Fairies

Gertrude M. Faulding

Edited by Mary Stratton


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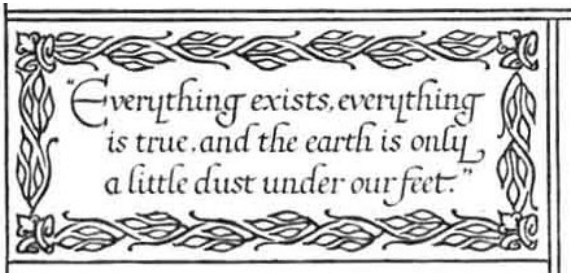

Fairies

This is not the considered dogma of schoolmen or of sages in council, but the whirling utterance of a poet, and it is with some such answer on our lips that we must affirm our belief in the fairy world. For this belief is with most of us like a little plant, open to the morning sun, shivering gaily in the winds of life; scorched some times, and sometimes almost uprooted and vanishing away; yet ready always to blossom again at the stirring of ecstasy or the breath of an enchanted air. It is so inconsiderable that it will never harden into a creed; so tiny and humble a thing that the wise of this world have never tried to preserve it as a talisman or to use it as an artificial symbol of contention. So that it has been left from the beginning to grow free like the daisies, and children from the morning of time have woven it into happy coronals and into flower-chains, which, becoming longer and ever longer, and flung forth as they were by little, heedless fingers to the dews and the winds of heaven, have at last enmeshed the whole round world in their magical network.

It is of no use our asking how the belief sprang up, or when; nor need we inquire too precisely into its nature,

for while fairy lore belongs to every country it has been able hitherto to defy those of the learned who would trace its origin or reduce it to a system. Science cannot examine nor reason grasp it, for what they touch is not the entrancing secret of the fairies, that indescribable, elusive thing, but some trace of it rather, some shining in the fields and forests, in poetry and in childhood; some glamour of the morning world, left there perhaps by the passing of the Little People.

It is significant that except to the child and the seer they have always passed. It is not for nothing that the immemorial beginning of our fairy tales should be: "Once upon a time, long, long ago." It all happened, tantalizingly, in the "good old days," and the good old days recede, as we know, for ever. It was thus when Chaucer wrote:

The Elf-quene with her joly compagnie,
Danced full oft in many a grene mede;
This was the old opinion as I rede;
I speke of many hundred years ago.
But now can no man see non elves mo.

And thus it is now according to a poet of the present day, who does not however, happily, quite believe his own words:

Englishmen care little now
For elves beneath the hawthorn bough.

Even Mr. Kipling is constrained to put a melancholy speech into the mouth of his gallant Puck : ". . . there's no good beating about the bush: it's true. The People of

the Hills have all left. I saw them come into Old England and I saw them go. Giants, trolls, kelpies, brownies, goblins, imps; wood, tree, mound, and water spirits; heath-people, hill-watchers, treasure-guards, good people, little people, pishogues, leprechauns, night-riders, pixies, nixies, gnomes, and the rest—gone, all gone !"

But this is after all only another way of saying that in Faery there is no time, just as there is no space either (as Euclid understood space) and no logic, but only the glamorous twilight and the soft beauty of the Borderland.

This region must be of man's own unconscious making—the indispensable atmosphere which lies about the more solid world of his thought—perhaps the "frange" of M. Bergson—a place of delicate mist and colour, and of gently moving winds; outside it a man could not breathe, nor would his winged fancies ever learn to fly. This is the true home of the fairies, and we need not wonder that they prefer for the most part to dwell there in hiding, behind the glimmering ramparts and the gates of which we have glimpses now and then, making excursions of course—for they are an adventurous race—into our human world, but liable to retreat suddenly on a flash of rainbow wings, hurling back a shower of silvery arrows, flame-tipped with laughter, at all those matter-of-fact, sturdy mortals who call themselves the sons of Common Sense, but who nevertheless gaze after them wistful-eyed from the hither side of the fairy frontier.

