"THE ISLE OF MAN"
(1831)

[2d] Sir,—The object of my present and, for the time, concluding communication is to offer a few remarks on some of the superstitions which existed among the *former* inhabitants of the island. I say the former inhabitants, for very few traces of these absurd notions are now found to exist. The very memory of the "good people," the *fairies*, is fast disappearing from the island. The admirers of the march of intellect will probably assume for their philosophy the credit of having effected this emancipation from the influence of superstition; but it would not be difficult to show, that to a very opposite and much less exceptionable cause has this effect been owing. Were this wonderful illumination of intellect capable of effecting such beneficial achievements as the rooting out of popular prejudices, and the belief in goblins, elves, and fairies, *et hoc genus omne*, none could withhold the admiration it so proudly challenges. But the modern system of utilitarianism wages war not merely with the ridiculous and absurd; it scruples not to throw overboard the very idea of the possibility of any intercourse subsisting between the inhabitants of this and those of the unseen world, as well as the very existence of those immaterial beings themselves. Do not be alarmed, Mr Editor,—I have no intention of entering into an elaborate disquisition on this deep subject; nor shall venture to imitate the example of the magician of the north, who, in his recent work on "demonology and witchcraft," appears to blow hot and cold in a breath, leaving his readers completely at a loss to infer his own opinion as to the positive existence of the various *dramatis personæ* introduced into his pages. For my own part, I am quite content to incur, on this subject, the imputation of enthusiasm, while I can plead, as authorities, the first poet and the greatest moralist of our country. It is, at all events, satisfactory to think, with the former, that

"Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth unseen,
Both when we wake and when we sleep."

I have never yet met with any argument which appeared to me sufficiently conclusive against the possibility of such supernatural intercourse. The difficulty to comprehend such intercourse has often, been assigned as a reason for withholding belief; but it would be easy to prove, that, on the same principle, we must absolutely believe almost nothing at all, since there is scarcely any given subject, connected with either matter or mind, of whose essence we have any thing like an adequate perception. We should, I think, act much more rationally, if, with our inimitable dramatist, we adopted a middle course, and concluded that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

After this tedious preamble, permit me, Mr Editor, at once to introduce you to the once potent and far-famed fraternity, the "good people," the fairies of the Isle of

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Man. Tradition will have it, that one of their number, many ages ago, held the sovereignty of the island. His name, *Mannanan*, a very appropriate one too, bas been handed down to posterity. From the same source we also learn, that for many years he held undisputed possession of the country, being able, by a multiplication of his person to an indefinite extent, and by marshalling his hosts, so produced, on the brow of a hill commanding the offing, effectually to intimidate all adventurers against any attempt at invasion. Leaving, however, the authenticity of these statements to the investigation of the learned antiquary, let us attempt to sketch the characteristics of this wayward and eccentric race, whom I have not, I trust, at the risk of a personal visitation for my temerity, ventured to bring under your notice. From the concurrent testimony of those deeply versed in the history of these mysterious sprites, we learn, that, although diminutive in person, they were potent and prompt to avenge all insults and acts of aggression on their territories; yet not incapable of kindness towards those who sought to propitiate their goodwill. Dire, indeed, were the results to such as provoked their resentment. To ride a broom-stick, or be ridden by these beings, as a pack horse, over hill and dale, bog and brake, at their mere *ad libitum*, were among the lightest punishments inflicted for rebellion against their authority. In some cases their vengeance was not confined to the infliction of personal chastisements. The obnoxious mortals were subjected to serious visitations in their property, especially in the article of cattle. Unoffending animals, of the milch kind especially, were either unaccountably taken away by the stroke of death, or rendered barren and unproductive,—their milk was vitiated or with held, nor could the spell under which they suffered be removed, until, by a regular course of expiation, assisted by the advice and experience of all the old wives in the district, the malevolence of these offended sprites was appeased. Occasionally their visitations were of a still more formidable description. Lovely infants were sometimes spirited away out of their cradles by these vengeful beings, and others, of a less favoured description, being substituted. Hence the idea formerly current, and which still prevails among the lower Irish, of children being (Hibernice) *changed in the cradle* by the fairies; the supposititious child being generally found, in after life, characterized by the wayward propensities of his progenitors. Their jurisdiction extended especially to certain groves, trees, and mounds of earth. Many of the latter are still found in the island, and which, probably, originally formed Druidical altars. The elder tree, in particular, was held sacred by them, and to deprive it of a particle of its foliage was sure to subject the luckless of fender to the most serious consequences. Many curious tales, in illustration of their vindictive propensities, are still current among the aborigines of the island.

