

Introduction to the Folklore of Scotland

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Introduction

Man is a story-telling animal. Before the introduction of radio and television, people provided their own entertainment, by singing and by telling stories, many of which were concerned with local traditions : a subject of great interest to the hearers. In 1812, the Brothers Grimm published the first collection of European folktales ; and in the early twentieth century the Aarne-Thomson classification system showed that the same tale types and motifs appear all over the world, but with distinct local variations. However, the categories used here are entirely my own, to group the stories that I want to tell, and to show some of the underlying themes of folktales, in particular those that are told in Scotland.

Most folktales have some basis in fact, no matter how embroidered the story has become. The basis may be an observed facet of human nature, such as we see in the widespread tales of a wicked stepmother : a woman will always, consciously or unconsciously, favour her own child over that of a previous wife, and the stepchild will be aware of that and perhaps exaggerate the degree of neglect that he or she feels. Other tales may explain some aspect of nature, or celebrate a famous person of the past. Still others carry a moral lesson, or a warning. Many embody a profound truth that might be difficult to explain otherwise. Some tales are merely short anecdotes, perhaps joking ; while others are lengthy, designed to fill the long dark evenings of winter. Folktales, in fact, are limited in scope only by the talents of the teller.

From the thousands of tales told in Scotland, I have here selected only a few, to represent the some of the wealth of Scottish folklore. I hope that they

will inspire you to find out more.

I. The Same, but Different

1. *The Seal Maiden*

Many countries have tales of human beings turned into animals or birds by enchantment, who may regain their human form at certain intervals by throwing off the skin which covers them. The first Japanese folktale that I heard was *Hagoromo*, the story of the crane who shed her feather robe to dance as a beautiful girl. In Scotland, this type of tale is told of the swans, but much more commonly of the seals, which can be found chiefly along the west and north coasts of the country.

If you ever have the good fortune to find yourself face to face with a seal, you will know why the legends say that they are human beings under enchantment. They gaze out of their large soft brown eyes with an air of infinite sadness, remembering the time when they were people like us, and longing for the time when they will all be released from the spell, and gain souls. When that day comes, they will at last be able to enter Heaven.

The reason why they were punished by being transformed into seals is not clear : several explanations are offered. Some say that they offended the fairies, the Little People ; others that they were cursed by a jealous witch. One theory is that they were people to whom the Gospel was preached, but who refused to be converted to Christianity : if they repent and become Christian they will become human once more. Still another theory is that they were the soldiers of Pharaoh's army, who drowned in the Red Sea, but this seems unlikely, since the seals when in human form speak Gaelic, the language of Heaven, and how would ancient Egyptians come to speak Gaelic ?

On one thing, however, everyone agrees. At certain fixed intervals the seals are permitted to come ashore at night, discard their skins, and resume human form. When dawn approaches, they must resume their skins and return to the sea. Thus they are reminded perpetually of what they have lost.

From time to time these seals, temporarily freed from enchantment, are seen on the shore by mortals. If the seals see such a person, they will

immediately seize their skins and flee back to the sea. Occasionally, however, one of them is too late, and the human intruder has found and kept a skin. Its owner cannot then return to the sea, but is the prisoner of the possessor of the skin.

Many are the stories of what happened then. Here is one of them.

A young man named Donald lived in a small house by the shore with his elderly widowed mother. Their tiny farm, called a croft, was small, but it had provided a good living for them. They grew vegetables in the garden, enough to feed themselves and to provide for the winter, fertilising the ground with the seaweed thrown up on the beach by the sea. The sea also provided a harvest of shellfish, mussels and cockles, to augment their diet. A few hens scratched for food along the shore, and provided them with eggs, albeit somewhat fishy-tasting eggs. When they were too old to lay any more, they ended up in the pot. A cow provided milk and butter, and a few sheep gave wool which Donald's mother spun and wove into clothing for them. It was not a luxurious life, but it kept them healthy and well fed.

Finally, however, the old lady had become too frail to work the ground. Now he had to do everything himself, and he was becoming increasingly tired. Worrying about his mother's health did not improve matters.

One evening, almost totally exhausted, he wandered onto the beach before going home to supper and to bed. The sight and sound of the sea, he thought, would give him the courage to continue the struggle. The sun had just set beyond the western horizon, and the crimson and gold of the sunset sky had faded to pink and grey. Gentle ripples splashed gently on the shingle. He felt at peace.

Suddenly, his attention was caught by a movement in the water further out. As he watched, incredulous, a large group of seals came swimming toward the shore. Hastily concealing himself behind a rock, he watched in fascination as they came ashore, took off their skins, and assumed their human form. Among them was one particularly beautiful girl, and Donald fell in love with her at first sight. He noted carefully where she hid her skin, in a gap

between two rocks, and while she was dancing with her sisters on the sand he crept cautiously toward the hiding place. Stealthily, he took the skin, and then retreated silently to his refuge.

As the short summer night drew to a close and dawn approached, the seals began to prepare for their return to the sea. But one of them could not find her skin, and was obliged to watch, weeping, as the others sadly parted from her. Before dawn broke they must be gone.

As the last seal slipped below the surface of the water, Donald emerged and approached the seal maiden.

“Don’t be frightened”, he begged. “Marry me, and I will love you and take care of you for the rest of our lives.”

As you can imagine, the girl required a good deal of persuading, but at last she consented, for Donald was a very attractive young man, and she could feel the warmth and kindness of his nature. They went back to the little house, where she was introduced to Donald’s mother, who at once took a great liking to her, and welcomed her warmly.

“I shall call you Ishbel”, said the old lady, “for it was the name of my own mother, and you have a great look of her. I hope you will be as happy as she was.”

Soon the young couple were married, and settled down together in the house by the shore. The seal maiden was a very good wife, caring for her husband and mother-in-law, and sharing in all the work of the croft.

The years passed happily, and in time the couple had three children. Their mother loved them dearly, but every so often she went down to the shore at dusk, looked sadly out over the sea, and sighed deeply.

One day, when Donald was out working on the croft, the youngest child came running to his mother, bringing a strange object that he had found hidden away in a corner of the byre.

“Look, Mother !” he called. “See what I found ! Whatever is it ?”

The seal wife looked at it, and gave a great cry. It was her own lost sealskin.

Now that her skin had been returned to her, her human family no longer

had the power to hold her : the sea must reclaim its own. The whole family was broken-hearted when they realised what had happened. Even the seal wife, though she longed to rejoin her kinsfolk, was grief-stricken at having to leave her husband and children. However, there was no help for it.

That evening, the whole family went down to the shore, and there they wept bitterly as she bade them farewell, put on her skin and slid into the sea. As she swam out, the seals gathered to greet her, barking their welcome to their long-lost relative. Never again did they take human form in that place.

To this day there are families who boast of being descended from the seals.

2. *Greyfriars Bobby (1858-72)*

Another tale that is “similar but different” is the story of Greyfriars Bobby, whose statue is on the regular tourist circuit in Edinburgh.

We tend to have a proprietary feeling about our own country’s favourite stories, and to think that they are unique. In truth, of course, it is extremely likely that something similar will have happened somewhere else at some time. The details may vary, but the outline of the story will be recognizable. In this case, the point of the tale is the value of fidelity.

In the year 1872 a small dog died in the city of Edinburgh. Many dogs died in the same year, but this one was rather special.

Our little Scottish dog, a Skye terrier whose name was Bobby, was two years old when his master died, and Bobby was inconsolable. He followed the funeral procession to the graveyard of the Greyfriars Church, and there he remained after all the people had left. For the rest of his life he stayed by the grave. A sheltered corner nearby gave him some protection from the wind and the rain, but of course he became hungry. Close to the graveyard was a restaurant where his master had often eaten together with his dog, and every day at one o’clock exactly Bobby now went there by himself to be fed. How did he know the right time ? Was it instinct, or the gun which is still fired from Edinburgh Castle as a time signal ?

Bobby lived for another fourteen years, never going far from his master's grave, and always sleeping on it at night. Although the authorities tried to chase him out of the graveyard, where animals are not allowed, the local people supported him, and finally he was left in peace to his vigil. He became the most famous dog in the city, and came under the personal protection of the Lord Provost, who paid his dog licence fee, and gave him an inscribed collar to prove it. When at last he died he was buried near his master, though just outside the consecrated ground, and a statue of him was put up nearby.

All Japanese tourists visiting Edinburgh now stop to photograph the statue of the faithful dog called Greyfriars Bobby. But I wonder how many of them had always assumed that the only such dog was Tokyo's own Chuken Hachiko, and subconsciously felt that foreign dogs could never behave like him.

In 2011 a Swedish professor announced that the story was not quite true : that there were actually two dogs, which accounted for the dog's long life, and that the legend was concocted by the owner of the restaurant to increase the number of customers. But we Edinburgh people know better.

II. The Importance of Names

3. *Whuppity Stoorie*

Names are a vital part of a person's identity. At some time we have all probably felt more in control of a situation when we first learned the name of a person whom, for example, we saw every day at the bus stop without knowing who he or she was.

A common theme in folktales around the world is that of the superhuman creature which loses its power for good or, more generally, for evil when its name is known. The name itself is usually mere nonsense syllables in the language of the country where the tale takes place, impossible to guess. This version of the story is from the Lowlands of Scotland.

Once upon a time, there lived a young widow in the village of Kittlerumpit, but where exactly that village was is not related. The young woman was good-looking and hard-working, but since she was also poor she had not had one offer of marriage after her husband died. All she had was her

baby son, and the pig that provided milk for them both. That animal also regularly produced many piglets, which could be sold for money, with the aid of which the girl could contrive to support herself and her child.

One day, however, the pig fell ill, and seemed likely to die. Nothing that the girl tried in the way of treatment, with herbs and other medicines, made any difference. She was in despair. Without the pig, how could she and her child manage to survive? She was at her wits' end, when suddenly she saw walking up the garden path a strange little old lady. The lady was dressed in a gown and cloak of green, the colour of the fairies, and had an old-fashioned tall-crowned hat on her head and a long staff in her hand.

As she approached, the young woman, still weeping bitterly, got up from the stone on which she had been sitting and curtsied politely.

"Madam," she cried, "you see here before you the most unfortunate woman alive!"

The old lady had no patience with such self-pity.

"I've no desire to hear piper's news and fiddler's gossip," she snapped. "I know that you are in trouble, but plenty of other people are in worse case than you are! What I want to know is, if I cure your pig, what are you prepared to give me?"

"Oh, your ladyship, if you can but cure my pig, I'll give you anything you ask," replied the sobbing girl, little guessing with whom she was dealing.

"That's a bargain, then," said the green-clad lady, "and I'll keep you to it, remember!"

She strode straight in to the sty, and examined the sick pig. After giving it a long, long look, she began to murmur something under her breath, that sounded like:

"Pitter, patter;

Holy water."

Then she took out of her pocket a small bottle with some oily liquid in it, and rubbed the sow with the oil - between the ears, on the snout, and at the tip of the tail. Then she gave it a smart slap on the rump, and said, "Get up, beast!"

And with that the pig got up, gave itself a shake, and went over to the trough for its breakfast, which it was soon eating with a good appetite.

You can imagine how happy the young woman was. She wanted to kiss the hem of the lady's green gown, but the other was having nothing of that.

"I don't like these foreign habits," she said. "We made a bargain, and it's time for you to keep your end of it. You promised to give me anything I asked. Well, I'm not a greedy or unreasonable person, so I'll just ask you for that boy, your son."

Then the young woman gave a great cry of despair, realising too late that the green stranger was a fairy woman, for these are always trying to steal baby boys. She dropped down on her knees, and begged and pleaded for mercy, that the fairy lady would leave her her son, but to no effect.

"You can spare me all that noise," said the old lady, tartly. "I'm not deaf. We made a bargain, and you must keep it. It's as simple as that. But I'll grant you this one thing. By the law of the fairies, I can't take him from you till the third day from today, and not even then, if you can tell me what my name is."

Away she went down the path with a swish of her green skirt, leaving the young mother half-fainting.

