wife an' weans will be roasted," ran across the kitchen, and flew up the wide chimney. Somewhere in fairy dwellings the Martins'

own child remained ; but, when the shock caused by his disappearance had a little subsided, they congratulated themselves at having got rid of his elfish substitute.

Less quaint but more poetical than the above is the legend of Rhoda Devlin. Two farmhouses at the foot of Carrick Brae were inhabited by John Devlin and Mark Callaghan. Exactly between their two farms arose the rocky hill, which was overgrown in parts with stunted hazel bushes, wild roses, and woodbine, leaving patches of scanty grass here and there where sheep or pigs might graze. Each farmer kept three gaunt pigs, as different from the sleek animals of the present day as can be imagined ; and, as it was then the custom to keep them out of doors in summer, they used to send the pigs to the Brae. An amicable arrangement was made that Rhoda Devlin and Nancy Callaghan should feed these six interesting creatures day about. When it happened to be little Rhoda's day for carrying the bucket of potato-skins and buttermilk to the pigs' trough upon the Brae, she was wont to set out in high spirits, the sunshine making her yellow ringlets shine like gold, and every one who met her used to say, "What a beautiful child!" Nobody said this of Nancy, who was merely a stout, round-faced girl, like a hundred other peasant children. The beautiful Rhoda loved to play, and gather bouquets of roses, bluebells, and fairy thimbles on the Brae ; and she had many pretty fancies about the nooks and tangles, and the little arbours underneath the bracken. She liked to linger there much better than to help her mother to wash the dishes, feed the poultry, or bake the cakes for supper.

It was on a warm summer afternoon that she took her bucket, and set out for the Brae. The afternoon faded into evening, and her mother went many times as far as the green gate to look for her before she appeared.

"Naughty child, what kept you frae your work?" asked Mrs. Devlin.

"Oh, mammy, dinna be angry! It was the nice, wee childer on the Brae made me stop to play wi' them, an' the time went by."

"What childer is those, Rhoda?"

"I dinna know, mammy."

"Maybe they belong to those M'Phersons that's come to Mr. Graham's new house down there at Carrick?"

"I dinna know," repeated the child.

"Weel, Rhoda," said her mother, pushing her roughly into the kitchen, "be they wha they may, you'll no leave your work again—idle, bad child!"

Next day it was Nancy's turn to feed the pigs, and she did not meet with any company to idle her ; but on the day after that Rhoda went again. It was sunset before she returned. She was received with reproaches, to which she replied—

"It was the nice, wee childer kept me, an' wouldna let me go ; an'

oh! mammy, dinna send me to the Brae again, for they say they'll keep me the next time, an' no let me awa any more."

She sobbed bitterly, and seemed to be in the liveliest terror.

"Nonsense! Stop talking that foolishness!" said her father and mother, angrily.

A kind of horror appeared to possess the child: she could not be induced to settle to anything, and her restlessness increased as the hour for her next visit drew near.

"Here, be off wi' you, Rhoda," said John Devlin, putting the bucket into her hand.

"Oh, daddy, please, dinna send me! Let Mick 'go the day," cried the child, clasping her hands.

"Mick has his work to do. Was there ever sich a contrary child! Go this very minute, an' tell the childer your father bids you come home at wanst."

Very slowly Rhoda lifted her pail, and turned to go, sobbing bitterly as she went. She never came home. Evening—sunset—twilight came, and brought no sign of her. Search was made upon the Brae; but no trace of her could be discovered beyond the empty bucket, and a bunch of faded foxgloves laid upon a stone. The neighbours had not seen her, and very grave indeed they looked when they heard the story.

"You shouldna ha' sent her back, when she fleeched you sae sore. Sure she was a bonnie wean, an' it's like enough the wee folk set their hearts on her. She'll be weel done for wi' them, for it's said they ha' fine houses underground, furnished like a gentleman's parlour, an' the very best o' gude living;—but it is to be feared that you'll see her nae mair."

This was cold comfort for the heart broken parents. Mrs. Devlin kept vigil upon the Brae on May eves and Hallowe'ens, for at such times mortals, it is said, may see the elfin people; but, alas! she never saw her child. She saw the powder fall from the catkins, and the hazel plumes nod to the May breeze, but never her pretty Rhoda's yellow curls. She heard fairy pipers play in the distance; and in chill October withered benweeds rustled like footsteps on the Brae; but she never heard the elphin troop ride by, nor ever caught the sound of her lost child's voice.

L. M'C.