This enchanted strip of country at the confines of the human soul has been peopled by man from the beginning of time. The primitive gods would appear to have been among its earliest denizens—grotesque monsters, many of them—hydra-headed, changeful, vague and terrifying as the forms in some nightmare of childhood—but these passed away. And slowly, from varying periods, from the sea and the mountains, the desert and the plain, we find gathering a motley host of creatures : unicorns flash along, swift-footed; phoenixes, fiery of wing, go sweeping by; mighty genii appear suddenly with the vaporous whirlwind for a garment; the hoofs of centaurs are heard thundering, "pawing in the valley, swallowing the ground with fierceness and rage," and among them pierces the thin reed-piping of some goat-footed, shaggy-bearded Pan; we catch the dancing of woodland nymphs and fauns, and the rustle of shy dryads among the leaves. In the cavernous places of the mountain lurks an old brood of dragons; in the mysterious fastnesses of the sea sirens and mermen, yes and Leviathan himself whose "eyes are like the eyelids of the morning," who trails behind him so shining a pathway that "one would think the deep to be hoary."

A strange company, and strange regions indeed to be the home also of the fairy folk; these would seem however to haunt more especially the dewy uplands of the north—a delicate little people, and a whimsical mischief-loving, yet addicted for the most part to homely and helpful tasks; full of the laughter and the dancing joy of childhood; full too (though not always) of its uncompromising morality and its sudden melancholies.

Whence did they come, these people of myth and legend with their

> *Song of Nature's hidden powers*
> *That whistled like the wind, and rang*
> *Among the rocks and holly bowers ?*

Doubtless from the god-given faculty of wonder, which is the parent also of high philosophy standing at first sight so far aloof. "Les facultés qui engendrent la mythologie sont les mêmes que celles qui engendront la philosophie, et ce n'est pas sans raison que l'Inde et la Grèce, nous présentent le phénomène de la plus riche mythologie a côté de la plus profonde métaphysique." Reflection shows Renan to have been right. Wonder holds a torch alike to the wise man and to the child. The latter takes it, and with a shout of joy waves it about his head; and behold moving forms gather round him, sweeping him in a moment into the heart of a tale. He sees, shall we say, not the usual phenomena of the heavens, but something more—a young man going forth in his strength—one who proves himself to be the doer of doughty deeds. The child or the child-man will follow the hero through breathless adventures; he will climb and fight, love and give chase, moving onward for ever in a trail of glory till at last he meets his doom, is overcome by his enemies and slain. But in his back he bears a magical bright disk which restores him to life, and his trusty servant comes day after day to rouse him for fresh deeds of prowess at the appointed hour. Such is a boy's tale among the Indians of the far west; the adventures of the Day-god and of his faithful servant the Morning Star.

We have now passed the period in which it was usual to find the nature myth behind all stories. But we must recognize its importance and great interest, and we must admit that most remarkable human impulse—to personify. This faculty is for ever at work not only upon the more striking natural phenomena, but upon the little objects of daily life, and upon abstractions as well.

> *Man, once descried, imprints for ever*
> *His presence on all lifeless things; the winds*
> *Are henceforth voices . . .*
> *A shape peeps from the breezy forest-top,*
> *Arch with small puckered mouth and mocking eye.*

The teller of tales can weave romances with an old street lamp as hero, or a sausage-skewer; and it is long since we created the gods and the virtues in our own image—War and Plenty, Fruitfulness and Light. Wisdom to the Greek was the grey-eyed maiden, very fair and serene and even terrible; to the Jew one who "uttereth her voice in the streets," who "crieth upon the highest places of the city." For even the greatest sages, though vowed to Reason and following her with all patience and loyalty, must yet be lighted on their way by the torch of wonder, and are conscious as they go of peering faces beyond—at the edge of the gloom. And there comes a time when they can go no farther (having no formula more to express the vanishing truth which as yet they dimly see) and then they too have recourse to the child's enchanted opening: Once upon a time. In some such way as this we have come by innumerable stories of the creation of the world. We have the ancient Babylonian Tiamat who was the darkness of the deep, mother not only of the lesser gods and of Merodach

who slew her, but of "all monstrous, all prodigious things," the first universal giver of life. We have too the preserving Indian Shiva, the obscure Osiris, and immeasurably far from these the Demiurgus of Plato whose handling of myth, if conscious, is no less poetic.

