

THE IRISH FAIRY BOOK

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The Irish Fairy Book by Alfred Perceval Graves & George Denham

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ALFRED PERCEVAL GRAVES & GEORGE DENHAM

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by Alfred Perceval Graves

illustrated by George Denham

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A Faery Song

Sung by the people of faery over Diarmuid
and Grania, who lay in their bridal sleep
under a Cromlech.



W E who are old, old and gay,
O so old!
Thousands of years, thousands of years,
If all were told:
Give to these children, new from the
world,
Silence and love;
And the long dew-dropping hours of the night,
And the stars above:
Give to these children, new from the world,
Rest far from men.
Is anything better, anything better?
Tell us it then:
Us who are old, old and gay,
O so old!
Thousands of years, thousands of years,
If all were told.

W. B. YEATS.



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* From "Hero Tales of Ireland."

Preface

IRISH Fairy Lore has well been called by Mr. Alfred Nutt, one of the leading authorities on the subject, "As fair and bounteous a harvest of myth and romance as ever flourished among any race," and Dr. Joyce, the well-known Irish scholar and historian, states: "that it is very probable that the belief in the existence of fairies came in with the earliest colonists that entered Ireland, and that this belief is recorded in the oldest of native Irish writings in a way that proves it to have been, at the time treated of, long established and universally received."

Colgan himself supplies us with the name and derivation of the Irish word for fairy, Sidh (shee), still used throughout the country. "Fantastical spirits," he writes, "are by the Irish called men of the Sidh, because they are seen, as it were, to come out of the beautiful hills to infest men, and hence the vulgar belief that they reside in certain subterranean habitations; and sometimes the hills themselves are called by the Irish Sidhe or Siodha."

In Colgan's time, then, the fairy superstition had passed from the upper classes, gradually disenthralled of it by the influence of Christianity to the common people, among whom it is still rife. But it is clear that in the time of St. Patrick a belief in a world of fairies existed even in the King's household, for it is recorded that "when the two daughters of King Leary of Ireland, Ethnea the fair and Fedelma the ruddy, came early one morning to the well of Clebach to wash, they found there a synod of holy bishops with Patrick. And they knew not whence they came, or in what form, or from what people, or from what country; but they sup-

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posed them to be Duine Sidh, or gods of the earth, or a phantasm."

As suggested, the belief of the Princesses obtains to this very day amongst the peasantry of remote districts in Ireland, who still maintain that the fairies inhabit the Sidhe, or hills, and record instances of relations and friends being transported into their underground palaces.

The truth is that the Gaelic peasant, Scotch and Irish, is a mystic, and believes not only in this world, and the world to come, but in that other world which is the world of Faery, and which exercises an extraordinary influence upon many actions of his life.

We see in the well-known dialogue between Oisín (Ossian) and St. Patrick, and in other early Irish writers, how potent an influence Druidism, with its powers of concealing and changing, of paralysing and cursing, had been held to be in the days when the Irish worshipped no hideous idols, but adored Beal and Dagdae, the Great or the Good God, and afterwards Aine, the Moon, Goddess of the Water and of Wisdom, and when their minor Deities were Mananan Mac Lir, the Irish Neptune, whose name is still to be found in the Isle of *Man*; Crom, who corresponded to Ceres; Iphinn, the benevolent, whose relations to the Irish Oirfidh resembled those of Apollo towards Orpheus. The ancient Irish owed allegiance also to the Elements, to the Wind, and to the Stars.

Besides these Pagan Divinities, however, and quite apart from them, the early Irish believed in a hierarchy of fairy beings, closely analogous to us "humans," supposed to people hill and valley, old road and old earth-mound, lakes and rivers, and there to exercise a constant, if occult, influence upon mankind.

Various theories have been advanced to account for their origin. Some call these fairies angels outcast from heaven for their unworthiness, yet not evil enough for hell, and who, therefore, occupy intermediate space.

Others suggest that they are the spirits of that mysterious early