

IRISH SUPERSTITIONS.—No. III.  
GHOSTS AND FAIRIES.

BY W. CARLETON.

WHEN a superstition is once impressed strongly upon the popular credulity, the fiction always assumes the shape and form which the peculiar imagination of the country is constituted to body forth. This faculty depends so much on climate, temperament, religion, and occupation, that the notions entertained of supernatural beings, though generally based upon one broad feature peculiar to all countries, differ so essentially respecting the form, character, habits, and powers of these beings, that they appear to have been drawn from sources widely removed. To an inquiring mind there can be no greater proof than this of their being nothing but the creations of our own brain, and of assuming that shape only which has uniformly been impressed upon our imagination at the precise period of life when such impressions are strongest and most permanent, and the reason which ought to combat and investigate them least capable of doing so. If these inane bugbears possessed the consistence of truth and reality, their appearance to mankind would be always uniform, unchangeable, and congruous; but they are beheld, so to speak, through different prejudices and impressions, and consequently change with the media through which they are seen. Hence their different shape, character, and attributes in different countries, and the frequent absence of rational analogy with respect to them even in the same.

Where now are the multitudinous creations of the old Greek and Roman mythologies? Where are their Lares, their Penates, their Fauns, Satyrs, Nymphs, Dryads, Hamadryads, Gods, and Goddesses? And yet the peasantry of the two most enlightened nations of antiquity were so firmly fixed in a belief of their distinct and individual existence, that the worship of them formed an essential part of their religion. Where are they now? And who believes in the existence of a Faun, a Dryad, or a Hamadryad? They melted into what they were—nothing—before the lustre of Revelation, which, by bringing the truth of immortality to light, banished the whole host of such incongruous monsters from the earth, and impressed the imagination of mankind with truer notions and simpler imagery. The pure but severe morality of the Christian religion, by making man sensible of his responsibility in another life, opened up to the good and rational the bright hopes of future happiness. But we have our fears as well as our hopes, and as these preponderate in proportion to our fitness for death, so will we view the world that is to come either with joy or terror. Every truth is abused and perverted by man's moral delinquencies: and the consequence is, that an idle fear of ghosts and apparitions is an abuse of the doctrine of our immortality. Judgment and eternal life were brought near us by Revelation, but we fear them more than we love them, and hence the terrors of our imagination on thinking of any thing that is beyond the grave. As the old monsters of the mythologies disappeared before reason and religion, so also will ghosts, fairies, and all such nonsense, vanish when men shall be taught to reason upon them as they ought, and to entertain higher notions of God than to believe that his purposes could be thwarted by the power or malignity of a fairy. Why, what, for instance, is every ghost story that we have heard, granting them to be true, but a direct revelation, and so far antiscriptural and impious? What new truth has the information of a spectre ever conveyed to us? What knowledge of futurity beyond that which we already know have these dialogues with the dead ever brought to light? What view of our moral, religious, or social duties, with which we were not acquainted before, have apparitions ever taught us? None. Away, then, with these empty and pusillanimous chimeras, which are but the mere hallucinations of a weak judgment, acted upon and misled by a strong fancy or a guilty conscience.

The force of imagination alone is capable of conjuring up and shaping out that which never had existence, and that too with as much apparent distinctness and truth as if it was real. We all know that in the case of a female who is pregnant, a strong impression made upon the imagination of the mother will be visible on the body of the child. And why? Because she firmly believes that it will be so. If she did not, no such impression would be communicated to the infant. But when such effects are produced in physical matters, what will not the consequence be in those that are purely mental

and imaginative? Go to the lunatic asylum or the madhouse, and there it may be seen in all its unreal delusion and positive terror.