That night she could not sleep, and the next day too she could do nothing but hug and kiss the boy, in desperation, sure that she was going to lose him for ever. But then on the second day, still carrying the child, she wandered out of the house and through the woods, not caring where she was going. On and on she went, till she reached an old quarry where there was a spring of fresh water. Meaning to get a drink for herself and her child, she approached it, but stopped dead as she heard an unexpected sound from within the quarry, the hum of a spinning wheel and a voice singing. Quietly she crept closer, and there she saw with astonishment her fairy visitor, who was spinning and singing to herself :

"Little knows that silly dame

That Whuppity Stoorie is my name !"

You may well believe that the girl could hardly contain herself for

joy. Cautiously she eased her way back from the place, till she was far enough away to run for home as fast as she could. Now her problem was solved, and all she had to do was to await the return of the fairy.

On the third day, therefore, she sat on the same stone as before, pulled her cap over her face, and, as the fairy woman came up the path, pretended to be weeping. But the fairy paid no attention, merely striking her staff sharply on the ground, as she called out,

“Here, goodwife, I’ve come for the boy. Quick, hand him over, and fulfil your part of our bargain.”

The young mother, secretly enjoying herself, threw herself on the ground.

“Sweet madam,” she begged, “take the pig, but leave me my son !”

“The fiend take your pig !” said the angry fairy. “What use is a pig to me ? A bargain’s a bargain, and I want the boy !”

“Then, I pray you, my lady, take me, and spare the boy !”

“The woman’s demented !” exclaimed the fairy. “Who in their senses would want a stupid ugly woman like you ?”

Sorely affronted at this, the goodwife rose to her feet and gave a deep, mocking curtsy.

“Indeed, your ladyship,” she said slowly and spitefully, “I should have known that I am not worthy even to tie the shoelaces of the high and mighty princess - *Whuppity Stoorie* !”

If a bomb had exploded under the green fairy woman, she could not have jumped higher than she did at the surprise she got ! She stamped and stamped her feet in a fury, then with a great shriek of rage and frustration whirled around, and went away to wherever she had come from.

But the goodwife of Kittlerumpit, laughing fit to burst, picked up her son and went inside, singing as she went,

“I’ve given Old Nick a bone to pick,
With his tricks and his *Whuppity Stoorie* !”

4. *Short Hoggers of Whittinghame*

Names are important in other ways as well, as part of our identity.

Without a name, we have only a half-existence.

Baptism is a sacred rite of the Christian church, in which a child is given a name and accepted as a member of the Church. It used to be believed that a child who had not been baptised could not go to Heaven. For this reason, if a newborn child seemed unlikely to live for many days, or hours, it was necessary to perform the ceremony with great urgency. The following tale relates what happened in one case where this was not done.

The little village of Whittinghame in East Lothian used to have a ghost. It was no ordinary fearsome ghost, with clanking chains about its ankles. Indeed, it was a very small one, very small and harmless. In fact, it was a baby ghost.

It was the ghost of a baby that had died unbaptised, and so had not been given a name. Its mother had been an unmarried girl, who abandoned her illegitimate child under a bush, leaving it there to die.

The little soul duly arrived at the gates of Heaven, and joined the queue of those awaiting their turn to be let in. Saint Peter was in charge here, with a large book in which were written the names of all those entitled to pass through the Pearly Gates and take their place in Paradise. As each soul presented itself, he asked its name, and checked to make sure the name was entered in the book he held. Without this authorisation, no-one could go in.

Finally the child reached the head of the queue. The previous soul had given her name, and, after consulting his register, Saint Peter smiled at her.

“You have led a good and virtuous life,” he told her. “Welcome to Heaven !”

Next he turned to the soul of the baby.

“And who are you ?” he asked. “What are you called ? What is *your* name ?”

“I don’t know,” replied the infant. “I’m just me. Nobody called me anything. I don’t think I do have a name.”

Saint Peter looked grave.

“That won’t do,” he said. “If you don’t have a name, it won’t be in my book, and if it isn’t written in my book you can’t enter Heaven. That is the

rule. I am very sorry, my child, but there is no way I can let you in. Oh, dear, this is very difficult ! You are not a sinner, because you did not live long enough to commit any sins, and therefore you cannot go to Hell. And yet I cannot allow you into Heaven. Rules are rules. I'm afraid you will just have to go back to Earth, and try to find out what your name is. Come back here when you know. Next, please."

The disconsolate little soul, rejected by both Heaven and Hell, had no choice but to return to Earth. He chose to go to the only place he had known in his short life, the village of Whittinghame.

A soul rejected by the afterlife can only become an uneasy ghost, homeless and unhappy. In time, the villagers began to tell of seeing an apparition, the ghost of a small child, wearing the baby clothes in which it had died. It haunted the churchyard, and the areas round about, and appeared to be weeping sadly. Some people told of it seemingly trying to ask them something, but none had the courage to confront it and speak to it. It is dangerous to have contact with the spirit world : the spirits may drag you into their own world. The superstitious villagers had a dread of dying themselves if they approached the ghost.

So the years passed, and then the decades, and then the centuries. Still the lonely little ghost wandered sadly around, hoping vainly to discover its name.

One night, a man in the village had been out celebrating the birth of his own first child. He and his friends had spent the evening in the inn, and drunk the health of the newborn infant not once, but many times. When finally he began unsteadily to wend his homeward way, he had definitely reached the stage where he could be called "happy". Singing a drinking song, woefully out of tune but blissfully unaware of it, he staggered past the churchyard.

A movement caught his eye, and with an effort he came to a stop, supporting himself on the churchyard wall. A small figure, dressed in rather tattered garments, sat on a flat tombstone, its feet dangling over the edge, and looked pathetically at him. The new father was full of goodwill to all, and,

after a convivial evening, oblivious to the possibility of the supernatural. The child's little woollen bootees, known in this area as "hoggers", presented themselves to his bleary gaze. Full of his new paternal responsibilities, he reacted. Such a small child, he instinctively felt, should not be out at night.

"Hey, there, Short Hoggers !" he called cheerfully. "What are you doing out here ? Off home with you !" And he staggered on to his own home, and to his son, and out of this story.

He left behind him, however, the little ghost, delirious now with happiness.

"At last, at last, I have a name :

They call me Short Hoggers of Whittinghame !"

he sang to himself, loudly and somewhat out of tune. But who was going to complain about his being a little off-key, when there was so much to rejoice about !

Triumphantly, the little soul sped as fast as he could to the Pearly Gates, and presented himself once more to Saint Peter. The latter smiled benevolently at him.

"I remember you, my child," he said. "You were the child with no name, whom I told to come back when you had one. Well, have you found one ? What is your name ?"

The little soul swelled with pride and joy.

"I am *Short Hoggers of Whittinghame* !" he announced.

"Welcome !" said Saint Peter. "Welcome to Heaven !" And the newest member of the blessed passed into Paradise.

From that day to this, no ghost has ever again been seen in the village of Whittinghame.

III. The Fairies

5. *The Origin of the Fairies*

Folk tales often seem to be pure products of a fantastic imagination, unrelated to real life. However, behind every traditional tale there is usually a germ of historical truth, no matter how distorted by repetition and

embellishment over the years, or the centuries.

The fairies, or Little Folk, as they appear in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands of Scotland, have certain distinct characteristics. They live in mounds or hillocks, they love music and dancing, and they fear cold iron. They may be smaller than the average modern person, but they are very far from being the tiny, gauze-winged, delicate creatures popular with romantic Victorian illustrators. Sometimes they are benign and helpful to people, teaching their art to pipers, or helping with the housework or harvest. More often, however, contact with them is dangerous, as is all contact with the spirit world. They may steal away a beautiful human baby, leaving in its place an ugly and bad-tempered changeling ; or lure into their hillocks a particularly gifted piper, to play for them for seven, or for a hundred, years. When the piper returns to this world, he thinks that only a single night has passed, as time is different in the realm of the fairies. For protection against the fairies, people planted at their gate a rowan tree. As a side benefit, the berries make delicious jelly, making the tree doubly useful.

What is the origin of this belief ?

Scholars offer two theories. One is that the fairies are a folk memory of an ancient race that once inhabited the land, before being driven out by a more powerful invader armed with iron tools and weapons. The defeated people took refuge in the hills and in caves, or even perhaps in ancient burial mounds, where they continued to live a more primitive life, segregated from the newly dominant race. I remember as a child entering one such mound. Many other hillocks, perfectly ordinary, are also associated with the fairies, and are said to be where they live.

The second theory is that they are best understood as a survival of the ancient pre-Christian Celtic religion, a folk memory of old gods who had much to do with fertility, and of all the attendant minor spirits of nature. Probably the truth is a mixture of both theories.

But a different, and more romantic, explanation is offered in the Highlands.

Long, long ago, before ever the world took shape or form, God lived with his angels in the place called Heaven. There the angels lived in perfect

harmony, because they took pleasure in doing the will of God who had created them. But at about the time that God was occupied with creating the world that was to be called Earth, a new spirit entered Heaven, the Spirit of Discontent, who poisoned the minds of certain angels so that they no longer wished to do the will of God.

Black thoughts filled the minds of these rebellious ones, and blackened their hearts too, so that in time their outward appearance became black as well. For a long time God was patient with them, perhaps hoping that they would forget their discontent, but at last he began to fear that the good angels too would be corrupted. Parting the thick cloud of mist that screens Heaven from the rest of the universe, he looked out over space. Below him was the newly-created Earth, and far beyond it, beyond all the stars, he saw a pool of blackness, so vast that it could not be fathomed, with at its heart a red light that gleamed like an eye of fire. So evil did it seem that the good angels all covered their faces with their wings to avoid the fearful sight.

God pointed to the black pool and spoke to the leader of the rebels.

“That is where I am going to put you and your fellows, to be damned for all eternity. Never think that you can come back to Heaven !”

The wrath of God was so great that the black angels were almost blown off the edge of Heaven. But their leader turned defiantly to his followers, saying,

“Come then with me, those of you that are on my side. We are well rid of this place. But if God thinks that all the angels that are left are on his side, then he’ll soon find out that there are those who are Neutrals. They are not on my side, but neither are they on his !”

And with that parting shot he and his followers were thrown out of Heaven, to sink down for ever into the black abyss.

For a time it seemed as if peace had returned to Heaven. But then it was found that what the Evil One had said was true, that there were some angels who were indeed neutral. While they did no wickedness, they seemed unwilling to do good either. God was not pleased with them, fearing that they might affect the good angels.

So at last he called the Neutrals together, and said to them,

“There is something that I must tell you. I cannot keep you in Heaven any longer, because you are not with me – and those who are not with me are against me. That is why I cannot leave you here among the good angels. But I am sending you down beyond the mists of Heaven to the place called Earth. There you are to live in the hills and under the ground as a Little People, and those who live on the Earth will call you *the fairies*. I am not going to take away your wings, and at night when the moon is full you may come out from your fairy hills and exercise them, in case the time comes when I think you are fit to be recalled to Heaven, where you would need your wings again.”

And that is how the Neutrals were banished from Heaven and put to live on the Earth as the Little People. For ages and ages they lived in their fairy hillocks, only coming out at night to dance in the dark circles of grass called fairy rings, where mortal people sometimes saw them. But as time went on, fewer and fewer fairies were seen, even when the moon was brightest, and then only in ones and twos where once there had been scores. Finally, now at last the fairy hills are silent, and no longer is their bewitching music heard in the glens.

There are people who would tell you that this is due to the inventions of Man, and that the lighting of darkness at the touch of a switch, the vehicles that run by themselves without horses to pull them, and the machines that fly on man-made wings have frightened away the fairies from the Earth. Those who would tell you this are people who have neither poetry nor romance in their souls.

In the Highlands, people know better. They know that, starting perhaps a hundred years ago, maybe more, maybe less, God began to feel sorry for the poor fairies in their underground dwellings, and decided that they had been banished from Heaven for long enough. So he pardoned them, and took them back to Heaven to give them a second chance !

6. *The Fairy Flag of Dunvegan Castle*

What about particular tales of fairies ? Here is one among many, an especially famous one.

Dunvegan Castle, a stronghold on the rocky north-western coast of the Isle of Skye, is the seat of the Clan Macleod. The same family has lived in the castle for nearly eight hundred years, a record which not many families can equal.

