

**THE FOLK-LORE
RECORD, VOL. II**

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FOLKLORE SOCIETY

**THE FOLK-LORE
RECORD, VOL. II**

The Folk-Lore Society,

FOR COLLECTING AND PRINTING

RELICS OF POPULAR ANTIQUITIES, &c.

ESTABLISHED IN

THE YEAR MDCCCLXXVIII.



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PUBLICATIONS
OF
THE FOLK-LORE SOCIETY.

III.

THE
FOLK-LORE RECORD,

VOL. II.

CONTAINING—

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Reverend JAMES SIBREE, Jun.

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OLD BALLAD FOLK-LORE. By JAMES NAPIER.

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LONDON:
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1879.

PREFACE.

I HAVE been asked to contribute a preface to the *Folk-Lore Record*, and regret that want of time for due preparation prevents me from writing anything at all complete or adequate about the objects of the Society. Compelled to be brief, I must select one or two points on which I have already written with, perhaps, damnable iteration. The readers of the *Record* must pardon me if, like the narrators of the fairy stories we collect and study, I tell a twice-told tale.

The science of Folk-Lore examines the things that are the oldest, and most permanent, and most widely distributed, in human institutions. It is not meant, of course, that every caprice of rural or social superstition is old, and permanent, and widely distributed. I have never heard that cannibals scruple to dine when there are thirteen in company; or that Assyrians, Egyptians, and Andaman islanders, think it a perilous thing to walk under a ladder. It is not even in every English county that the robin redbreast's appearance in a house is a sign of approaching death, and very probably Spanish peasants do not hold, like the Scotch, that the yellowhammer "drinks a drop of the deil's blood every May morning." But, setting aside

the accidents of folk-lore, we find the great mass of the more essential popular customs and beliefs existing in almost identical shape, among peoples modern and ancient, peoples barbarous and civilized, peoples of the eastern and the western hemispheres, and of the Australian continent. Let me give two or three examples, chosen at random, of the singularly wide distribution of certain practices. In the Dionysiac mysteries the ancient Greeks were accustomed to daub their naked bodies over with clay and dirt; this was part of the ritual, and, to explain a custom which seemed senseless, the initiators told a puerile story about Bacchus and the pirates. This same custom of daubing young neophytes all over with dirt is part of that rite which, among Australian black fellows and among certain African tribes, answers roughly to confirmation in the Christian Church. Will any one say that the dirty practice of the Greeks was an invention of their own civilisation, and that black fellows and negroes retain this, and not much else, from a culture which they once shared with Aryans? Or is it not more probable that a rite, originally savage, was not discarded by the Greeks as they passed from savagery to civilisation? This example has not, to my knowledge, any counterpart in modern folk-lore. Let us take another instance. French and Scotch peasants are or were in the habit of burning the bed on which a patient died, of spreading the ashes smooth on the floor, and of examining these next day to see whether the *revenant* of the dead had marked them with his feet. An inspector of natives in Australia (who does not seem ever to have heard of the Scotch and French superstition) found Australians carefully smoothing sand round the grave of a tribesman, and watching every morning for the print of his ghostly tread. Now here, we may say with some confidence, is an instance of a savage belief perpetuated in Europe among Catholic and Presbyterian peasants just as a savage rite was perpetuated by civilised and religious Greeks.

These two examples must stand as too scanty proof of the assertion that the folk-lore of civilized is often identical with the superstitions of savage races, and that superstitious practices are among the most widely and evenly distributed of human institutions. Now when we find widely and evenly distributed on the earth's surface the rude flint tools of men, we regard these as the oldest examples of human skill. Are we not equally justified in regarding the widely and evenly distributed beliefs in ghosts, kelpies, fairies, wild women of the forests (which are precisely the same in Brittany as in New Caledonia), as among the oldest examples of the working of human fancy? And, to go a step further, is not the nursery-tale which you find among Celts, Germans, Basques, Bechuanas, Aztecs, and Egyptians, obviously a relic of human imagination, constructed in an age when people now civilised were in the same intellectual condition as people still savage? The flint arrow-head picked up from a British camp is like that which is buried with an Algonquin chief, or which is discovered in Egyptian soil, or on the plain of Marathon, or which tips the reed of a modern Samoyed. Again, the popular tales of modern Samoyeds are often obviously related in plot and incident to, and identical in tone and style with, those which are deciphered from Egyptian papyri, or are imbedded in the Vedas, or are collected from the lips of Basques in the Pyrenees, Germans in the Black Forest, Celts in Barra, Zulus by the Buffalo River. It is a common error to suppose that, because a tale is found in the Veda, the Veda is its original source. But, in point of fact, the Veda is only the oldest *literary* document in which we meet the tale. It probably existed long before the Vedaic age, just as the story of *Cupid and Psyche* is older than Apuleius, or the *Black Bull o' Norway* older than Sidney's *Arcadia*. The Vedaic priests and minstrels found and used a pre-existent tale, just as the country people at Bristol explain the tower, called "Cook's Folly," by a story at least as old as the time of Rhamses II.