All the great poets and prophets, indeed, have found it necessary, with a view perhaps only to their hearers, to teach in tales. But it may be that they themselves can see or at least express the truth more clearly through this medium of vision and of song; in any case human life has been enriched by them with story after story—from the misty background of the great epics to that group told simply upon the shores of Galilee: "the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field. . . . "

Now among all these wonder-begotten fables, between the tender parables of the wise and the grotesque nature myths of the humble, we find the fairy tales which delight our childhood. These have little at first sight to teach or to explain; but irresponsible and freakish as they are, frivolous even and absurd, they yet come to us with a charm so potent and lure us into a world so glamorous and gay, so simple in its values, so youthful and lovely in its laughter, that we are happy to go, and sorrowful enough when at last we must return

> *with a fairy hand in hand*
> *To a world more full of weeping than we can understand.*

This race then whose home is so close to and yet so far from the human world, whose members are so rarely seen of men, yet who can in a hundred subtle ways

influence and control them, may well claim from us the attention which its fascination demands. Its main characteristics are agreed upon strikingly in every country. The

grannie busy at her spinning-wheel in an Irish cabin, has much the same store of tales for her children's children as the old peasant woman on the Steppes of Russia or even among the hills of Hindustan. They tell, for instance, how the village idiot has been "fey" since a certain evening in his boyhood when, returning by moonlight along a lonely road, his ear caught the strains of a silver music, he saw the merry dancing of the elves, and was lured to join them within their magic circles. And everywhere are stories of new-born babes, mysteriously taken by some night-tripping fairy from their cradles on a midsummer eve, and of the puny changelings left in their stead. There are tales, even more common, of domesticated brownies who come to help and to reward the careful housewife and to pinch or punish the slattern, who will gratefully accept any dainties, curds or cream, which may be set aside for them, and yet are grievously offended if their hosts are so tactless in their mistaken goodwill as to leave them the present of a garment.

"Indeed your grandams' maids were wont to set a bowl of milk before him and his cousin Robin Goodfellow, for grinding of malt or mustard, and sweeping the house at midnight; and you have also heard that he would chafe exceedingly if the maid or good-wife of the house, having compassion of his nakedness, laid any clothes for him beside his mess of white bread and milk, which was his standing fee; for in that case he saith,

'What have we here ? Hemten, hamten, here will I never more tread nor stampen.'"

Or, as a Yorkshire version of the story has it

Hob red coat; Hob red hood;
Hob do you no harm, but no more good,

was shouted angrily by a hitherto friendly and helpful little goblin to his peasant host, who on account of this dire but well-meant insult must forgo his household services for ever; and how valuable these were we can tell from no less an authority than Milton who

Tells how the drudging goblin sweat,
To earn his cream-bowl duly set,
When in one night, ere glimpse of morn,
His shadowy flail hath thresh'd the corn,
That ten day-lab'rers could not end.

Finally there are the familiar legends of change and enchantment. These go right back to the lykanthropos or wolf-man of ancient Greece, and we have all shuddered at the ghost-hounds, kelpies and terrible were-wolves of northern lands. It is true that such spells were left for the most part to be worked by sorcerers and witches, but Puck was not the only naughty fairy who could have given Bottom an ass's head. For the mischief-loving elves are as numerous as the good, and nursery literature abounds in doves and swan-maidens, shaggy bears and hideous uncouth monsters of every description, yes even in lizards and toads, in which sad shapes human beings are, for a time at any rate, doomed to dwell. Such transformations are sometimes

the outcome of sheer malignity on the part of the fairies, but have been brought about more often for purposes of discipline; for the really terrible and wicked fairies are in Celtic and Teutonic legend comparatively rare. Under the resemblance of evil they are often in reality stern moralists whose duty it is to punish the guilty while their gentler comrades reward the virtuous. Kingsley gave us in the“ Water Babies“ a splendid illustration of this in Mrs. Be-done-by-as-you-did, and her twin sister (or other self as it turns out) Mrs. Do-as-you-would-be-done-by: they are abstractions of course, principles, what you will; but we meet them nevertheless as two delightful and very much alive old-young daughters of the deep, whose province it is to rule over the changing populace of the green vast water-world.