Of the treasures which have accumulated there over the centuries, three are particularly famous : the Fairy Flag, Rory Mor's Horn, and the Dunvegan Cup. The Cup is a wooden bowl rimmed with silver and mounted on silver feet ; the date on the mounting is 1493, but the bowl itself is believed to date from the tenth century. The Horn, an ox horn rimmed with silver, holds half a gallon, and is supposed to be filled with wine and drunk completely in a single draught by each successive chief of the clan when he (or she) comes of age. Both the Cup and the Horn have legends attached to their origins, which tell how they came to be among the treasures of the clan.

But the Fairy Flag is undoubtedly by far the most famous, and the most precious, of the three. It now hangs framed in a place of honour on the wall of what was once the castle banqueting hall.

It is a squarish piece of heavy silk, yellowish brown with age, and embroidered with patches of red which have come to be known as "elf-spots". The chief of the clan on one occasion took it to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, to a specialist on ancient textiles, for an expert opinion on its origin. The considered reply was that it was of Eastern origin, possibly a saint's shirt, which had probably been brought back as a trophy from the Crusades, and that the "elf-spots" were beautiful Eastern darns.

"You may *believe* it to be a relic of the Crusades," said the chief, "but I *know* that it was given to my ancestor by the fairies."

To which the expert responded, with perfect courtesy, "I bow to your superior knowledge !"

After all, what could a mere Englishman know about Highland fairies ?

The ancestor in question was one of the early chiefs of the Clan

Macleod. As appears to have been fairly common in those days, he married a fairy, and took her to live with him in the castle. They were devoted to each other, and lived together at peace with all the world. This happy state of affairs lasted until a son was born to them. Then disaster struck the couple. A summons came from the fairy world for the wife to return to her own people. Against this call there was never any appeal possible: it was a command that could only be obeyed without delay. Broken-hearted, the pair walked down the path, going together as far as mortal man might, to the Fairy Bridge. There they said their last farewell, and the chief returned, a lonely man, to the castle where he and his wife had known such happiness.

In accordance with the custom of the clan, a great feast was held to celebrate the birth of the heir, and on the appointed day all the clansmen gathered at Dunvegan to take part in the rejoicing. Food and drink were provided in abundance, and the singing and dancing grew merrier as the evening wore on. Even the baby's nurse, sure that her charge was asleep, went downstairs to join the festivities.

But the baby, left alone in its cradle, was completely forgotten. He wriggled and squirmed in his sleep, as babies will, and soon his coverings had been kicked off. He awoke cold and shivering, and began to cry miserably. No mortal ears were at hand to heed him, but his mother heard his cries. Gentle, unseen hands covered him with a soft, silken coverlet, and gentle voices began to sing a lullaby, soothing him back to warm and comfortable rest.

The forgetful nurse heard the voices, and rushed, terrified, to see what had happened. Before her was the baby, smiling at what she could not see, and in the air all around her were the fairy voices.

She gathered up the child, wrapped him in the fairy coverlet, and took him down to the banqueting hall, where she told her story. Then, as they listened, the chief and all the clan heard the fairy voices, singing. The voices promised that the silken cloth, the Fairy Flag, if waved when the clan were in dire peril, would bring them help not of this world, and save them from defeat. Three times, and three times only, could the Flag's aid be summoned. After the

third time the Flag would be taken back by its fairy owners, and never seen in this world again.

Then the voices faded away.

Ever after, the baby's nurse sang him to sleep with the fairy lullaby that she had heard that night. Tradition says that she told her descendants that she had been so impressed by the tune that she remembered it at once, and never forgot a note. The words, on the other hand, she found difficult to remember, but whenever she hesitated or stopped voices around her took up the song. She also said that the child never suffered from any of the ailments or accidents common to children, and she believed that the boy was guarded and protected by his fairy kin.

The Dunvegan Cradle Song is undoubtedly very old, being in an ancient and almost forgotten form of Gaelic, which may well have been the language of the fairies (and indeed, as all Highlanders know, it was the language of the original paradise, the Garden of Eden). For generations it was sung to the Macleod heirs, and no woman who was unable to sing it was chosen as a nurse for the young chief.

After the dramatic events at the castle, the Flag was put carefully away in a special case, and a Standard Bearer was appointed, whose duty it was to carry the Flag. This office has been hereditary in one family since the beginning. Usually, when the clan went into battle, the Flag would be carried in its case, with a guard of twelve men sworn to die in its defence. Often the mere sight of the cased Flag caused the tide of battle to turn. Many men swore that as it passed eyes could be seen shining from every hillock, and that shadowy armies marched after it.

To date, the Flag has been waved twice. Only one more wave is permitted before the fairies reclaim it. But it still has power, even at a distance.

As recently as the Second World War, men of the Clan Macleod, soldiers, sailors and airmen, carried with them a photograph of the Fairy Flag. No longer with a guard of twelve, but still a talisman, it went wherever the clansmen did. And for those who returned safely to Skye, who is to say that it

was not because of the protection of the Flag ?

7. *The Gizzen Brigs*

The fairies appear frequently in the folktales of Scotland. They are of many kinds. Some of them are helpful, some are malicious. This is a tale of fairies who only wanted to be given work, whatever it was : helpful fairies, but whose helpfulness was taken to extremes.

A sandbar near the mouth of the Firth of Dornoch is known as “the Gizzen Brigs”, “the noisy bridge”, because of the noise made by the sand in storm tides. The tale, an explanation of a natural phenomenon, tells us how the sandbar came by the name. It also includes a warning about the possibly dire consequences of failing to follow instructions.

There was once a Laird of Reay, in the north of Sutherland, whose land was cut in two by a long finger of the sea, called the Kyle of Tongue. This was a great nuisance, because whenever he wanted to go from one side of the Kyle to the other he had to make a long journey round its southern tip, as the rocky slopes were too steep for there to be a landing place for a boat. A bridge was needed, but it would not be an easy task to build one. So the Laird, who had a certain reputation for magic, called together all the fairies of Reay, and asked them for their advice and help.

“No,” they said, “we are not bridge-building fairies. We can do nothing for you. But we have heard that the Wise Woman of Tarbat, in Ross, has working fairies whom she can command. You should send to her for help.”

So the Laird sent for one of his clansmen, and ordered him to go to Ross to consult with the Wise Woman. Angus, as his name was, dutifully set off on the long walk south. He was able to shorten his journey somewhat by taking a boat to cross the Firth of Dornoch, and at last he arrived at the headland called Tarbat Ness.

There he found the Wise Woman, who was sitting outside her little hut and gazing over the sea. She turned round as he approached.

“Ah, Angus Mackay,” she said. “And what will you be wanting with me ?”

Startled that she knew his name, Angus tried to explain his errand. The Wise Woman looked at him thoughtfully.

“Why,” she asked, “should I be helping the Laird of Reay? A hard man he is, and not one to do me a favour.” Then her eyes softened. “But his wife, now, she is a good and kind woman. For her sake I will do as he asks.”

After a moment’s consideration, she went into her hut, and emerged again a few minutes later with a large box wrapped in heather and tied around with stout cords. This she handed over to Angus.

“Now remember,” she instructed him, “under no circumstances whatever may you open the box. You must give it, wrapped and tied as it is, only to the Laird himself. If you open it, you will wish that you had never been born. Is that quite clear?”

Angus was impressed despite himself.

“I understand,” he agreed. “I will do as you say.”

Taking the box, he left the Wise Woman, and turned back on the road that would take him to Reay. But he knew that he had many, many miles to travel, and he was already tired from the long journey to Tarbat. By the time that he had reached the foot of the hill of Tain, he was too weary to go any farther, and sat down for a rest.

As he sat there, he suddenly became aware of strange sounds of life from the box by his side. It was not exactly like the buzzing of bees, nor yet like the humming of insects. In addition, something seemed to be moving and shifting the weight of the box from side to side. Angus felt more and more curious about the contents of the box, until at last he could bear it no longer.

“That old witch in Tarbat,” he boasted to himself with bravado, “she was just talking. Why should I not have a wee look inside? After all, if I am to carry it all the way back to Reay, I ought to know what it is I am carrying. It might need very special handling, and if I do not know what it is, I cannot do that. I can easily tie it up again so that no-one will ever know that I looked.”

Thus the young man justified the breaking of his word, and the breaking of his trust.

Taking out his dirk, he cut the cords that bound the package, and poked a

small hole in the heather covering. All of a sudden, the buzzing from within grew louder, and from the hole burst out an agitated swarm of small brown fairies

“Give us work, master, give us work !” they cried.

Angus, appalled, hardly knew what to do, but the fairies were insistent.

“Give us work, master, give us work ! We are working fairies, we must work !”

Frantically looking around for inspiration, Angus saw behind him the hill of Tain, covered at this season of the year by the purplish-pink of the little flowers of the heather. He had a sudden idea.

“Go, then,” he ordered. “Strip the hill of Tain of every single leaf of the heather, and of every single flower of the heather, and do not come back to me until every single one has been taken.”

“That should keep them for long enough !” he thought, and hurried off as fast as he could on his homeward way. But he had not gone far before he heard behind him the insistent cry,

“Give us work, master, give us work !”

“I gave you work !” he cried angrily. “I told you to strip Tain Hill of every single blade of heather !”

“We have done so, master. Give us work !”

Sure enough, when he looked back, the hill was stripped bare. Angus was terrified. Whatever could he do with the insatiable fairies ?

Suddenly, as he looked around him, he remembered the purpose of his journey, and had an idea. Before him lay the Firth of Dornoch, that he had crossed by boat on the way to Tarbat. His master, the Laird of Reay, desired a bridge to cross a more difficult sea passage. As the fairies clamoured round him, ever more insistently, he knew what to do.

“Build me a bridge,” he said. “Build it of sand, of the sands of the seashore, so that one may cross dry-shod from one side of the Dornoch Firth to the other. Do not come back to me until you have finished it.”

“We will, master, we will,” chorused the fairies.

They set to at once, and were well on their way to building a beautiful

bridge, when, alas ! the tide came in, and swept away all that they had achieved. Weeping and wailing, the fairies had to begin over again, while Angus returned safely to Reay, and to an unpleasant interview with the Laird.

To this day, the fairies are still trying to build their bridge, but every high tide destroys what they have built up. Then they cry out in despair, because their work will never be done. And whenever the inhabitants of Dornoch hear them, in nights of storm in particular, they tell each other,

“The fairies of the Gizzen Brigs are weeping, because their bridge has been washed away again !”

I hate to have to tell you that in 1991 a concrete bridge was built, without the help of the fairies, who are still struggling to build their sand bridge.

As well as fairies, the Little People, Scotland also had giants, though there are not so many tales told of them. The most famous is *Fingal*, who lived in a cave on the Isle of Staffa, near Iona. The constant boom of the Atlantic swell reverberating from the roof and walls of the cavern is a majestic and unforgettable sound.

It impressed the composer Mendelssohn too, when he visited Scotland in 1829. In his concert overture, *Fingal's Cave*, the music reflects the eternal rise and fall of the ocean echoing around the cavern walls.

It is to be hoped that when Fingal lived there the floor of the cave was above sea level, otherwise life must have been definitely uncomfortable !

IV. Tales of Famous People

8. *Saint Columba and the Monster*

One common type of legend celebrates the doings of saints and other famous men.

Legends attach themselves to famous people of the past, for one reason or another. The deeds for which they became famous in the first place become exaggerated in the retelling, and perhaps other stories become attributed to a more famous person. Probably the greatest number of Scottish legends that are attached to one person concern Saint Columba (521-597), an Irish prince

who became a missionary monk on the island of Iona.

One of these concerns what is perhaps the best-known legend of Scotland, that of the Loch Ness Monster, familiarly known today as “Nessie”.

Long, narrow, and very deep, with almost vertical sides, the chilly waters of Loch Ness are opaque, the colour of strong tea from the peat through which flow the streams that feed it. Visibility is almost nil below the surface. Beautiful though it may be in the sunshine, it has always had a rather sinister reputation. For one thing, it never gives up its dead. Whatever the reason, neither man nor beast drowned in Loch Ness ever reappears.