To return to the analogy of the arrow-heads, how is the essential identity in form of the British, the Red Indian, the Greek, the Egyptian flint arrow-head, explained? Obviously by the simple fact that on English, American, Greek, and Egyptian soil there once existed races as simple, and as necessarily driven to the use of stone implements, as are the modern savages, who still use tools of flint. No one will say that people, after acquiring the art of using metals, will prefer to resort as a general rule to the employment of stone. No; the arrow-heads in the ground attest the ancient presence of barbarism on Greek, English, and Egyptian soil. Let us turn again to the fairy tales. I am anxious to make out a parallel between them and the arrow-heads. I conceive that they are savage and early in character, that in style and type of incident they bear the marks of savage fancy as clearly as the arrow-head bears the marks of the rude stone hammer. And I conclude that many popular tales among Greeks, ancient and modern, Egyptians, Vedic Aryans, Basques, Celts, Germans, are just as plainly relics and survivals of the savage stage of fancy as the flint arrow-heads in European soil, and the rude clay pipkins of Celtic graves and of the modern cotters in the Hebrides, are relics and survivals of savage art and manufacture.

When we want to study flint weapons, palæolithic or neolithic, we visit the museums and easily find great store of these articles. But it is not quite so easy to study savage fairy-lore. One may recommend the Red Indian legends collected by Schoolcraft, the Zulu tales of Callaway, the New Zealand legends in Sir George Grey's works, the publications of Bleek, and of the South African Folk-Lore Society. A shorter way is to read Mr. F. A. Farrer's chapter on "Savage Fairy-Lore" (*Primitive Manners and Customs*, Chatto and Windus, 1879), where very many barbarous fairy stories are pleasantly discussed. These fictitious of peoples still rude are, almost certainly, not impor-

tations from European neighbours. They are often intertwined with the legends of the pedigree and origin of the tribe. In other cases they are kept secret and mysterious by the least progressive and cultivated members of the race, the old women. Again, we may be pretty sure that European collectors have not much misrepresented the savage legends, because each collection lends testimony to the authenticity of the others. Collectors who know nothing of each other bring the same class of tale from every quarter of the globe. This is a point on which the reader can only convince himself by examining the collections. He will find that all the savage tales have the same features, of which the most marked is the attribution of speech and intelligence like that of men to plants, stones, trees, animals, stars, the sun and the moon. Man's fancy has not yet taken a distinction between himself and the things in the world. All nature exists in his consciousness, and his consciousness in nature, in a confused nebulous way. In savage tales the sun sits by the roadside and takes a wife; the frog goes a-wooing; the galaxy is a handful of ashes thrown up into the sky by a girl; the Pleiades among the Tasmanians were mortal girls; the Eskimo say that "some of the stars have been men, and others different sorts of fishes and animals." Now this same confusion of fancy actually exists among contemporary savages. They address bears, beavers, and lizards, as if they could be heard and answered. Their whole family laws turn on the theory that they are descended from animals and plants.

Turn now to modern European *märchen*, those collected in Russia, the West Highlands, Germany, Brittany, everywhere. Do not the animals and inanimate things play the same familiar part, as protectors, enemies, friends, walking and talking with men? Again, does not classical mythology, as in the Metamorphoses of Ovid, make Callisto a bear, and the bear a star, and another bear the ancestor of the Arcadians, while an aspara-