But among the fairy folk of ancient legend we find that the sterner moralists are-usually the dwellers underground; we look for them among the gnomes and the dwarfs, the trolls and the goblins who inhabit the dark long corridors of the mines, and are acquainted with the interior mysteries of the mountains. These people are skilled artificers in every kind of metal; they can even coin gold and silver for such mortals as are foolish enough to demand of them gifts of money, but they like better to fashion magical ploughs and scythes and pruning-hooks which help but cannot degrade the sons of men. One of the earliest, as it is also one of the sweetest things ever written about the Little People tells us that “it is their nature to have the power to serve, but not to injure“ man. They may tease and pinch and jeer, have their fun and mislead night-wanderers to their harm, and most of us were taught by our nurses to

strike holes in our empty egg-shells, lest otherwise the witch-fairies should run off with them, and putting out to sea in the little bobbing boats, should play their pranks upon the sailor-lads. But in spite of all this the pleasant thought remains with us that the fairies are not in any real sense workers of evil, not even those queer, dark dwarf-like little beings about whom such curious legends are afloat.

The hero of" Phantastes," we remember, encounters them when, full of bitterness at having been "found by his own shadow," he is wandering drearily through Fairy Land. "I travelled through a desert region of dry sand and glittering rocks, peopled principally by goblin-fairies. When I first entered their domains, and, indeed, when ever I fell in with another tribe of them, they began mocking me with offered handfuls of gold and jewels, making hideous grimaces at me, and performing the most antic homage, as if they thought I expected reverence, and meant to humour me like a maniac. But ever, as soon as one cast his eyes on the shadow behind me, he made a wry face, partly of pity, partly of contempt, and looked ashamed, as if he had been caught doing something inhuman; then, throwing down his handful of gold, and ceasing all his grimaces, he stood aside to let me pass in peace, and made signs to his companions to do the like." It is true that later in the story this same Sir Anodos climbs, in the course of his journeying, down slippery rocks to a vast underground cavern where he meets with other and far more hideous Kobolds, scrannel-voiced and full of evil humour, who mock at and come near to torture him. But these are in the end repulsed by some noble and selfless impulse which stirs in the breast of the young

knight, and indeed they would seem, with their temptations and their wiles, to have less affinity with the Little People proper than with those ugly demons of medieval art who are familiar to us all, grotesque and horrible, in the great "Nativity" of Botticelli and some of the Judgment pictures of Fra Angelico, where we see them flying from the angels into the caverns and dark places of the earth, or busy with their little pitchforks thrusting the wicked into Hell. These are the same creatures who whispered to Christian as he passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the children of nightmare, or of evil suggestion, or of sin. The fairy race does not own them, though it would appear from the Hans Andersen story of Elfin Hill that they are sometimes invited to parties. In the tale the Elf-King's housekeeper (an old maiden who is quite "hollow behind ") is discussing with a raven the forthcoming guests: "The mer-man and his daughter must be invited first, although it may not be agreeable to them to remain so long on dry land, but they shall have a wet stone to sit on, or perhaps some thing better; so I think they will not refuse this time. *We must have all the old demons of the first class, with tails, and the hobgoblins and imps;* and then I think we ought not to leave out the death-horse, or the grave-pig. . . ." Evidently it was not to be an exclusive party, but whoever the "old demons of the first class" may be it is pleasant to turn from them to the true Hill People, industrious and funny and innocent, whose dancing-grounds are above on the grass, and whose dwelling-places are beneath, lit by magic lamps, splendid with pinnacle and glancing dome.

Let us suppose for a moment that a mortal of to-day has the good fortune to meet with some such troll, some

goblin or swart fairy of the mine.