Before I close this portion of my little disquisition, I shall relate an anecdote connected with it, of which I myself was the subject. Some years ago I was seized with typhus fever of so terrific a character, that for a long time I lay in a state hovering between life and death, unconscious as a log, without either hope or fear. At length a crisis came, and, aided by the strong stamina of an unbroken constitution, I began to recover, and every day to regain my consciousness more and more. As yet, however, I was very far from being out of danger, for I felt the malady to be still so fiery and oppressive, that I was not surprised when told that the slightest mistake either in my medicine or regimen would have brought on a relapse. At all events, thank God, my recovery advanced; but, at the same time, the society that surrounded me was wild and picturesque in the highest degree. Never indeed was such a combination of the beautiful and hideous seen, unless in the dreams of a feverish brain like mine, or the distorted reason of a madman. At one side of my bed, looking in upon me with a most hellish and satanic leer, was a face, compared with which the vulgar representations of the devil are comeliness itself, whilst on the other was a female countenance beaming in beauty that was ethereal—angelic. Thus, in fact, was my whole bed surrounded; for they stood as thickly as they could, sometimes flitting about and crushing and jostling one another, but never leaving my bed for a moment. Here were the deformed features of a dwarf, there an angel apparently fresh from heaven; here was a gigantic demon with his huge mouth placed longitudinally in his face, and his nose across it, whilst the Gorgon-like coxcomb grinned as if he were vain, and had cause to be vain, of his beauty. This fellow annoyed me much, and would, I apprehend, have done me an injury, only for the angel on the other side. He made perpetual attempts to come at me, but was as often repulsed by that seraphic creature. Indeed, I feared none of them so much as I did the Gorgon, who evidently had a design on me, and would have rendered my situation truly pitiable, were it not for the protection of the seraph, who always succeeded in keeping him aloof. At length he made one furious rush as if he meant to pounce upon me, and in self-preservation I threw my right arm to the opposite side, and, grasping the seraph by the nose, I found I had caught my poor old nurse by that useful organ, while she was in the act of offering me a drink. For several days I was in this state, the victim of images produced by disease, and the inflammatory excitement of brain consequent upon it. Gradually, however, they began to disappear, and I felt manifest relief, for they were succeeded by impressions as amusing now as the former had been distressing. I imagined that there was a serious dispute between my right foot and my left, as to which of them was entitled to precedence; and, what was singular, my right leg, thigh, hand, arm and shoulder, most unflinchingly supported the right foot, as did the other limbs the left. The head alone, with an impartiality that did it honour, maintained a strict neutrality. The truth was, I imagined that all my limbs were endowed with a consciousness of individual existence, and I felt quite satisfied that each and all of them possessed the faculty of reason. I have frequently related this anecdote to my friends; but, I know not how it happened, I never could get them to look upon it in any other light than as a specimen of that kind of fiction which is indulgently termed "drawing the long bow." It is, however, as true as that I now exist, and relate the fact; and, what is more, the arguments which I am about to give are substantially the same that were used by the rival claimants and their respective supporters. The discussion, I must observe, was opened by the left foot, as being the discontented party, and, like all discontented parties, its language was so very violent, that, had its opinions prevailed, there is no doubt but they would have succeeded in completely overturning my constitution.

*Left foot.* Brother (addressing the right with a great show of affection, but at the same time with a spasmodic twitch of strong discontentment in the big toe), Brother, I don't know how it is that you have during our whole lives always taken the liberty to consider yourself a better foot than I am; and I would feel much obliged to you if you would tell me why it is that you claim this superiority over me. Are we not both equal in every thing?

*Right foot.* Be quiet, my dear brother. We are equal in every thing, and why, therefore, are you discontented?

*Left foot.* Because you presume to consider yourself the better and more useful foot.

*Right foot.* Let us not dispute, my dear brother: each is equally necessary to the other. What could I do without you? Nothing, or at least very little; and what could you do without me? Very little indeed. We were not made to quarrel.

*Left foot (very hot).* I am not disposed to quarrel, but I trust you will admit that I am as good as you, every way your equal, and begad in many things your superior. Do you hear that? I am not disposed to quarrel, you rascal, and how dare you say so?

Here there was a strong sensation among all the right members, who felt themselves insulted through this outrage offered to their chief supporter.

*Right foot.* Since you choose to insult me without provocation, I must stand upon my right—

*Left (shoving off to a distance).* RIGHT!—there, again, what right have you to be termed “right” any more than I?— (“Bravo!—go it, Left; pitch into him; we are equal to him and his,” from the friends of the Left. The matter was now likely to become serious, and to end in a row.)

“What’s the matter there below?” said the Head; “don’t be fools, and make yourselves ridiculous. What would either of you be with a crutch or a cork-leg? which is only another name for a wooden shoe, any day.”

*Right foot.* Since he provokes me, I tell him, that ever since the world began, the prejudice of mankind in all nations has been in favour of the right foot and the right hand. (Strong sensation among the left members.) Surely he ought not to be ignorant of the proverb, which says, when a man is peculiarly successful in any thing he undertakes, “that man knew how to go about it—he put the right foot foremost!” (Cheers from the right party.)