Some people say that the story of the Monster is a modern invention, thought up to increase tourism. It is true that reports of sightings of the monster suddenly increased from 1932, when a motor road was constructed along the shores of the loch, making access to the place unprecedentedly easy. But the story is far older. The first recorded sighting was in the sixth century.

From about the end of the fourth century, various missionaries brought Christianity to Scotland. Many of these have lived on in legend, the facts of their lives blending with the miraculous events attributed to them. Of these, by far the most famous was St. Columba.

Columba was born a prince of Donegal, in Ireland, in about 521. Despite his name, which means “dove”, he came of a warlike family, and it was after a bloody battle over Church property that he repented of the part that he had taken in the fighting. To punish himself, and to do good instead of the harm he had done, he vowed to carry Christianity to Scotland, a mere twelve miles away across the North Channel. But he also vowed that he would not stay where he could look back and still see Ireland, lest homesickness weaken his resolve. Accordingly, it was not until he reached the little island of Iona, off the south-west tip of the larger island of Mull, that he found the place where he could settle at peace, together with twelve faithful companions. There in 563 he founded a monastery, which was to be the base for his journeys.

From here, he travelled throughout the country, though mostly in the west and north, preaching wherever he went, but returning regularly to Iona to

refresh his spirit. That low fertile island, with its beaches of white shell sand, offered the peace he needed to regain strength for his next journey.

One of those journeys took him north, to an area ruled by a king named Brude, who lived in a town that is now called Inverness. Brude was a Pict, a member of the race of the original inhabitants of Scotland. The name "Pict" was a nickname bestowed on these people by the Roman invaders who referred to them as "the painted ones", probably because they painted their faces in alarming patterns before going into battle.

On this occasion, Columba reached the River Ness, intending to cross it at a point close to its junction with the loch. There, on the opposite bank, he saw a group of grieving people who were burying a young man. Columba called out to them.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Our friend here was swimming in the loch," replied one man, "when an enormous beast suddenly appeared out of the water beside him and savagely bit him. A real monster it was! I've never seen anything like it before, and I hope I never see one again. Several of us shouted at the creature, and we jumped into a boat and raced as fast as we could to try to save him, but it was too late. We only just managed to rescue his corpse with boathooks before the beast could drag him down below the surface."

"I see," said Columba thoughtfully. Quietly he offered a prayer for the repose of the man's soul, as the group on the opposite bank began to disperse.

"Well," he said, addressing his followers, "we have a little problem. We still have to get across the river, and the only boat seems to be on the other bank. Would one of you please swim across there and fetch the boat, so that we can all cross?"

There was a moment's stunned silence, while the men all looked at each other. What about the monster? Had it gone away, or was it still lurking nearby? Was it safe to enter the water? Nobody wanted to become a snack for a ravenous beast!

But one young man, called Lugne Macumin, was made of sterner stuff, and he hesitated for only an instant. Throwing off most of his clothes, he

plunged into the water, and started swimming strongly for the far side. The others watched anxiously, and then gave a great cry. The monster had reappeared ! Baulked of its first prey, it had remained close by, hiding in the depths of the loch. Now, feeling the disturbance in the water caused by the swimmer, it suddenly rose to the surface and rushed, open-mouthed, at Lugne as he swam. Surely nothing could save him. It seemed indeed as though this must be the end of him.

On shore, everyone, pagan and Christian alike, was frozen to the spot with terror. Everyone, that is, except Columba. He surveyed the scene calmly, and then, with his raised hand making the sign of the cross in the air, he commanded the beast :

“In the name of God, go no further ! Do not touch the man, but go back at once to your own place !”

Hearing this, the beast started back as though it had been jerked with ropes, and fled away as fast as it could, although it had been almost within arm’s reach of Lugne. The power of prayer had defeated it, and sent it back to its underwater fastness.

And that was the end of that adventure. When the men from Iona could see that he was unharmed, they praised God, who conquered all evil. The local men too, impressed by the magnitude of the miracle that had witnessed, announced that from then on they too would believe in the God of the Christians.

Since that day, the monster has been shy of showing itself, lest a successor to St. Columba banish him again.

Leaving the loch, Columba and his men proceeded on their way to Inverness, to the castle of King Brude. Brude and his advisers were suspicious of these strangers, and the great gates of the castle were locked and barred against them. However, the party of monks climbed up the hill to the gates, singing psalms as they went, and although Brude’s Druids tried to drown out the sound both by making noise and by magic, the voices of the Christians prevailed.

When they reached their objective, they asked to be allowed to enter and

to speak to the king.

“Permission refused !” snapped the guard, and the gates remained firmly barred.

But Columba traced the sign of the cross on the doors. Immediately the massive iron bolts drew back of their own accord, and the doors swung open by themselves. The Saint and his companions had only to enter.

Awestruck, and converted by the miracle, Brude not only gave his permission for the saint and his companions to preach throughout his lands, but also he and all his men were baptised as Christians there and then.

Many more were the miracles that Columba has been credited with performing. The island of Iona, where he had built his monastery, became not only a centre of learning but a place of holiness and pilgrimage. Because of its sanctity, it was the preferred burial place of ancient Scottish kings, and others : according to the official count, forty-eight Scottish, eight Norwegian, four Irish, and two French kings lie buried there.

And still the pilgrims flock to Iona.

9. *Saint Mungo*

*The tree that never grew,
The bird that never flew,
The fish that never swam,
The bell that never rang.*

This rhyme refers to the design of the coat of arms of the City of Glasgow. The shield shows a leafy tree, with a bird perched on the topmost branch and a bell hanging from the lowest one. At the foot of the tree is a large fish with a ring in its mouth. All these elements of the design, the tree, the bird, the fish, and the bell, are part of the legend of St. Mungo, who founded a church here in the sixth century.

One common type of legend celebrates the life and miraculous doings of saints and holy men. The tales of St. Columba are many and various ; those of St. Mungo are more coherent, and tell a continuous story. This is that

story.

Glasgow's patron saint had a rather rough introduction into life. His mother, the Princess Thanea, a daughter of the pagan King Lot of Lothian, became pregnant before her marriage, and refused to divulge the name of the father. In a fury, King Lot, who seems to have been somewhat lacking in fatherly affection, had her thrown off a cliff at the end of the hill called Traprain Law, where he had his capital. When she miraculously survived this drastic punishment he then had her cast adrift on the sea of the Firth of Forth, in a small boat called a coracle, without oars or rudder, cursing her as he abandoned her to the sea god.

The little boat floated with the tides, until finally it drifted upriver and came close inshore at a place called Culross, on the north side of the Firth of Forth. There the craft and its exhausted occupant were seen and rescued by members of a community of Christian monks, who promised to take care of her as one of their own.

In due course Thanea's son was born, and christened Kentigern, but the monks always called him affectionately by the pet name Mungo, meaning "dear one", and it is by this name that he is best known today.

As he grew up, Mungo had a strong faith in God, which he could sometimes put to practical use. The little monastery had a school where the young Mungo was taught with other boys, who, sad to say, were rather jealous of the special favour shown to him, and often tried to play tricks on him, so as to get him into trouble. On one such occasion, it was Mungo's turn to look after the flame of the fire, which was never to be allowed to die out. He had had a long and tiring day, and in the silence of the night he dozed off for a while. This should not normally have created any great problem, but some of the other boys sneaked in, and poured water on the fire to put it out, then went off laughing quietly to themselves. When Mungo woke he was appalled to see that he had failed in the task entrusted to him. What could he do about the mess of sodden wood and ashes that should have been a fire? At any rate, more wood was obviously needed. Out he went into the snow of the wintry night, and returned carrying a bare frozen branch from a nearby tree. This he

laid carefully in the fireplace, and so great was his faith that it would burn that it did indeed burst into flame, and reignited the wet wood of the fire.

It is to be hoped that his classmates were properly ashamed of their mean and nasty behaviour.

This was the first of the miracles that legend attributed to the future saint, still a very young boy. The second concerned the pet robin of the abbot of the community.

This friendly little bird, that often used to perch on the abbot's shoulder, was one day attacked by a hawk. Before the predator could be chased away, it had sunk its talons deep into the robin's body, but dropped it as it flew off. Weeping, Mungo picked up the tiny corpse, holding it cupped in his hands to warm it, and uttering anguished and impassioned prayers to God to bring it back to life. Incredibly, after a few minutes the bird's heart began to beat again, and soon it was fluttering feebly in Mungo's hand. It quickly recovered, and despite its alarming adventure lived out its full term of life. But it was never again allowed to be where birds of prey might attack it.

As he grew older, Mungo decided that he must go to another part of the country, but where? His chance came when an old monk made his dying request. He asked that his body be put on a cart drawn by a pair of wild bulls; where the bulls stopped was to be his burial place. Mungo agreed to carry out his wish, though he was rather puzzled to know how he was going to be able to yoke to a cart such intractable creatures as wild bulls! But in the early morning after the old man died, Mungo found two young bulls roaming nearby, and these having docilely allowed themselves to be yoked to a cart, they all set off westwards.

Finally the bulls stopped, near a pleasant stream that ran through a green hollow. Here Mungo buried the old monk, and here he decided to settle and build a church. This would take time, so in the mean time he hung a bell on the branch of a tree, so that he could summon people when it was time for prayers at the meeting place under the tree in the open air.

The place where he settled was called in the Celtic language he spoke *gles cau*, meaning "green hollow", or as it is usually translated today, "dear green

place". This grew with the passage of time into the city of Glasgow.

Meanwhile, Mungo built his little church, but did not spend all his time there. He frequently travelled, often going as far as Wales. He became the trusted adviser of both ordinary people and the local kings.

The wife of one of the latter had become infatuated with another man, and to him she imprudently gave a ring that had been a present from her husband. The king noticed the ring on the man's hand as he lay sleeping, and gently removed it. He threw the ring into the River Clyde, and summoning his wife, ordered her to produce it.

"Why," he demanded, "are you not wearing the ring I gave you? Go and fetch it, and put it on at once! If you cannot find it, then you shall be put to death!"

It seems that it was not only fathers who were murderously severe towards the female members of their families!

Panic-stricken, the queen rushed to St. Mungo, begging him for help. He, perhaps remembering the fate of his mother, calmed her down.

"All will be well this time," he told her, "but you must never again give your husband any reason to doubt your faithfulness to him."

The queen fervently made the promise. Whatever affection she had felt for the other man, her love for her husband was greater. Besides, she had had the fright of her life when he threatened to kill her.

Mungo then sent a monk to fish in the river, telling him to bring back the first fish he caught. The monk cast his line, and immediately hooked a large salmon. When this had been brought to shore, it was found that in its mouth was the queen's missing ring. Mungo had worked another miracle! Inexpressibly relieved, the queen at once took the ring to her husband, who, being really very much in love with her, and regretting having doubted her virtue, forgave her. We may be sure that she never again gave him reason for jealousy.

Mungo died in 612, and is buried in Glasgow Cathedral, which stands on the site of the church he built. The lampposts near the cathedral have a design of the elements of his legend: the tree, the bird, the bell, and the

salmon with a ring in its mouth. His likeness, in his bishop's garb, crowns the full coat of arms of the City of Glasgow. From there he is still watching over his "dear green place".

10. *Michael Scott and the Devil*

Folktales and legends often gather not merely around saints and holy men, but also around other great men of the past. One such was Michael Scott, perhaps the most significant intellectual of the Middle Ages, who lived from 1175 to 1235, and was employed for a time by the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. It may have been because of his great learning that common people believed him to be a magician, and to have superhuman powers. To the unscientific mind, whatever one cannot easily explain must be magic. Legend says that much of his learning came from his having had the first sip of a broth made from a white snake, a magical creature, and that this gave him magic powers. The following is one of the many tales told of him, one which has a curiously anti-clerical touch.

Easter is a very important festival of the Christian church, and one which determines the date of other festivals. But unlike Christmas, it does not fall on the same date every year, varying by as much as month from year to year. The forty days before Easter, called Lent, were marked by fasting, when people had to abstain from eating such things as meat and butter. It was therefore important for them to know when exactly to begin their fast. Once upon a time, it is said, every year an envoy would be sent from each country in the world, a person of high status and reputation, to ask the Pope in Rome on what day Easter would fall, since the Pope was the only person who knew.