Suppose he picks up on his rambles one of the curious long stocking-caps with at its end the little tinkling bell by which the fairies set such store. He will find that he has great power, as long as this is in his possession, over the owner. Why the bell is of such importance no legend has explained. It may be the outward symbol of elfin citizenship; some rights perhaps are forfeited without it in that enchanted subterranean kingdom, believed to be so gorgeous, which is the home of the goblins. Now if the youth, the finder of the cap and bell, be wise (as wise as we should be did such a chance befall us !) he will endeavour to strike a bargain with its distracted owner, and may thus obtain some fairy-gift of surprising value. Let him beware, however, what he asks : not gold, for the luckless man who stipulated for a guinea in every ploughshare died before his time of avarice and overwork; not idleness, nor mere pleasure, nor vain glory, for these things are hated of the Hill People and subtle with fairy curses.

Let him choose rather some useful gift of magic workmanship, a noble pump or a fiddle, a cooking-pot or a fire-lighter, a reaping hook or an airship— something beautiful for the service or the joy of man. What a fine airship might they not fashion for him, the goblin host; a monoplane shall we say, constructed cunningly with lightest aluminium for the framework of its tenuous dragon wings, with delicate fittings of filigree silver, with a mechanism so marvellous, and with so entrancing a music in its whirring flight that it would claim instant obedience from the angry children of the winds. But the gift would come (like all fairy

gifts) on one condition: that the ship should be used only for peaceful purposes. Let the aeronaut direct it once towards war and strife, and the undoing of his fellows; let him try to fathom with ambitious and aggressive thoughts the secret of its power, and the graceful thing would fall headlong to earth; the very mountains would open to receive it, and then close for ever, amid the derisive jeers of gnomes and pixies, upon the wonder of its soaring flight.

If we must on reflection admit that these busy people who "do their business in the veins of the earth" have kept up with the times (and some indeed will go farther than this, and hold them responsible for certain among the inventions and discoveries of the present day) we shall see no reason to doubt its being the same also with the fairies of the upper air, the floating sylphs, and all those merry elves that are still to be found haunting the flowers and the forests, the reed-fringed inland meres and the pools of the sea-shore. But their charms are perhaps more old-fashioned, because on the whole more unchangeable. We hope, as fondly as did our ancestors, that they will come to the cradles of our children with promises to the newborn of health and fortune, of beauty and nobility. Mothers sit now as they ever did, looking for them to come in the ruddy fireglow or by the silver shining of the stars,

In quaint attire guisely
Quiet pace and softely,

and who shall say that they look in vain ?

The fairies will always keep, I think, their quaint attire. No one would wish them, as a race, to dress in anything but green—

Green jacket, red cap, and white owl's feather,

and we think of them always as being very small and delicate. They are

the pert fairies and the dapper elves,

or again

the span-long elves that dance about the pool

—and indeed Chancellor Gervase of Tilbury, who lived in the thirteenth century and is probably the earliest English authority on fairies, speaks of the Little People as not quite half an inch high. This seems to us, till we remember the poets, almost too tiny. But after all the poets are more likely than other mortals to have seen the fairies, or to interpret, at any rate, for those that have; among others we may surely count Hans Andersen with his tender-hearted elf who lived in a rose and had a sleeping-chamber behind each leaf, and was "such a wee little thing that no human eye could see him. . . . What we call veins on a leaf he took for roads; ay, and very long roads they were for him."

However this may be, the elves can doubtless grow bigger, for are they not of their nature unbeholden to the laws of space ? We know that they can assume at will the forms of men or of monsters. Alonso and his companions mistake Ariel for a foul harpy, and draw

their swords upon him; Titania, making herself a woman, loved the weaver of Athens in all his mortal grossness. Yet (away once for all with consistency, the one hobgoblin against whom the gates of Faery are for ever barred)—yet Ariel was wind-rocked in the bell of a cowslip, and we remember that the four delicate henchmen told off to minister to the humours of the ungainly Ass were—Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustard-seed.

The poets' names for the fairies are in fact always the names of very little creatures : Pip and Trip, Pede and Penny, Cricket, Pigwiggen, Hodgepoke, Little Little Prick, and the rest of them. Even Incubus and that more famous Rumplestiltskin who made so much fuss about his name, hardly sound gigantic !