*Left.* That’s mere special pleading—the right foot there does not mean you, because you happen to be termed such; but it means the foot which, from its position under the circumstances, happens to be the proper one. (Loud applause from the left members.)

*Right foot.* You know you are weak and feeble and awkward when compared to me, and can do little of yourself. (Hurra! that’s a poser!)

*Left.* Why, certainly, I grant I am the gentleman, and that you are very useful to me, you plebeian. (“Bravo!” from the left hand; “ours is the aristocratic side—hear the operatives! Come, hornloof, what have you to say to that?”)

*Right hand (addressing his opponent.)* You may be the aristocratic party if you will, but we are the useful. Who are the true defenders of the constitution, you poor sprig of nobility?

*Left hand.* The heart is with us, the seat and origin of life and power. Can you boast as much? (Loud cheers.)

*Right foot.* Why, have you never heard it said of an excellent and worthy man—a fellow of the right sort, a trump—as a mark of his sterling qualities, “his heart’s in the right place!” How then can it be in the left? (Much applause.)

*Left.* Which is an additional proof that mine is that place and not yours. Yes, you rascal, we have the heart, and you cannot deny it.

*Right.* We admit he resides with you, but it is merely because you are the weaker side, and require his protection. The best part of his energies are given to us, and we are satisfied.

*Left.* You admit, then, that our party keeps yours in power, and why not at once give up your right to precedence?—why not resign?

*Right.* Let us put it to the vote.

*Left.* With all my heart.

It was accordingly put to the vote; but on telling the house, it was found that the parties were equal. Both then appealed very strenuously to Mr Speaker, the Head, who, after having heard their respective arguments, shook himself very gravely, and informed them (much after the manner of Sir Roger De Coverley) that “much might be said on both sides.” “But one thing,” said he, “I beg both parties to observe, and very seriously to consider. In the first place, there would be none of this nonsense about precedence, were it not for the feverish and excited state in which you all happen to be at present. If you have common sense enough to wait until you all get somewhat cooler, there is little doubt but you will feel that

you cannot do without each other. As for myself, as I said before, I give no specific opinion upon disputes which would never have taken place were it not for the heat of feeling which is between you. I know that much might and has been said upon both sides; but as for me, I nod significantly to both parties, and say nothing. One thing, however, I do say, and it is this—take care you, *right foot*, and you, *left foot*, that by pursuing this senseless quarrel too far it may not happen that you will both get stretched and tied up together in a wooden surtout, when precedence will be out of the question, and nothing but a most pacific stillness shall remain between you for ever. I shake, and have concluded.”

Now, this case, which as an illustration of my argument possesses a good deal of physiological interest, is another key to the absurd doctrine of apparitions. Here was I at the moment strongly and seriously impressed with a belief that a quarrel was taking place between my two feet about the right of going foremost. Nor was this absurdity all. I actually believed for the time that all my limbs were endowed with separate life and reason. And why? All simply because my whole system was in a state of unusually strong excitement, and the nerves and blood stimulated by disease into a state of derangement. Such, in fact, is the condition in which every one must necessarily be who thinks he sees a spirit; and this, which is known to be an undeniable fact, being admitted, it follows of course that the same causes will, other things being alike, produce the same effects. For instance, does not the terror of an apparition occasion a violent and increased action of the heart and vascular system, similar to that of fever? Does not the very hair stand on end, not merely when the imaginary ghost is seen, but when the very apprehension of it is strong? Is not the action of the brain, too, accelerated in proportion to that of the heart, and the nervous system in proportion to that of both? What, then, is this but a fever for the time being, which is attended by the very phantasms the fear of which created it; for in this case it so happens that the cause and effect mutually reproduce each other.

The conversation detailed above is but a very meagre outline of what was said during the discussion. The arguments were far more subtle than the mere skeletons of them here put down, and very plentifully sprinkled over with classical quotations, both of Latin and Greek, which are not necessary now.

Hibbert mentions a case of imagination, which in a man is probably the strongest and most unaccountable on record. It is that of a person—an invalid—who imagined that at a certain hour of the day a carter or drayman came into his bedroom, and, uncovering him, inflicted several heavy stripes upon his body with the thong of his whip; and such was the power of fancy here, that the marks of the lash were visible in black and blue streaks upon his flesh. I am inclined to think, however, that this stands very much in need of confirmation.