Some years ago, on being taken by a Manx farmer to view his grounds, we came in contact with a large mound of earth, nearly in the centre of one of his fields, which, from its appearance, might have lain undisturbed for centuries. On expressing my surprise that so valuable a mass of soil had not been turned to good account, my informant proceeded to enlighten me as to the history of the hillock in question. He narrated, with due gravity, that, some years before, his predecessor, one who disbelieved the existence of any beings more powerful than himself, bad one day collected a number of his labourers with the temerarious design of levelling the mound, and spreading its soil over the surrounding fields. On directing them to proceed, one and all declined to engage in an attempt so likely to incur the ire of the rightful proprietors, the "little people." Chagrined at such unreasonable opposition, the landlord, seizing a spade, rashly made an incision into this hitherto untouched portion of sacred earth. Mark, however, the consequences: no sooner had he so done, than he was seized with a violent pain in the leg, which obliged him to desist; and the disease, in spite of every effort, in a few weeks, carried him off. Of course the hillock is now perfectly safe from all future attack, the fairies having completely won the day.

To describe all the freaks of these wayward wights would be an endless task. I distinctly recollect the feelings of awe and admiration with which, in my boyish days, I used to listen to recitals of this nature, some of which were calculated to make one's hair stand on end "like quills upon the fretful porcupine." To wit, as how these mischievous imps, on any affront, set the skill and thrift of the good housewife completely at fault, by disarranging over night all her plans, either by clandestinely removing, or utterly demolishing, [3a] her culinary and other utensils. Sometimes these sprites would amuse themselves by imitating the avocations of the human kind. The plying of the wheel was one of their favourite nocturnal employments. The wheel and flax of the terrified spinstress were in constant requisition, while she has had to listen for hours, during the dead of the night, to the incessant whir of the instrument, while under the hands of these busy operatives. I have observed, that the fairies were not incapable of kindness—hence the cognomen "good people" probably had its rise. The following tale was related to me some years ago by a credible individual, who received the account from the heroine of the story herself.

Once on a time, a female had occasion to travel on foot from the south to the northern district of the island. Her way led across the chain of mountains by which the island is intersected. Before she bad cleared the mountains she was benighted, in a part where a human habitation could not be met with for an extent of miles. Weary and disheartened, our traveller became apprehensive that she should be compelled to rest, for the night, with the heather for her bed and the sky for her canopy, when, and as if conjured up by magic, a substantial stone edifice started into existence just before her! With combined feelings of fear and curiosity she ventured to approach the mansion, and, after some hesitation, entered. The hostess, apparently a being of flesh and blood like herself, kindly welcomed her, and invited her to be seated; and, being made acquainted with the necessity which had driven her to seek a shelter, proceeded to prepare materials for supper. She poured a quantity of milk into a pot, which was left to simmer over a huge fire. Meanwhile a man, who seemed to be the master of the house, on being informed of the stranger's circumstances, concurred with his dame in making her welcome. The pot at length began to boil, and, to the no small amazement of the guest, the landlady, after pouring out its contents, skimmed off a considerable quantity of fresh butter! The milk was then deposited in dishes, and set before the family as their evening repast. Our dismayed traveller had her horror prodigiously increased, when, on casting a furtive glance at her host, she observed that his upper works had been increased by an extra head! It is needless to remark how much her appetite was heightened by this supernumerary sauce. She wisely fore bore, however, any symptoms of alarm, and endeavoured to act as if all was in the straight—forward course of events,—a line of conduct which, probably, ensured her ultimate safety. Bedtime at length came, when the host and hostess, after showing the stranger her cot for the night, separated from their own domicile by a slight partition, left her to repose. In spite of her terrors, Morpheus at length shed his somniferous influence over her weary eyelids. She slept soundly; and, on waking next morning, found herself comfortably ensconced in a sheep-cot in the heart of the mountains, all traces of her last night's habitation, and its mysterious inmates, having evanished, "leaving not a wreck behind."

The "good beings" have, like the house in the mountains, also disappeared from their former favourite haunts. To what portion of our globe they have betaken themselves it is difficult to say, although circumstances would lead to the conclusion, that they have joined the parent live in the southwestern districts of that land of legends and monstrosities, old Ireland, where, it would appear, that their freaks and frolics are as rife and frequent as ever.

The close correspondence between the legendary stories of the Irish, the highlanders of Scotland, and the Manx, sufficiently demonstrate that they must have had a common origin. Of all nations, ancient and modern, Germany, perhaps, has the honour (if honour it be) of possessing the largest catalogue of demons and nonentities, and it is singularly observable in her case, that superiority in science and intellect is compatible with a proneness to superstition, and that of a description, probably, more absurd and revolting than those of the Irish or Manx themselves: witness the unearthly, wild, and demoniacal character of the lighter productions which continually teem from the workshop of German literature.

Among the obligations under which we lie to our common Christianity, it is not one of the least, that, in proportion as its pure influence extends, such absurd superstitions as those to which I have adverted are effectually dispelled. This result it accomplishes by unfolding the character of its beneficent Author, as one without whose permission no event can happen to his creatures, whose "tender mercies are over all his works," and on whom the destinies of all beings and worlds are entirely dependant.—I am, &c.,

R.

Pseud [initialled as "R"]. "[Letter to the Editor] The Isle of Man." *Liverpool Albion* 8 August 1831: 2d–3a.

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* I am grateful to Simon Young for bringing this piece to my attention.

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