There is nothing else for it, however, but crude size when we insist on bringing these dainty denizens of the mist and moonshine, and putting them through their antics on the uncouth human stage. But it is not there, let us not think it, that we see them as they really are. No. We must watch for them in the out-of-door world, before they creep into hiding under the acorn cups, while they still dance featly on the hill-side or flit wheeling through the purple twilight upon the leathern wings of their captured rere-mice. We must watch for them (if our eyes be open) as they plunder the heavy-laden bees intent on their booming homeward journey through the summer dusk, for it is then that the elves make haste to fashion the wax, their booty, into night tapers and to

light them at the glow-worms' fiery eyes.

The poets delight to dwell upon the small daintiness of the race. One of them, whose identity is only to be surmised, begins a curious treatise upon them by describing the clothes of the fairy king "brought to him on New-yeares day in the morning 1626 by his Queenes chambermaids":

First a cobweb-shirt, more thinn
Than ever spider since could spin,
Chang'd to the whitenesse of the snow,
By the stormie windes that blow
In the vast and frozen ayre,
No shirt half so fine, so fayre . . .

and so on at some length. This reminds us of what old Michael Drayton had to say about the equipment of King Oberon and of Pigwiggen his tiny foe as they rode forth from opposing sides to their desperate tourney, how he

quickly arms him for the field,
A little cockle-shell his shield,
Which he could very bravely wield;
Yet could it not be pierced:
His spear a bent both stjfl and strong,
And well near of two inches long:
The pile was of a horse-fly's tongue,
Whose sharpness nought reversed.
And puts him on a coat of mail,
Which was of a fish's scale,
That when his foe should him assail,
No point should be prevailing:
His rapier was a hornet's sting;
It was a very dangerous thing,

For i'f he chanc'd to hurt the King,
It would be long of healing.
His helmet was a beetle's head,
Most horrible and full of dread,
That able was to strike one dead,
Yet did it well become him;
And for a plume, a horse's hair
Which, being tossed by the air,
Had force to strike his foe with fear
And turn his weapon from him.

If, after such a fearsome sight, there is any courage left in our hearts we shall maybe find our way to the bank where the wild thyme grows, and there a modern poet will show us how the blue-green fragrant herb has become a mighty forest, haunted by terrific ladybird dragons, where

Ants like witches four feet high
Waving all their skinny arms,
Glared at us and wandered by,
Muttering their ancestral charms.

Here, in the glimmering half-light 'of the wood everything is a-quiver with marvel and romance, and if we listen many a roundel and a fairy song will come floating towards us, new notes echoing and blending with the old, because in the Forest of Wild Thyme, which is only a new and beautiful name for Fairy Land, all the songs are exactly the same age, and that is no age at all. Here we shall meet among others the fays of long ago:

Peaseblossom in his crimson cap
And delicate suit of rose-leaf green,
His crimson sash and his jewelled dagger;

yes, and Mustard-seed as well, who is a "devil-may-care, epigrammatic and pungent fellow," and who will teach us to be "laughter-wise." And when the music and revels are at their height we shall catch if we are fortunate a jangle of tiny silver bells, and a glimpse, all too brief, of Majesty, drawn behind a scampering team of little atomies—no less a personage than Queen Mab herself, who in her chariot which is an empty hazel-nut sets forth nightly with her mischievous *cortège* of dreams

In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the forefinger of an alderman.

At her passing the fairies will shake and sway with peal after peal of silvery laughter as they call to mind the pranks that will be played' this very night on mortal men. And then as likely as not they will

dance their ringlets to the whistling wind,

and betake themselves to their jolly banqueting. Their little tables, we know, are their own "midnight mushrumps," and for their wine

The pearlie drops of dew they drinke
In Akorne-cups fill'd to the brinke.

But sometimes their goblets are less homely—finer, we read, than the clearest Venetian crystal—yes, for they

Were all of ice not made to overlast
One supper, and betwixt two cowslips cast.