One year, the choice in Scotland was Michael Scott, a man of great wisdom and learning. He agreed to go, but being rather busy with one thing and another he delayed setting out for Rome until he suddenly realised that it was already February, and that the beginning of Lent must be at hand. How was he to get to Rome in time? The matter was urgent.

Although he was a Christian, he was also something of a wizard, though naturally he always used his powers only for good. So he decided to summon

up the Devil, and demand that the latter convey him at once to Rome.

The Devil seldom appears in his own shape, which would be too terrifying, but instead in some familiar and attractive form. In this case, since transport was what was required, he took the shape of a horse. An elegant grey filly appeared in answer to the summons of Michael Scott.

“How fast can you travel ?” asked the wizard.

“As fast as the wind”, replied the horse.

“That is not fast enough”, said the man.

Next, there appeared a beautiful chestnut mare. Michael Scott repeated his question.

“I can outrun the wind, and catch up with the next wind”, answered the horse.

“That is still not fast enough”, said the man.

Now there appeared a magnificent black stallion, a huge sleek beast with powerful muscles rippling under his skin.

“My speed is as fast as the glance between a man and a maid”, said the great black horse.

“That is fast enough for me”, said the man.

“Remember : If I serve you, I have the right to ask you three questions”, warned the Devil in the shape of the horse.

“And I have the right to give three answers”, replied the man.

The meaning of this was that the Devil could ask three questions, which the man was obliged to answer truthfully. If his answer included the word “God”, then the Devil would immediately vanish, freed from the spell which gave the man control over him, and drop the man wherever they were, whether over sea or over land.

As they set out, the Devil asked his first question.

“What do the people of Scotland say when they part from each other ?”

Michael Scott looked down. He knew that almost everywhere the answer was “May God be with you !” But they were passing over the island of Iona. For the inhabitants of that island the answer was different.

“May the blessing of St. Columba be with you !” he said, truthfully.

The horse snorted in disgust, but posed a second question.

“What do the women of Scotland say when they smoor the peat fire for the night ?”

Again the man looked down. Below were not godly housewives, invoking the blessing of God on the fire, but a group of giggling girls.

“Fire burn, peat smoulder ;

Bring me luck before I'm older !”

he responded.

Balked a second time, the horse was silent for a moment, and so great was his speed that before he had time to think of a third question they had reached Rome and landed at the Vatican.

There they were stopped by a porter.

“I require an immediate audience with His Holiness the Pope !” said Michael Scott.

“His Holiness is in bed”, replied the porter. “He can see no-one.”

“Nevertheless, my business is urgent !”

Pressed, the porter reluctantly sent for a chamberlain, who in turn finally agreed to see if His Holiness would receive the untimely visitor. At last, the Pope came rushing out, irritatedly buttoning up his fur robe.

“Who are you, who come to disturb me so late at night ?” he barked.

“I am Michael Scott, newly come from Scotland, to ask you the date of Easter.”

“How am I to know that that is who you are ?”

“You can see the snow of Scotland, here on my hat. There is no snow now in Rome.”

“That proves nothing. Show me more truly who you may be !”

The wizard looked at him for a moment.

“Two feet you have, yet they are not the same”, he replied in a level tone.

Surprised, the Pope lifted his gown, and looked at his feet. Sure enough, on one foot was a black shoe, but on the other was a woman's pink slipper. He paled.

“Go !” he said in fear, “and never come back here again !”

“Indeed I will go, and gladly, but first you must tell me the date of Easter.”

“It is, as always, the first Sunday after the first full moon of the spring”, said the Pope impatiently. “Now go away !”

So Michael Scott mounted his horse once more, and returned to Scotland. The horse was still sulking after his defeat on the outward journey, and forgot to ask his third question. But the Scots had learned the secret of the date of Easter, and no longer had any need to send an envoy to the Pope to ask for it. And since they generously spread the information, it is now common knowledge.

As for the Devil, undaunted by his defeat on this occasion, he is still seeking new ways to trick mankind into accepting his rule.

Michael Scott, the wizard and magician, was given Christian burial in Melrose Abbey, where his tomb can still be seen.

11. *True Thomas the Rhymer (Sir Thomas Learmont of Ercildoune, 1220-1298)*

Many tales are an explanation or embellishment of an incident in a noted person's life, but this legend explains a prolonged absence. That absence may well have been for political reasons, in a troubled time, but the traditional explanation is far more pleasing.

The Eildon Hills, a triple summit not far from Melrose, are said to have been split into three by the magic of Michael Scott. Nearby, in the village of Earlston in Lauderdale, is a ruined tower known as “The Rhymer's Tower”. It is said to be the birthplace of Sir Thomas Learmont, True Thomas the Rhymer of Ercildoune, the poet who in the late thirteenth century spent seven years with the Queen of the Fairies in Elfland.

This is what happened.

One summer day Thomas took his harp and went out to a place called Huntlie Bank, at the foot of the Eildon Hills. As he sat with his back to a huge thorn tree, known as the Eildon Tree, playing and singing to himself, he suddenly saw someone riding toward him. He sat up with a jerk, and stared wide-eyed at the vision in front of him. It was a lady, clothed in green silk and

velvet, and mounted on a milk-white horse whose bridle was decorated with fifty-nine silver bells that jingled musically. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Leaping to his feet, he took off his cap and bowed deeply and reverently.

“Hail, Mary, Queen of Heaven !” he whispered, “for that is who you must be. You cannot be a woman of flesh and blood.” And he bowed even deeper.

“Oh, no, Thomas,” she replied. “That is not who I am. I am only the Queen of fair Elfland, and I have come to hear you sing and play. Play on : music and green shade go well together.”

Bemusedly, he reached out a hand to help her to dismount, and she sat down beside him under the great Eildon Tree. The man hardly knew what to do, but eventually, settling himself comfortably, he began again to sing and to play, better than he had ever done before, while the lady listened raptly. The warm afternoon flew past, until finally the shadows lengthened, and the sun started to sink in the west.

“That was wonderful, Thomas !” said the lady. “Now you may kiss me. But I warn you, if you do, you will belong to me.”

“That,” said Thomas boldly, “is not a prospect to discourage me !” And he leaned over and kissed her tenderly on her rosy lips.

The lady smiled.

“Now that you have kissed me, you are mine. You must come with me, live with me, and serve me for seven years,” she said. “For seven full years, through good times or bad, as the case may be.”

“Willingly !” responded the man, and he kissed her again.

The lady remounted her milk-white horse, and taking Thomas up behind her, she gave the horse the signal to depart. Bells tinkling sweetly, they rode faster than the wind, on and on, further and further, over hill and over valley, until at length they reached a strange countryside, where the land of the living was left behind.

“Get off the horse now for a moment,” said the lady, “lean your head against my knee, and rest for a while. Now, can you see that place ahead where three paths branch off ? Look carefully. That steep and narrow one,

almost blocked with thorn bushes and briars, is the Path of Righteousness. Few dare to take it on their life's journey. The fair, broad road that leads across the flower-strewn lawn is the Path of Wickedness, for all it seems so fair that people call it the Road to Heaven.

"Now look at the third path, the path that winds through green hedges. That is the road to fair Elfland, and that is the road that we shall take tonight.

"But, Thomas, of one thing I must warn you. No matter what happens, no matter what you may hear or see, you must not speak one single word all the time you are in Elfland. If you do, you will never be able to return to your own country again. You will be bound to remain for ever with us. I tell you this for the love I feel for you. Be warned!"

Soberly, Thomas nodded silent agreement.

On they rode, wading through knee-deep rivers, hearing the roaring of the sea to one side. At one stage they waded through a river that ran red with blood, for all the blood shed on earth ran through the rivers of that strange country.

Finally they reached the gates of Elfland, and passed through into that enchanted country.

For seven years Thomas lived there with its Queen, doing her every bidding, but speaking not one word of human language, for he remembered her warning.

At last the seven years were up. One morning, the Queen summoned Thomas to her side.

"You have served me well," she said. "I do not wish to part with you, but according to our agreement I must. Now, at last, you may break your silence." She bent to pick an apple from a nearby tree. "Take this apple for your wages, Thomas, and eat it. It will give you two precious gifts from me: a tongue that can never lie, and also the gift of prophecy. You shall be known in future as True Thomas."

Thomas was decidedly doubtful about the value of this, and objected. Without being able even mildly to dissemble, how could he buy and sell goods? How could he speak respectfully to a superior whom he despised?

How could he speak flatteringly to a woman, as she expected? And did he actually want to be able to prophesy the future? Not many people would really want to hear it. The fairy gift, he felt, was a truly two-edged sword. It brought quite as many disadvantages as advantages.

“Quiet, Thomas!” said the Queen, rather severely. “Whatever I say, it must be so. There is nothing more to be said. What I have given you is not a gift to be lightly bestowed. It will bring you lasting fame, as the greatest prophet Scotland has ever known.”

With that, she gave him a new coat of the best smooth cloth, and a new pair of shoes, both in the fairy colour of green.

“Now you must go,” she said, “but when the time comes I shall call you back to me. I shall send two messengers, whom you will surely know are not of your world. When you see them, you shall come back to me.”

As True Thomas gazed lovingly into her eyes, she seemed to fade away into a mist. When he blinked, he found that he was again sitting under the Eildon Tree, in the late afternoon of a summer day. He might only have dozed off for a few moments, instead of having spent those seven years in Elfland.

Back in his home at Ercildoune, he found that little had changed, except that his friends all had a few more grey hairs. But they were astounded to see him, after all this time, as they had thought him surely dead. After all, someone who has not been seen or heard of for seven years is assumed in law to be dead. Everyone was curious to know where he had been, and how he had spent those years, but Thomas was reticent, and somehow people did not like to ask too many questions.

As time passed, Thomas came to be well known as a man who could be depended on always to tell the truth, and also as a man who could foretell the future. This he did in rhyming couplets that were easy to remember. Many people, from the local farmers to the richest in the land, came to consult him about their plans for the future, and for advice about what they should do. His fame as a seer spread throughout Scotland after he prophesied the death of King Alexander III in a fall from his horse on the cliffs one stormy night in March 1286.

One evening, seven years after his reappearance, Thomas was hosting a gathering of the local villagers in his tower home. Just as the feasting was at its height, a frightened servant came running in.

“Master, master !” he cried into the sudden silence. “A pair of milk-white deer are walking down the street ! What can it mean ? The deer are forest creatures, they never leave the woods to come into the village ; and anyway, who ever heard of milk-white deer ? It’s uncanny !”

Amid the excited exclamations of the villagers, Thomas alone was silent. Happiness overcame him as he recognised the sign for what it was : the summons from the Queen of Elfland.

Quietly he slipped out of the hall towards the deer. With the milk-white stag on one side and the milk-white doe on the other, he walked slowly toward the forest and the road to Elfland where the Queen awaited him. And this time he never came back.

The spot where the great thorn, the Eildon Tree, stood, and where he first met the Queen, is marked by a memorial stone.

12. *John o’ Groats*

“From Land’s End to John o’ Groats” is a common British expression, meaning “from one end of the country to the other”, just as Americans say “from coast to coast”. Land’s End is a rocky headland at the extreme south-west tip of the British mainland, while John o’ Groats is at the extreme north-east, nearly 900 miles away as the crow flies. The name Land’s End is self-explanatory. Beyond this point lies only the open Atlantic. But what about John o’ Groats ?

Some five hundred years ago there came from Holland to the northern tip of Caithness a man called John de Grote. Why he chose that particular place to settle is not recorded, but he was welcomed by the local people as a hard-working and pleasant man, and accepted by them all as one of themselves.

The headland where he settled was on the shores of the Pentland Firth, a strip of open sea seven miles wide separating the mainland from the islands of

Orkney. Although the coastal scenery was spectacular, with its cliffs and the isolated rock pinnacles known as “stacks”, the Firth was, and is, a dangerous place, with strong and unpredictable tides racing treacherously round submerged rocks. The gales that so often blow both from the north and from the Atlantic to the west made that strip of sea even more tricky for the inexperienced sailor ; and although many of the local people, making their living by fishing those dangerous seas, were of necessity skilful sailors, others, such as doctors and traders, were not.

