

"PLAYING AWAY ON THE PIPES AS MERRILY AS IF
NOTHING HAD HAPPENED." (Page 48.

IRISH FAIRY TALES

EDITED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

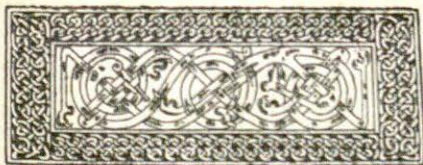
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ILLUSTRATED BY JACK B. YEATS

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CLASSIFICATION OF IRISH FAIRIES

IRISH Fairies divide themselves into two great classes: the sociable and the solitary. The first are in the main kindly, and the second full of all uncharitableness.

THE SOCIABLE FAIRIES

These creatures, who go about in troops, and quarrel, and make love, much as men and women do, are divided into land fairies or Sheoques (Ir. *Sidheog*, 'a little fairy,') and water fairies or Merrows (Ir. *Morua dh*, 'a sea maid'; the masculine is unknown). At the same time I am

inclined to think that the term Sheoque may be applied to both upon occasion, for I have heard of a whole village turning out to hear two red-capped water fairies, who were very 'little fairies' indeed, play upon the bagpipes.

1. *The Sheoques*.—The Sheoques proper, however, are the spirits that haunt the sacred thorn bushes and the green raths. All over Ireland are little fields circled by ditches, and supposed to be ancient fortifications and sheepfolds. These are the raths, or forts, or 'royalties,' as they are variously called. Here, marrying and giving in marriage, live the land fairies. Many a mortal they are said to have enticed down into their dim world. Many more have listened to their fairy music, till all human cares and joys drifted from their hearts and they became great peasant seers or 'Fairy Doctors,' or great peasant musicians or poets like Carolan, who gathered his tunes while sleeping on a fairy rath; or else they died in a year and a day, to live ever after among the fairies. These Sheoques are on the whole good; but

one most malicious habit have they—a habit worthy of a witch. They steal children and leave a withered fairy, a thousand or maybe two thousand years old, instead. Three or four years ago a man wrote to one of the Irish papers, telling of a case in his own village, and how the parish priest made the fairies deliver the stolen child up again. At times full-grown men and women have been taken. Near the village of Coloney, Sligo, I have been told, lives an old woman who was taken in her youth. When she came home at the end of seven years she had no toes, for she had danced them off. Now and then one hears of some real injury being done a person by the land fairies, but then it is nearly always deserved. They are said to have killed two people in the last six months in the County Down district where I am now staying. But then these persons had torn up thorn bushes belonging to the Sheoques.

2. *The Merrows*.—These water fairies are said to be common. I asked a peasant woman once whether the fisher-

men of her village had ever seen one. 'Indeed, they don't like to see them at all,' she answered, 'for they always bring bad weather.' Sometimes the Merrows come out of the sea in the shape of little hornless cows. When in their own shape, they have fishes' tails and wear a red cap called in Irish *cohuleen driuth* (p. 79). The men among them have, according to Croker, green teeth, green hair, pigs' eyes, and red noses; but their women are beautiful, and sometimes prefer handsome fishermen to their green-haired lovers. Near Bantry, in the last century, lived a woman covered with scales like a fish, who was descended, as the story goes, from such a marriage. I have myself never heard tell of this grotesque appearance of the male Merrows, and think it probably a merely local Munster tradition.

THE SOLITARY FAIRIES

These are nearly all gloomy and terrible in some way. There are, how-

ever, some among them who have light hearts and brave attire.

1. *The Lepricaun* (Ir. *Leith bhrogan*, i.e. the one shoe maker).—This creature is seen sitting under a hedge mending a shoe, and one who catches him can make him deliver up his crocks of gold, for he is a miser of great wealth; but if you take your eyes off him the creature vanishes like smoke. He is said to be the child of an evil spirit and a debased fairy, and wears, according to McAnally, a red coat with seven buttons in each row, and a cocked-hat, on the point of which he sometimes spins like a top. In Donegal he goes clad in a great frieze coat.

2. *The Cluricaun* (Ir. *Clobhair-cean* in O'Kearney).—Some writers consider this to be another name for the Lepricaun, given him when he has laid aside his shoe-making at night and goes on the spree. The Cluricauns' occupations are robbing wine-cellars and riding sheep and shepherds' dogs for a livelong night, until the morning finds them panting and mud-covered.

3. *The Gonconer or Ganconagh* (Ir.

Gean-canogh, i.e. love-talker).—This is a creature of the Leprecaun type, but, unlike him, is a great idler. He appears in lonely valleys, always with a pipe in his mouth, and spends his time in making love to shepherdesses and milkmaids.

4. *The Far Darrig* (Ir. *Fear Dearg*, i.e. red man).—This is the practical joker of the other world. The wild Sligo story I give of 'A Fairy Enchantment' was probably his work. Of these solitary and mainly evil fairies there is no more lubberly wretch than this same Far Darrig. Like the next phantom, he presides over evil dreams.