Let us listen with ears atune to the faint clink of these elfin wine-cups as the sound reaches us through the music of rhymes and chimes, the ding-dong of flower-bells, the blare of honeysuckle horns and all the blending loveliness of the fairy orchestra. There will be the hum of little voices too—the treble we know has usually been taken by the cricket, and

a deep, well-breasted gnat,
That had good sides, knew well his sharp and flat,
Sung a good compass, making no wry face,
Was there as fittest for a chamber bass.

As for the guiding spirit of all this harmony, the fairies' best musician, an old manuscript tells us, was none other than "little Tom Thumb, for he had an excellent bagpipe made out of a wren's quill and the skin of a Greenland louse." If among all the crowd we can find him we shall have found in all probability that "shrewd and knavish sprite" who is Hobgoblin as well, and sweet Puck—and we may please ourselves as to whether we will regard him as a type or an individual For he is, most truly, both; an individual to the tips of his brown fingers, he remains *the* fairy, *par excellence,* representing his race wit all those especially elfin qualities which w have noticed. He is tricksy yet helpful mocking yet friendly. "Lord," he exclaims "what fools these mortals be ! "—yet he is~ willing to go about their business and watches amusedly from some twilit haunt of his own the pompous talk, the preenings, the solemn struttings, the passionate entanglements which go to

make up the endearing folly of our kind. It is thus that he was seen in the, last century : "It has the sage's brows, and" the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile shaped like the long bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh" Meredith recognized him then for the Comic Spirit as no doubt he is.

There is plenty of evidence besides that he is among us to-day. Mr. Kipling has made him the hero of a book, showing us very delightfully how he haunts the Sussex Weald, "a small, brown, broad-shouldered, pointy-eared person with a snub nose, slanting blue eyes, and a grin that ran right across his freckled face." He is " fairy long-lived" as he tells the children, rather than old, having had his dish of cream set for him o' nights in the days when Stonehenge was new.

And here is another vision of him vouchsafed not so many years ago to a poet:

Oh, it was Puck ! I saw him yesternight
Swung up betwixt a phlox-top and the rim
Of a low crescent moon that cradled him,
Whirring his rakish wings with all his might,
And pursing his wee mouth, that dimpled white
And red, as though some dagger keen and slim
Had stung him there, while ever faint and dim
His eerie warblings piped his high delight;
Till I, grown jubilant, shrill answer made,
At which, all suddenly, he dropped from view;
And peering after, 'neath the everglade,
What was it, do you think, I saw him do ?

I saw him peeling dewdrops with a blade
Of starshine sharpened on his batwing shoe.

What stronger proof need we that Puck is among us still ? It matters nothing though Riley saw him thus in America, for he has always been a great traveller. It was long ago that he put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes, and he could move even then as swiftly as the arrow travels from the bow. He learned, centuries since, like all the fairies to ride upon the wind,

Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,
And dance upon the mountains like aflame.

Why should we, in any case, believe that this merry wanderer of the night has confined his journeyings to this earth of ours ? He need not. He is not made with our pitiful preferences for air and water, with our gross craving for daily bread, our shrinking fear lest we pass beyond fixed zones of heat and cold. He is as much at home in frost as in fire, and long ere this must have gone a-visiting to that mysterious other side of the waste moon, must have talked face to face with the old man who so strangely inhabits there, must have sought out the spirits of white fire who dwell for ever among the frozen craters of her desolate uplands. And has he not, looking over the rosy brow of the Hills of Dawn, set his face towards certain of the planets as well ? How could the evening and the morning star fail to lure him, and the silvery spaces that lie glimmering between them and us ? He may well have gone spying to the lurid confines of Mars himself, have read unquestioning the answer to those riddles with which we plague ourselves for ever. And what of the meteors, the

Leonids and the Draconids, children, as it were, among the planets, who whirl with docile obedience in their strange orbit so endlessly along the ether ? There could be no better sport, surely, for the fairy host than that of enticing away these tiny stars to be their playthings. And they do it. We cannot guess what their weary upward flight must be like; but we know that they are merry and dauntless, and loyal no doubt under the skilled leadership of Puck himself.