For this reason, John soon realised that there was a great need for a ferry service from the mainland to the islands of Orkney. A capable boatman himself, he immediately decided that he would start one. The most suitable place from which the ferry should leave was a sheltered beach between two rocky headlands close to his house. Without more ado, he built himself a good strong boat, and before long he was in business.

The fare which he charged his passengers was one groat - a coin worth fourpence. Because of this, and because of his name, he came to be known as John o' Groats, and so too was the beach from which the ferry departed.

He married a local woman, and in due course eight sons were born to them. As they grew up, one after another they were able to help their father with the ferry boats, of which he now had several. His business had prospered, and he had become a flourishing man of affairs, one of the wealthier men of the district.

The eight sons all in turn married wives from the district, and set up by themselves in their own houses, but once a year they all gathered at their father's house to celebrate his, and their, success in life. At first these reunions were happy gatherings, but gradually a sour note crept in. As so often seems to happen, it was the fault of the wives, who were becoming jealous of each other. One wife would say that *her* husband should have the place of honour at the head of the table beside his father, because he was the eldest ; but then another would deny that right and say that the honour ought to go to her own husband, who had a larger boat. A third would then insist that it was not fair that it was always the same person who sat at the head of

the table, and that each of them in turn should have the chance to do so. And so it went on.

This constant bickering and squabbling finally irritated John so much that he decided something must be done about it. One day therefore he went to a flat piece of land near the shore and began making measurements on the ground. To all questions as to what he was doing, he only shook his head.

As time went on, an odd house arose there. It had eight sides, and in each of the sides there was a door. John was the only person who worked on it, and no one, not even his wife, was allowed to see inside.

The day of the annual family reunion came round once more. The eight sons and their wives duly went to the house where they had been born, expecting to see the usual feast spread out on the table. Great was their astonishment when they saw that the table was bare. What had happened? Surely they had not mistaken the day! And their parents could not possibly have forgotten!

John smiled at them, and, taking his own wife by the hand, led them all over to the newly-completed house by the shore.

“For years,” he said, “you have been annoying your mother and me with your complaints and quarrels over precedence at my table. So from now on we shall hold our gatherings in this house. The table in it has eight sides. Each side of the house has a door which opens directly onto one side of the table. So each one of you will be entering through his own front door, and sitting at the head of his own table. And let that be the end of it. I do not want to hear anything more about who sits where! As for me, I am quite content to sit anywhere - even, if necessary, to stand!”

That settled the trouble in the John o’ Groats family, and thereafter there was harmony at the annual family feast.

Long after John and his sons had all died, the eight-sided house still stood as a memorial to a sensible man who found an original way to settle his family’s quarrels. The house too is now gone, but the name remains to keep his memory alive to this day.

And, when you have travelled from Land’s End to John o’ Groats, you may

travel yet further, and make the crossing over the Pentland Firth by the ferry which still runs from John o' Groats to Orkney.

IV. Cautionary and Moral Tales

13. *The Kelpies*

One function of folktales is to embed a warning in the entertainment of the story. The following tales include a warning about being too friendly with the unknown, in whatever shape it may appear.

Water is a dangerous element, and strange young men may be even more dangerous. One of them might even be a kelpie. If ever you should happen to meet with a kelpie, you would be well advised to flee as fast as you can, for they are indeed fearsome creatures.

And what, you may ask, is a kelpie ?

A kelpie is a water-horse.

A kelpie is an evil and dangerous creature which lives at the bottom of many lochs in the Scottish Highlands. There are also some who live in rivers, or even waterfalls. From time to time, one of them comes out of its watery home and tries to lure away young girls and boys, for they prey on human flesh. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it does not. It has many means of entrapment, and may appear in different forms for this purpose. It may take the form of a handsome young man, especially when it wishes to ensnare a young woman. His identity can then be suspected from the sand and waterweed in his hair. Most commonly, it appears in the form of a very beautiful horse, which disarms the suspicions of those who encounter it.

There was, for example, a kelpie who lived in a loch in the West Highlands. One day, a group of eight or nine boys and girls who were playing by the side of the loch saw a beautiful white horse wander up to them and stand close by. Its coat was sleek and glossy with health, and it wore a splendid saddle and bridle of gilded leather studded with jewels. Entranced, the children ran up to it.

"It's so tame !" cried one. "Let's stroke it !"

So the first child began to stroke the horse, but almost immediately

screamed in terror. "I'm stuck ! I'm stuck to the horse ! Help me ! For God's sake, help me ! I can't move my hand !"

Horrified, the others came rushing up, and grabbed the child, one after the other, and pulled as hard as they could. But each in turn became stuck, and could not free himself. The last boy, lame Duncan, barely touched the chain of children with the tip of his finger. Feeling the dreadful magnetic power of the beast, he quickly whipped out his knife and cut off his finger, just as the uncanny creature gave a great whinny and soared off into the air, and then dived under the water of the loch. The children, still stuck to his body, were never seen again, and their devastated parents were left to weep hopelessly. You may be sure that, in future days, fingerless Duncan often warned their younger brothers and sisters never to approach a stray horse !

However, a kelpie in the form of a horse could be captured and made to work if somehow its beautiful bridle could be removed and a lowly cow-rope put round its neck. This took away its evil power, and forced it to obey the commands of its captor, so long as the cow-rope remained in place. However, if the rope were removed, or fell off, the kelpie would resume his old evil strength, and curse the one who had enslaved him.

It sometimes happened that a kelpie fell in love with a young woman. Even then, the girl had to beware, for the kelpie would still want to carry her away to his home under the water.

In one Highland village lived a girl called Mairi, fair-skinned, dark-haired and beautiful. As was the custom in those days, the young people of the villages went up into the hills during the summer, taking with them the village's cattle to feed on the grass of the higher slopes. There they remained for several weeks, living in scattered small cottages called *shielings*, milking the cattle and making butter and cheese, until it was time to return to their homes. It could be lonely, but the young people would often visit each other of an evening, to give each other company.

Not so very far from Mairi's shieling was a waterfall, in which a kelpie had made his home. One evening, at the time called the gloaming, when the light slowly fades to the half-darkness of a Highland summer night, Mairi was

sitting and spinning when she heard a step approach the door and a voice called, "Can I come in, Mairi?"

Thinking that it was one of the boys from the village, she answered, "Of course! Come in and sit by the fire, and talk for a while."

But the man who came in was a stranger to her, and a rather odd-looking stranger at that. Nor did he talk very much, but sat in a corner quietly looking at her. After some time he left, still quiet.

Night after night he came, usually bringing with him a present of trout or some other fish, which he gave to Mairi for her supper. He seemed harmless enough, but there was something about him which made her feel increasingly uneasy, and she began to be sure that he must be the kelpie of the waterfall. At last one day she fled down the glen to tell her father that she no longer felt safe on the hillside.

Much perturbed by her story, he went to consult an old wise-woman about how to get rid of the unwelcome visitor.

"If it is indeed a kelpie," replied the old woman, "there is one sure way to get rid of him. The only thing he is afraid of is the feeling of boiling water on his feet. Scald his feet, and he will never come back to bother Mairi again."

Grateful for this advice, the father decided to take Mairi's place at the shieling that evening, and climbed up there without further ado. Placing a cauldron of water to heat on the fire, he dressed in some of her clothes and her cap, and with his back to the door sat in her accustomed place to spin, though, being a man, he was not too good at spinning.

As the gloaming fell, the creature arrived as usual, and sat as always in its corner. But something about the silent figure at the spinning wheel seemed different, and the kelpie began to be suspicious. He threw a bundle of sticks on the fire, and as it blazed up he saw that he had been tricked. Angrily, he leapt at the deceiver to attack him. But Mairi's father was quicker. He grabbed the cauldron from the fire and poured the boiling water over the creature's feet. Immediately, instead of human feet they showed as hooves.

Screaming with pain and fury, the kelpie demanded, "Who are you? What is your name? Your name! Tell me! Tell me!" — for

knowledge of a name gives power, and it would have let the kelpie take his revenge on the man.

“Myself alone !” replied the father.

The scalded kelpie, giving wails of pain, hobbled back towards his waterfall, where some of his brothers, hearing the commotion, came to see what was wrong. Seeing his blistered feet, they asked, “Who did this to you ?”

“‘Myself alone’,” replied the poor kelpie, repeating the name the father had given.

“Well, if it was yourself alone that hurt you, then yourself alone can help you.” And they left him to cope with his injuries by himself.

As for Mairi, she came back to the shieling, but never again was she troubled by her mysterious visitor the kelpie-man.

14. *The Red Book of Appin*

The Devil has a significant place in European folklore, always trying to lure unwary people to enter his service and to sell him their souls. He usually makes his initial approach disguised as a distinguished gentleman, in an attempt to disarm suspicion. One should always be very careful about trusting plausible strangers, who may very well have ulterior motives.

There was once a man who lived in the district of Appin in Argyll, who took a poor orphan boy called Dougal to live with him. When the boy was old enough, the man sent him out onto the hillside to look after the cattle.

One day Dougal was far up the glen with the herd when in the distance he saw coming towards him the figure of a man. Dougal stared with surprise, because in that lonely glen he almost never met anyone, and as the stranger approached he could see that the man was a very elegant and grand gentleman. What was such a person doing in this remote place ?

The gentleman came right up, and in a kind voice started asking questions, such as “Are you always here at this work ? Do you enjoy it ?” and many more. The boy could not understand at all why the man should be taking so much interest in him, and did not quite like it. It did not seem

natural.

When the gentleman said to him, "These are poor torn clothes you are wearing. Do you not wish for better?" Dougal only laughed.

"Who is there to see what I am wearing, except the animals?" he replied. "And, for sure, they do not care at all!"

But the gentleman continued, in a caressing tone, "Come with me, enter my service, and I will give you good clothes to wear, and good food to eat, and good money to spend. Won't that be better than the life you are leading now?"

It seemed an attractive offer, but Dougal was cautious, indeed a little suspicious, and so he told the man that until he had consulted his friend and master in Appin he could not make any promises.

"Very well," said the gentleman suavely, taking a large red book out of his pocket, "but in the meantime just write your name here in my book, to show that you are willing to take service with me."

Dougal liked this less and less, and repeated that before he did anything, even tell his name, he must consult his friend in Appin. The gentleman looked rather annoyed, but told Dougal to meet him at that same place the next day at sunset. The boy promised that he would.

Back home that evening, he told his friend all that had happened. The Appin man was alarmed.

"That was surely the agent of the Devil himself!" he exclaimed. "It's a good thing that you didn't sign your name, or you would have been lost for ever. Now, you must do exactly as I say, and you can foil his evil ways and save yourself from harm."

The next morning, he gave Dougal a sword, which with its hilt formed the shape of the Cross, and instructed him carefully.

"Go to the meeting place in plenty of time, and choose a good level spot. Draw a circle round yourself with the tip of the sword, saying as you do so, *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. Then you must draw a cross in the centre of the circle on which to stand. Once you have taken up your position there, let *nothing* tempt you to move from it, no matter what happens, until the sun has risen over the mountain-tops the next

morning. The man will do everything he can to induce you to come out and to put your name in his book. Tell him that you will only do so if he hands the book to you. And when he does, hang on to it tightly ! Do not let go of it for an instant. And remember, as long as you stand on the cross inside the circle, he cannot touch you. May God be with you, my child !”

That evening, Dougal went to the meeting place in good time, and did exactly as he had been told. He drew the circle with the sword point in the name of the Trinity, and a cross inside it, on which he took up his stand. Then he waited, ready to meet “Himself” when he should come.

At last, just as the sun was setting behind the hills, there was a sudden flash of fiery scarlet light - and there was the stranger, as suave and as elegant as before. He seemed pleased to see the boy, and smiled at him.

“So there you are !” he said. “You did come, after all. I am very glad to see you. Now, before we get down to discussing details, just come over here and write your name in my book.” And again the red book was brought out.

“Well, now,” said Dougal, “I am quite content where I am. If you want me to put my name in your book, would you just hand it to me here, please ?”