I have already mentioned a case of spectral illusion which occurred in my native parish. I speak of Daly’s daughter, who saw what she imagined to be the ghost of M’Kenna, who had been lost among the mountains. I shall now relate another, connected with the fairies, of which I also was myself an eye-witness. The man’s name, I think, was Martin, and he followed the thoughtful and somewhat melancholy occupation of a weaver. He was a bachelor, and wrought journey-work in every farmer’s house where he could get employment; and notwithstanding his supernatural vision of the fairies, he was considered to be both a quick and an excellent workman. The more sensible of the country-people said he was deranged, but the more superstitious of them maintained that he had a *Lianhan Shee*, and saw them against his will. The *Lianhan Shee* is a malignant fairy, which, by a subtle compact made with any one whom it can induce by the fairest promises to enter into, secures a mastery over them by inducing its unhappy victims to violate it; otherwise, it is and must be like the oriental genie, their slave and drudge, to perform such tasks as they wish to impose upon it. It will promise endless wealth to those whom it is anxious to subjugate to its authority, but it is at once so malignant and ingenious, that the party entering into the contract with it is always certain by its manœuvres to break through his engagement, and thus become slave in his turn. Such is the nature of this wild and fearful superstition, which I think is fast disappearing, and is but rarely known in the country. Martin was a thin pale man, when I saw him, of a sickly look, and a constitution naturally feeble. His hair was a light

auburn, his beard mostly unshaven, and his hands of a singular delicacy and whiteness, owing, I dare say, as much to the soft and easy nature of his employment, as to his infirm health. In every thing else he was as sensible, sober, and rational as any other man; but on the topic of fairies, the man's mania was peculiarly strong and immovable. Indeed, I remember that the expression of his eyes was singularly wild and hollow, and his long narrow temples sallow and emaciated.

Now, this man did not lead an unhappy life, nor did the malady he laboured under seem to be productive of either pain or terror to him, although one might be apt to imagine otherwise. On the contrary, he and the fairies maintained the most friendly intimacy, and their dialogues—which I fear were wofully one-sided ones—must have been a source of great pleasure to him, for they were conducted with much mirth and laughter, on his part at least.

"Well, Frank, when did you see the fairies?"

"Whist! there's two dozen of them in the shop (the weaving shop) this minute. There's a little ould fellow sittin' on the top of the sleys, an' all to be rocked while I'm weavin'. The sorrow in them, but they're the greatest little skamers alive, so they are. See, there's another of them at my dressin' noggin. Go out o' that, you *shingawn*; or, bad cess to me if you don't, but I'll lave you a mark. Hal cut, you thief you!"

"Frank, aren't you afeard o' them?"

"Is it me? Arra, what ud I be afeard o' them for? Sure they have no power over me."

"And why haven't they, Frank?"

"Because I was baptized against them."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, the priest that christened me was tould by my father to put in the prayer against the fairies—an' a priest can't refuse it when he's axed—an' he did so. Begorra, it's well for me that he did—(let the tallow alone, you little glutton—see, there's a weeny thief o' them aitin' my tallow)—because, you see, it was their intention to make me king o' the fairies."

"Is it possible?"

"Devil a lie in it. Sure you may ax them, an' they'll tell you."

"What size are they, Frank?"

"Oh, little wee fellows, with green coats an' the purtiest little shoes ever you seen. There's two o' them—both ould acquaintances o' mine—runnin' along the yarn beam. That ould fellow with the bob wig is called Jim Jam, an' the other chap with the three-cocked hat is called Nickey Nick. Nickey plays the pipes. Nickey, give us a tunc, or I'll malivogue you—come now, 'Lough Erne Shore.' Whist, now—listen!"

The poor fellow, though weaving as fast as he could all the time, yet bestowed every possible mark of attention to the music, and seemed to enjoy it as much as if it had been real. But who can tell whether that which we look upon as a privation may not after all be a fountain of increased happiness, greater perhaps than any which we ourselves enjoy? I forget who the poet is who says,

Mysterious are thy laws;  
The vision's finer than the view;  
Her landscape Nature never drew  
So fair as fancy draws.

Many a time when a mere child not more than six or seven years of age, have I gone as far as Frank's weaving-shop, in order, with a heart divided between curiosity and fear, to listen to his conversation with the good people. From morning till night his tongue was going almost as incessantly as his shuttle; and it was well known that at night, whenever he awoke out of his sleep, the first thing he did was to put out his hand and push them as it were off his bed.