5. *The Pooka* (Ir. *Púca*, a word derived by some from *poc*, a he-goat).—The Pooka seems of the family of the nightmare. He has most likely never appeared in human form, the one or two recorded instances being probably mistakes, he being mixed up with the Far Darrig. His shape is usually that of a horse, a bull, a goat, eagle, or ass. His delight is to get a rider, whom he rushes with through ditches and rivers and over mountains, and shakes off in the

gray of the morning. Especially does he love to plague a drunkard: a drunkard's sleep is his kingdom. At times he takes more unexpected forms than those of beast or bird. The one that haunts the Dun of Coch-na-Phuca in Kilkenny takes the form of a fleece of wool, and at night rolls out into the surrounding fields, making a buzzing noise that so terrifies the cattle that unbroken colts will run to the nearest man and lay their heads upon his shoulder for protection.

6. *The Dullahan*.—This is a most gruesome thing. He has no head, or carries it under his arm. Often he is seen driving a black coach called coach-a-bower (Ir. *Coite-bodhar*), drawn by headless horses. It rumbles to your door, and if you open it a basin of blood is thrown in your face. It is an omen of death to the houses where it pauses. Such a coach not very long ago went through Sligo in the gray of the morning, as was told me by a sailor who believed he saw it. In one village I know its rumbling is said to be heard many times in the year.

7. *The Leanhaun Shee* (Ir. *Leanhaun sidhe*, i.e. fairy mistress).—This spirit seeks the love of men. If they refuse, she is their slave; if they consent, they are hers, and can only escape by finding one to take their place. Her lovers waste away, for she lives on their life. Most of the Gaelic poets, down to quite recent times, have had a Leanhaun Shee, for she gives inspiration to her slaves and is indeed the Gaelic muse—this malignant fairy. Her lovers, the Gaelic poets, died young. She grew restless, and carried them away to other worlds, for death does not destroy her power.

8. *The Far Gorta* (man of hunger).—This is an emaciated fairy that goes through the land in famine time, begging and bringing good luck to the giver.

9. *The Banshee* (Ir. *Bean-sidhe*, i.e. fairy woman).—This fairy, like the Far Gorta, differs from the general run of solitary fairies by its generally good disposition. She is perhaps not really one of them at all, but a sociable fairy grown solitary through much sorrow.

The name corresponds to the less common Far Shee (Ir. *Fear Sidhe*), a man fairy. She wails, as most people know, over the death of a member of some old Irish family. Sometimes she is an enemy of the house and screams with triumph, but more often a friend. When more than one Banshee comes to cry, the man or woman who is dying must have been very holy or very brave. Occasionally she is most undoubtedly one of the sociable fairies. Cleena, once an Irish princess and then a Munster goddess, and now a Sheoque, is thus mentioned by the greatest of Irish antiquarians.

O'Donovan, writing in 1849 to a friend, who quotes his words in the *Dublin University Magazine*, says: 'When my grandfather died in Leinster in 1798, Cleena came all the way from Ton Cleena to lament him; but she has not been heard ever since lamenting any of our race, though I believe she still weeps in the mountains of Drumaleaque in her own country, where so many of the race of Eoghan More are dying of starvation.' The Banshee on the other hand who cries

with triumph is often believed to be no fairy but a ghost of one wronged by an ancestor of the dying. Some say wrongly that she never goes beyond the seas, but dwells always in her own country. Upon the other hand, a distinguished writer on anthropology assures me that he has heard her on 1st December 1867, in Pital, near Libertad, Central America, as he rode through a deep forest. She was dressed in pale yellow, and raised a cry like the cry of a bat. She came to announce the death of his father. This is her cry, written down by him with the help of a Frenchman and a violin.



He saw and heard her again on 5th February 1871, at 16 Devonshire Street, Queen's Square, London. She came this time to announce the death of his eldest child; and in 1884 he again saw and heard her at 28 East Street, Queen's Square, the death of his mother being the cause.

The Banshee is called *badh* or *bowa*

in East Munster, and is named *Bachuntha* by Banim in one of his novels.

Other Fairies and Spirits.—Besides the foregoing, we have other solitary fairies, of which too little definite is known to give them each a separate mention. They are the House Spirits, of whom 'Teigue of the Lee' is probably an instance; the Water Sherie, a kind of will-o'-the-wisp; the Sowth, a formless luminous creature; the Pastha (*Piast-bestia*), the lake dragon, a guardian of hidden treasure; and the Bo men fairies, who live in the marshes of County Down and destroy the unwary. They may be driven away by a blow from a particular kind of sea-weed. I suspect them of being Scotch fairies imported by Scotch settlers. Then there is the great tribe of ghosts called Thivishes in some parts.

These are all the fairies and spirits I have come across in Irish folklore. There are probably many others undiscovered.

W. B. YEATS.

Co. DOWN, June 1891.