The man laughed at first, as if it were a good joke, but when he discovered that the boy meant what he said, his face darkened in anger. But as Dougal refused to budge, finally he came up to him with a bad grace, and, holding out the book, said, “Here you are, then. Write !”

The minute his hand touched the invisible circle, the book fell from his grasp. He tried to snatch after it, but the power of the Cross prevented his hand passing over the edge of the circle. Frightened at first, Dougal remembered what the Appin man had said, how he would be safe there. Getting back the courage that had fled for a moment, he bent to pick up the book where it had fallen, and tucked it safely under his arm.

Then the stranger realised that he had been tricked, and he almost exploded with rage. He stormed round and round the circle, threatening all the dreadful things he would do to Dougal when he got hold of him. Then he began to change himself into all sorts of terrible shapes, and to blow fire and brimstone from his nostrils.

First, a wild horse kicked up its hoofs and pawed in the air, as if to trample the boy to death. Then it became a huge cat, its terrible claws trying to rend to shreds the invisible protective circle as it hissed and snarled, and spat poisonous fumes. After the cat there appeared a nightmare creature like a fiery dragon. When it opened its foul-smelling mouth to roar furiously, it seemed to Dougal that down its great throat he could see the fires of Hell itself.

All night long appeared in succession one horrible monster after another, each one more hideous and terrifying than the last. Standing firm on the cross, the boy prayed for deliverance, and his eyes grew tired straining to watch for the light of dawn in the east.

The night seemed endless, but at last the first fingers of light appeared in the sky. The evil creature redoubled its efforts to reach the boy, turning itself into a great black bird that tried to pierce the shield with its beak and claws, but against the protection of the sacred magic of the Cross it was impotent. As the sun rose over the mountains, it knew itself beaten, and with one last angry squawk it flew off and disappeared in the distance.

Meanwhile, the Appin man too had had a sleepless night, wondering anxiously how the boy had fared. As soon as the sun had risen, he hurried off to the place, afraid of what he might find. But there Dougal was, lying exhausted on the cross in the circle, the sword stuck upright in the ground beside him, and his head pillowed on the book. Even though he had known that the boy would be safe if only he stayed resolutely within the circle, the Appin man could hardly express his relief and thankfulness at finding him unharmed.

When they got home, they opened the book, and found that what it contained in its pages gave power over all evil spells and witchcraft. If any evil spell had been cast, the book showed how the spell could be countered.

From then on, until he was an old, old man, people came from far and wide to learn from Dougal the knowledge and the power for good that lay with the owner of the Red Book of Appin.

15. *The Witch's Cap*

Scottish witches do not generally wear the sort of black pointed hat made famous by Harry Potter, but wear rather the linen cap that was the normal headgear of any elderly woman. This is the tale of such a cap, and of the dangers of curiosity.

It was a wild night in Kintyre of Argyll. A belated traveller caught in the storm was glad to see a glimmer of light ahead, for he knew that he was lost, and could not find his way home in the dark.

"In such a storm," he thought, "no one is going to refuse shelter to a benighted man. Whoever lives in that cottage will surely give me a bed of some kind for the night. That is the very least that Highland hospitality demands of us all."

Turning aside towards the light, he saw that it came from a very small hut, from a hole in whose turf roof a thin trail of peat smoke poured.

"Well," he said to himself, "I shall not be sleeping in the lap of luxury, but at least there will be a fire to lie beside, and to keep me warm."

Reaching the hut, he knocked at the door. A cracked old voice bade him enter, and he went in. Crouched beside the peat fire was a strange old woman, who started with surprise when she saw him, and then glowered darkly.

"And who might you be?" she demanded.

"Good evening, mother," said he, politely. "I saw the light of your cottage when I was wondering whether I would be forced by the storm to hide for the night under a bush. I claim, by the laws and customs of Highland hospitality, a place by your fire for tonight."

The old woman grimaced. "I live alone," she said in a unfriendly voice, "and I do not wish for visitors. The shepherd down the glen will shelter you. It is no more than a mile - and he will give you a softer bed than you will find here."

But the traveller, who had already settled himself by the glowing peats of the fire, laughed.

"A mile, you said?" he enquired. "No, that's too far. I can't walk any

further tonight. I won't bother you. Indeed, I'm already half asleep."

And he suited the word to the deed, as he lay down before the fire. The old woman eyed him angrily, but said nothing.

It seemed but a moment later that there was a scratch at the door, and a thin old voice queried, "Elspeth, Elspeth, are you there?"

"What's that?" asked the traveller, suddenly awake.

"Only a neighbour. Go back to sleep!" said the old crone.

He tried to do so, but out of the corner of his eye he saw two other ugly old women creep into the room and join his reluctant hostess. Every sense alert, he listened as best he could to their whispered conversation, and felt, rather than saw, the baleful looks they threw in his direction. An uneasy feeling grew on him, and he began to wonder fearfully, "Can they be witches? I must be very careful!" He lay as still as he could, simulating sleep, until at last one of the old crones said, "He's fast asleep now. Let us be off!"

Peeping cautiously out of one eye, he saw them quietly putting on heavy shawls, ready to go out, despite the weather. The one called Elspeth drew a white cap from her pocket, pulled it over her unkempt grey hair, and muttered, "Off to Carlisle!" At once rising in the air, she flew out through the smoke hole in the roof of the cottage. The second witch copied her actions, and the third was about to do the same when the man sprang up and snatched her cap from her. Surprised, she screeched furiously at him, but the man had already popped her cap on his own head and uttered the magic words, "Off to Carlisle!" He too then sailed out of the smoke hole, leaving behind a baffled and enraged witch.

He found himself flying behind the first two witches, and in no time at all they landed south of the Border with England, in a cellar in the town of Carlisle. The man gazed in wonder as he saw that it was full of bottles and barrels of the choicest wines, such as he had never before seen. The two witches, to whom it was nothing new, drank heartily of their favourite wines, and the man, taking care to keep out of their sight, followed their example.

When they had finally drunk their fill, the old women donned their caps

again, and muttering "Off to Argyll !" they disappeared from view.

The man thought he would be well advised to follow their example, and looked for his own borrowed cap, which he was sure he had put down on one of the wine barrels. To his horror, he could not find it, and while he was still frantically searching for it, the owner of the cellar came to see what was causing the noises he had heard. The unfortunate traveller was caught red-handed as a thief.

Since this was not the first time his wine had been stolen in similar fashion, the cellar owner handed the culprit over to the authorities for punishment. Almost before he had time to realise what was happening, the poor traveller was tried for repeated breaking and entering, and for the theft of expensive wine. He was condemned to be hanged.

He attempted to explain how it was that he came to be in that cellar, but that only made the case against him worse. By confessing that he had been in the company of witches he made himself guilty of witchcraft by association.

"You are fortunate," said the judge severely, "that I do not believe you, for if I had condemned you as a witch, then you would have been burnt at the stake. Indeed, it may be that you are guilty chiefly of foolishness, and of crass stupidity in choosing your associates, but the law is the law. Consider yourself lucky that you will only be hanged."

The day of the execution arrived. As he climbed onto the gallows, prodded by his guards, he saw the great crowd of spectators who had come to see how this man, who had confessed to consorting with witches, would meet his end. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he contemplated his fate, and he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe it away. As he brought it out, he saw, with incredulity, that it was not his handkerchief but the Witch's Cap. A faint glimmer of hope flickered in his mind.

"Am I allowed to make one last request ?" he asked.

The hangman laughed.

"Anything you want except your life," he answered. "But nothing else will do you much good !"

"Thank you. Then, my last request is this. I wish to die with my

nightcap on my head !”

“Granted !” agreed the hangman, amused at the foolish-seeming desire. Truly, he had heard some strange requests, but seldom such a ridiculous one as this !

The condemned man put on the cap.

“Off to Argyll !” he called in a loud voice.

Immediately, before the hangman could react, the man rose in the air, gallows and all, and soared up high over the execution site. The gasps, cries and exclamations of the astounded crowd below were soon left far behind him, and in no time at all he flew over the Border, north into Scotland and safety.

Once back in Argyll, he took good care to land in an area far from the witch’s cottage. The wood of the gallows turned out to be very useful to make the framework of a new house for himself, which was one good result of his adventures. But you may be sure that never again did he dare to put on the Witch’s Cap.

16. *The Laird of Co*

One role of folktales is to teach moral lessons in an enjoyable fashion. This tale teaches the value of kindness, of generosity, and of keeping one’s word.

Culzean Castle in Ayrshire is famous for its spectacular clifftop setting, and for the “co’s”, or sea caves, in the rocks underneath the castle. For this reason its owner has always been known as the Laird, or lord, of Co.

One such Laird was a particularly kind and considerate man, always ready to help others in need, and to do what he could for people less fortunate than himself.

So when one morning a little boy came across the green lawns of the garden carrying a small copper can, and respectfully asked the Laird if he could go to the castle and get a drink of ale for his sick mother, the Laird willingly gave his consent at once.

“Go to the kitchen,” he instructed, “and tell the butler that I said you are to fill your can with the best ale that we have in the cellar. That should surely

help your mother to get well.”

Away went the boy to the kitchen, and gave the Laird’s message to the butler. The old man listened, nodded, and took the boy with him down to the cellar to carry out his master’s orders. There, there was a cask, already open, of especially fine ale that was kept for the Laird himself to drink, and the butler decided that the Laird’s private supply was the obvious choice in this case.

“I will fill the child’s can from this,” he thought. “It is both light and nourishing, and it will do an invalid good.”

Taking the can from the boy, he started to tap the ale from the cask into it.

But you can hardly imagine his astonishment when the ale, flowing freely from the cask, left the little can no more than half full. More and more ale flowed out, but still the can could not be filled. At last the cask was empty. And yet, no ale had spilled onto the floor, which was quite clean and dry.

“There is something uncanny about this,” thought the butler, eyeing the child askance. “It must be witchcraft !” Of nothing was he more afraid than witchcraft. At the mere thought, the hair on his head stood up on end.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’ve done what I could. There must be something the matter with your can. Please take what you have, and go. I can’t keep on pouring away the Laird’s ale like this.”

But the boy refused to be moved.

“A promise is a promise,” he argued. “The Laird promised that my can should be filled, and I’m not going away until it is.”

No matter what the man said, the boy remained adamant. “A promise is a promise !”

The poor butler, deeply perturbed, saw that he must consult his master, reluctant though he was to do so. Telling the boy to wait, he went off to inform the Laird of what had happened.

“Whatever am I to do ?” he asked. “That can is bewitched !”

The kindly Laird listened to his tale carefully, and smiled.

“Well, the boy’s quite right,” he said. “I promised that he should have his can full of the best ale, and so he shall, even if we have to empty the cellars

to do so. Open another cask, and still another if necessary. But be sure to see that the can is filled. I gave my word, and I shall certainly keep it.”

Despite his doubts and fears, the butler dared not disobey, and so went back down to the cellar to open another cask, as he had been ordered. No sooner had he done so than the boy's can was filled, though only one or two drops of ale had flowed into it.

“Take it, laddie,” said the butler, thoroughly alarmed, “but go, and go quickly !”

“Thank you,” said the boy gravely. “I shall not forget your kindness.”

Carefully carrying the can, he departed, obviously pleased and grateful. And though the butler made enquiries all around the area, no-one knew who the child was, nor who was his mother.

Years passed, and misfortune one day befell the Laird of Co. War had broken out, and the Laird went to fight for his country in Flanders. But there he was captured, and for some reason he was condemned to die.

The night before the time fixed for his execution, he was thrown into a deep dungeon, heavily locked and barred. Sadly he remembered his wife and children, thinking that he would never see them again. He seemed to see his Ayrshire home rise before his eyes, and with it, unbidden, a vision of the little boy, now long forgotten, who had once begged for ale for his sick mother. But suddenly he sat up, blinking. It was no vision : the boy was really there before him.

The door of his cell had flown noiselessly open, and on the threshold stood the lad, looking not a day older than when he had last appeared. He put his finger to his lips, to signal the need for silence.

“Laird of Co,

Rise and go !”

he whispered, and held out a hand to help him.

You may be sure that the Laird obeyed all too gladly. Tiptoeing in stocking feet along the corridors, past the sleeping guards, and through doors that opened of their own accord, they came at last out into the open air beyond the walls.