"Go out o' this, you thieves you—go out o' this, now, an' let me alone. Nickey, is this any time to be playin' the pipes, and me wants to sleep? Go off, now—troth if yez do, you'll see what I'll give yez to-morrow. Sure I'll be makin' new dresses; and if yez behave decently, maybe I'll lave yez the scrapin' o' the pot. There now. Och! poor things, they're decent crathurs. Sure they're all gone barrin' poor Red-cap, that doesn't like to lave me." And then the harmless monomaniac would fall back into what we trust was an innocent slumber.

About this time there was said to have occurred a very remarkable circumstance, which gave poor Frank a vast deal

of importance among the neighbours. A man named Frank Thomas, the same in whose house Mickey M'Grory held the first dance at which I ever saw him, as detailed in a former number of this Journal—this man, I say, had a child sick, but of what complaint I cannot now remember, nor is it of any importance. One of the gables of Thomas's house was built against or rather into a Forth or Rath called Towny, or properly Tonagh Forth. It was said to be haunted by the fairies, and what gave it a character peculiarly wild in my eyes, was, that there were on the southern side of it two or three little green mounds, which were said to be the graves of unchristened children, over which it was considered dangerous and unlucky to pass. At all events, the season was mid-summer; and one evening about dusk, during the illness of the child, the noise of a handsaw was heard upon the Forth. This was considered rather strange, and after a little time, a few of those who were assembled at Frank Thomas's went to see who it could be that was sawing in such a place, or what they could be sawing at so late an hour, for every one knew that there was none in the whole country about them who would dare to cut down the few whitethorns that grew upon the forth. On going to examine, however, judge of their surprise, when, after surrounding and searching the whole place, they could discover no trace of either saw or sawyer. In fact, with the exception of themselves, there was no one, either natural or supernatural, visible. They then returned to the house, and had scarcely sat down, when it was heard again within ten yards of them. Another examination of the premises took place, but with equal success. Now, however, while standing on the forth, they heard the sawing in a little hollow, about a hundred and fifty yards below them, which was completely exposed to their view, but they could see nothing. A party of them immediately went down to ascertain if possible what this singular noise and invisible labour could mean; but on arriving at the spot, they heard the sawing, to which were now added hammering and driving of nails, upon the forth above, whilst those who stood on the forth continued to hear it in the hollow. On comparing notes, they resolved to send down to Billy Nelson's for Frank Martin, a distance only of about eighty or ninety yards. He was soon on the spot, and without a moment's hesitation solved the enigma.

"'Tis the fairies," said he. "I see them, and busy crathurs they are."

"But what are they sawing, Frank?"

"They are makin' a child's coffin," he replied; "they have the body already made, an' they're now nailin' the lid together."

That night the child certainly died, and the story goes, that on the second evening afterwards, the carpenter who was called upon to make the coffin brought a table out from Thomas's house to the forth, as a temporary bench; and it is said that the sawing and hammering necessary for the completion of his task were precisely the same which had been heard the evening but one before—neither more nor less. I remember the death of the child myself, and the making of its coffin, but I think that the story of the supernatural carpenter was not heard in the village for some months after its interment.

Frank had every appearance of a hypochondriac about him. At the time I saw him, he might be about thirty-four years of age, but I do not think, from the debility of his frame and infirm health, that he has been alive for several years. He was an object of considerable interest and curiosity, and often have I been present when he was pointed out to strangers as "the man that could see the good people." With respect to his solution of the supernatural noise, that is easily accounted for. This superstition of the coffin-making is a common one, and to a man like him, whose mind was familiar with it, the illness of the child would naturally suggest the probability of its death, which he immediately associated with the imagery and agents to be found in his unhappy malady.

**ANTIQUITY OF RAILWAYS AND GAS.**—Railways were used in Northumberland in 1633, and Lord Keeper North mentions them in 1671 in his journey to this country. A Mr Spedding, coal-agent to Lord Lonsdale, at Whitehaven, in 1763, had the gas from his lordship's coal-pits conveyed by pipes into his office, for the purpose of lighting it, and proposed to the magistrates of Whitehaven to convey the gas by pipes through the streets to light the town, which they refused.—*Carlisle Journal*.

\* The dressings are a species of sizey flummery, which is brushed into the yarn to keep the thread round and even, and to prevent it from being frayed by the friction of the reed.