The Laird was overjoyed to have regained his freedom, and began to shower thanks on the boy, but the latter stopped him.

“You are not safe until you are well out of the country,” he said shortly. “Get on my back, hold fast, and I will take you.”

The wondering Laird did as he was bade, and boy and man rose in the air and flew across the land and the sea, faster than it takes to tell, till they arrived safely at Culzean, on the green lawn where they had first spoken so many years ago. The boy put his hand in the Laird’s, and looked up at him.

“One good turn deserves another :

Take this for being kind to my old mother !”

he said, and vanished.

From that day to this he has never been seen again.

17. *The Gift of Fire*

Fire is the element which enables mankind to live and to keep warm in the coldest places, and to cook its food, rather than being obliged to eat it raw. For our earliest ancestors, fire must have been a magical and fearsome thing, brought by lightning, and uncontrollable. Then, at some stage, people learned how to control and to make fire by themselves. How this invaluable gift was given to mankind has been told since prehistoric times, in every country of the world. Here is how the gift of fire was brought to Scotland.

Far out in the Western Ocean, somewhere beyond the sunset, lies the Celtic Paradise, called Tir nan Og, the Land of Youth. On this island where dwell the spirits of the blest, the young are forever young, and the old grow no older but retain the vigour of their youth. The scent of apples always wafts from its shore, for the trees there bear both blossom and fruit all year round.

It is also the home of the birds.

In the beginning the birds lived only on Tir nan Og, and sang to the spirits there, thus keeping their hearts eternally young. However, after a time the gods decided that mortal man too needed the comfort of birdsong, and the promise of all that was good to come after death. So the birds left Paradise for the world of men. Some of them stayed, and settled permanently.

Others came only for a visit, and then returned whence they had come. Of these, the cuckoo was so terrified that he might not be able to return that he never built a nest for himself, lest by so doing he might be considered to be a bird of this world.

Among the birds that made the journey was the redstart, known in the Hebrides as the firetail. This is the story of how she got this name.

Now, although we think of Tir nan Og as a land of orchards and of sunshine, it would be a dull Paradise where the weather never varied, and the sun never set. So in the evenings the older people in particular sat around the fires in the halls of the Blessed Isles, fires that burned clearly and without smoke, glowing red with dancing flames of many colours. There they gazed into the flames and told tales, of heroes and others, and remembered the days of the past. No matter how many tales they told, the stories were always new. The younger people joined them to sing songs, and such evenings were not the least of the joys of Paradise.

But on earth fire was unknown, and this worried the firetail. A small brown bird, inconspicuous among her more colourful companions, she had a warm and generous heart. She had seen how much the blessed spirits enjoyed the warmth and the light of the fire, and she wished that she could find some way to share this with people on earth. They too would appreciate its comfort, especially on cold winter nights. How could she share it with them?

At length she plucked up her courage, and flew to the gods who reigned in Heaven. Nervously, she made her plea.

“In Tir nan Og we have fire, and it is one of the great blessings of the place. But on earth it is unknown. Could it not be shared with men? If there were any way to do so, I would do my utmost to take it to them. Please, please let there be some way!”

There was a long silence, which lasted so long that the little firetail began to despair, thinking that her request had been ignored. Finally, however, after long thought, the god of the Blessed Isles responded.

“Yes,” he said, “you may carry fire to men, but only if you can find a proper person to receive it. Only the unselfish, kind and good may do

so. You may give it to no other.”

The god then stuck in the little bird's tail a brand of eternal fire, and she flew off, overjoyed.

When she arrived on earth, she did not quite know what to do next. She was only a little bird, and had no real idea of how to set about her task. But then she saw a man come along, and so she went up to him and asked if he wished for fire. Of course, he did not know what fire was, and, thinking that she might make a tasty snack for supper, tried to kill her. Frightened, she flew away.

The best course of action seemed to be to ask for advice. The wisest of the birds was the owl, so to him she went for help. The owl counselled her to tell all the birds of the air of her quest, that she had a gift of infinite value to bestow on the most kindly and unselfish man. They would see that everyone heard of it.

This was done, and soon men came streaming up to the bush where the firetail sat with her tail aglow. Each one boasted of how good and kind he was, and how unselfish, the claims growing more and more extravagant as each tried to convince her of his superior merit. Before long the voices became loud and angry, and then they all came to blows. Terrified, the firetail flew away. Surely, she thought, these men cannot be good ?

On and on she flew, until at last she fell exhausted beside a small cottage. Out ran a small child, who carefully picked her up and took her indoors to show to her mother.

The mother, who was nursing her baby, smiled at the child and told her where to put the tired bird to rest, promising to give it soon a dish of sops in milk. The firetail watched her, and thought to herself,

“How I wish that this could be the good, kind person who gets the fire, but of course she could not have done any great unselfish deeds. What a pity !”

However, having thanked the woman politely for the food, she asked hopefully, “Are you by any chance unselfish and good ? I have a precious gift for such a person.”

The woman laughed.

“Indeed, no !” she said. “I have no time to be unselfish and good, because I have my husband and children to care for day by day. Then, in spring, there is the ploughing and sowing ; harvesting and grinding the grain in autumn ; spinning and weaving in winter, while my husband fishes and hunts. Neither of us has the time to be kind and unselfish.”

She gave the bird a shell of water, and then turned to comfort a child who had tripped and fallen.

All at once the firetail knew what she had to do. She asked the children to bring her a few pine twigs, and to build her a nest. This they did, and she flew into it, letting her tail touch the resinous twigs. As she did so, fire flamed up.

The woman who was too busy doing good things to be good, and doing kind things to be kind, had been granted the inestimably precious gift of fire.

V. National Emblems

18. *The Saltire : Saint Andrew's Cross*

The flag of the United Kingdom is a complicated union of the flags of the originally independent kingdoms which make it up. Of these, the national flag of Scotland is a white saltire on a blue ground, the cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland. Why did it become so ?

Tradition says that in the ninth century in what is now East Lothian, a battle was fought between the Scottish King Angus, with an army of Picts and Scots, and the much larger invading army of Angles and Saxons. The king had had a dream, in which he saw a great cross in the sky, which would bring him victory. On the morning of the battle, as the sun rose, there indeed was a white cross of cloud in the blue sky – and the army of the Scots was victorious. Since then, St. Andrew's Cross has been the national flag of Scotland.

19. *The Thistle and the Heather*

There are two flowers that are dear to the heart of Scottish people

everywhere — the thistle, and the heather. Ornamental varieties of both are found in parks and gardens all over the country, and the wild varieties are even more widespread.

This may seem a curious choice of flowers to love. After all, the Japanese cherish the delicate cherry blossom, and the English treasure the fragrant and colourful rose. Why do the Scots prefer such unspectacular flowers? There are of course legends to explain this.

The Scots, as we all know and believe, are a friendly and welcoming people, but at the same time fiercely independent, and resent outside interference in their affairs. The national motto is in Latin : *Nemo me impune lacessit*, “Nobody injures me with impunity”, or, as it is often rendered, “Who dares to meddle with me !” Make a friend of a Scot, and he will be generous in friendship and hospitality. Anger him, however, and he will become an unforgiving enemy. These two sides of the Scottish character are said to be united in the thistle, with its soft pink tassel of a flower-head, but its sharply spiked leaves.

However, there is a little more to it than that.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Vikings frequently came in their longships to ravage the coasts of Scotland. Sometimes they destroyed villages and retreated with their plunder, sometimes the Scots were able to fight them off.

Tradition tells us that long ago, on one such occasion, the Scottish force that went to meet them was worn out from following the invaders along the coast. Wearied, they slept deeply, and might have been slaughtered to a man if it had not been for the little thistle plant. In the dark of the night, the barefoot Viking warriors were trying to creep up silently on to the unsuspecting Scots, when one of them stepped on the sharp leaves of a thistle. He gave a cry of surprise and pain, and this woke the Scots, who were then able to defeat the enemy.

Ever since then, it is said, the thistle has been the soft but also prickly emblem of Scotland.

The thistle is not of great use to people, but the heather was one of the

most useful plants in the Highlands and Islands. It was used in building houses, for walls and thatching, and for the ropes and pegs that held the building together. The leafy young twigs filled mattresses for sleeping on. Older branches, stripped of their leaves, made brooms for sweeping, and baskets for storage or for carrying things. Heather stems could be woven into mats to cover the floors. The plant was used as fuel for cooking, heating and lighting ; and the rotted plants of ancient time provided peat, which, dried, was the aromatic chief fuel of winter. Both the roots and the leaves were used for dyeing wool, into various shades of yellow. Long stems could even form walking sticks or crutches. The bees that flock to its small flowers make from its nectar the most delicious of all honey. From those same flowers, people have distilled alcoholic drinks : heather ale and heather wine. The flowers are also used to make perfume, and to perfume soap. Last, but not least, heather potions have healing properties effective for many ailments, both internal and external. The plant was indeed a blessing to the people.

This is the story of how the heather came to clothe the hills of Scotland.

When God had almost finished creating the world, he still had some rocks left over, and decided to use them to create another, and beautiful, country. So he placed some of them carefully together to form the mountains of the Highlands of Scotland, and scattered others in the western sea to form the islands of the Hebrides. Then he looked thoughtfully at them. They needed some vegetation to make them the beautiful country he envisaged. What would be the best plants to choose, to cover the rocks ?

He considered carefully, and then sent for the oak tree.

“Oak tree,” he said, “you are the biggest and strongest of all the trees I have made. Will you go to my new country, to clothe the bare rocks, and to help it with your strength to become more beautiful ?”

The oak tree shook his leaves regretfully.

“I cannot,” he replied, in his rumbling bass tones. “I need deep soil for my roots to grow strong, and to keep me rooted in place. On these rocks, there is not enough earth for them to grow down to sufficient depth. I would

be blown over in the first gale. I am sorry, but I will not be able to take root in your new country.”

God considered again, and then sent for the honeysuckle, with its delicate yellow flowers and its sweet fragrance.

“Honeysuckle,” he asked, “would you be willing to go and spread your beauty and fragrance over the rocks and hills of my new country, and to help it to become more beautiful?”

The honeysuckle’s flowers drooped.

“Alas,” she said, in a frail voice, “I cannot grow by myself. I need help to live! By myself, I am only a poor, feeble thing. I need a tree, or a wall, or a fence, to support me. Ask me again, much later, but only if these are present. For now, I am sorry, but I am weak, and I will not be able to grow in your new country.”

God sighed, and considered again. Then he sent for the rose.

“Rose,” he said, “you are among the sweetest and the most beautiful of the flowers. Will you go to my new country, and clothe its rocks with your grace and fragrant splendour?”

The rose fluttered her petals in agitation.

“Oh, dear!” she said. “I would like to, I really would! But I can’t, I really can’t! The hills are so wet and windy and cold, I could never survive there. I need warmth and shelter to flourish and grow. I couldn’t grow there, I really couldn’t!”

Disappointed with the reactions of the oak, the honeysuckle, and the rose, God turned away. He turned over in his mind the other plants he had made, and then noticed by his feet a low-growing green shrub with tiny purplish-pink or white flowers. It was the heather.

“Heather,” he said, “I have asked this question of three other plants, but they all found good reasons to refuse. So I am asking you: will you go to my new country and clothe the bare rocks, to make them beautiful?”

The heather was rather taken aback to be asked to carry out such an important task. She thought about the rain and the wind, the poor soil and the lack of shelter, and wondered if she would be up to the job. But she told

herself that if God had asked her to do it, he must have had confidence in her.

“If you want me to do it,” she said with resolution, “then I shall certainly do my very best.”

God was pleased with the little heather, so pleased indeed that he decided to give her some extra gifts, as a reward for uncomplainingly accepting the task. He gave her the strength of the oak tree, to make her stems and bark as strong as any tree or shrub in the world. He gave her the fragrance of the honeysuckle, to perfume the air around her. Lastly, he gave her the sweetness of the rose, that would attract bees from afar. And with this triple blessing he sent her out to clothe the rocky hills of Scotland, to be in turn a blessing to its people.

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Introduction to the Folklore of Scotland



Locations of the Tales