. . . And at last they reach the meteorites, and, bestriding them with riotous laughter, they tease them and cajole, prick them with fantastical jests, spur them with a hundred quips and taunts, madden them with the barbs of their delicate mockery, till at last their steeds, the little ramping lions and the bold fire-spurting dragons with curly tails, dash full of gay madness from their accustomed path, and are guided earthward by the mischief-loving elves. Then follows the smooth, gliding, silent movement, better fun, the riders think exultantly, than any flying, down the long blue steeps of the ether, till as they near the misty earth air closes about them, air infinitely delicate, it is true, far too fine for any mortals to breathe, yet so much coarser than the ether that it checks the speed of the heavenly invaders. They find themselves met on a sudden by invisible foes, the small wandering spirit-winds who come whispering, lifting and combing the black manes and the golden, till the marvelous hair, streaming wildly behind, begins to glitter and crackle with ruddy sparks of fire; and the meteorites themselves glow with anger at the hostile, unknown element. But the fairy riders, as the air thickens, shout with triumph and urge their coursers onward and downward, till they reach the earth at last

in one glorious rush, and behold they are changed into stars of burning flame. We have all, on summer nights, watched their swift passage across the sky, in showers but seldom, sometimes in twos and threes, often alone. Who can doubt but that this is Puck's own method of sweeping back to earth ? Others before us may have suspected this, for there is, in the " Anatomy of Melancholy," a significant passage in which Burton speaks of the fairies and goes on to discuss the dewy grass-rings always associated with them; "they leave that green circle which we commonly find in the plain fields, *which others hold to proceed from a meteor falling.*"

What if both theories be correct What more glorious incident could there be in the elfin revels than some such swift return of a fairy traveller—the starry courser driven from highest air to where his brother sprites are "by moonshine leading merry rounds" ? We can imagine the tinkling hubbub of welcome, the fantastical dizzy stories of adventure, the wonder of the stay-at-home fays, and to the wanderer the caress of the cool fragrant earth which for all his journeyings he loves the best. It is likely that despite his many hundred summers he has not even yet exhausted all the treasures of his own planet. The fairies have power to explore so many regions which have long been closed—are still, some of them—to the enterprise of man. Virgin forests and trackless mountains, the silent polar worlds of ice, the darkness of the deepest ocean, even the fiery heart of the earth with its boiling vapours and molten treasure hoard—all these are open to the blithe spirits whose privilege it is

to fly,
To swim, to dive into the fire,
to ride On the curl'd clouds. . .

They have the freedom of the elements.

Whether they venture much into our great cities we cannot learn either from

poetry or legend. But we can guess. For they must, times and again, have glanced down from their flight in air upon the towers and columns as they rise dark and dreamlike into the moonlit sky. They will have seen the long streets, the roofs guarding their mysteries, the chimneys which send forth wraiths of smoke in spirals that are like music, and from further still they will have been fascinated by the lights—their wavering glint upon canals and rivers, the ruddy twinkle of them which to fairy eyes must be full of who knows what of mortal secrecy and marvel. It is unlikely indeed that so adventurous a band of little people, all inquisitive as they are, would flit by overhead and never descend along the moonbeams to explore the streets and courts which are so quick with child life. How sad if there should be millions of children gathered together, and no fairies haunting about them. Sad ? No, impossible. "It is frightfully difficult," says Sir J. Barrie, "to know much about the fairies, and almost the only thing known for certain is that there are fairies wherever there are children." Yes indeed, and we have seen how Peter Pan, the eternal child, is responsible for whole troops of them in Kensington Gardens.

Their portraits even have been chiselled (and magnified) in company with squirrels and conies and little mice on the pedestal of his statue, and we have heard what fun goes forward behind the great locked gates after closing time. They have the placid, grimy sheep to play with and a great company of homeless London cats may come to them for the painless extraction of sparks. And just as in centuries gone by when as we know they used to dance featly upon "Bednall Green," so to-day they find in the city precincts tracts of grassland for their revelry, where (to the sound no doubt of Peter's piping) they still

> *By moonshine do the green-sour ringlets make*
> *Whereof the ewe not bites.*

And whether or not we can see these we may yet come in the city twilight upon "gentle" places, as in olden days the fairy-haunted spots were called. For the "ancient, sacerdotal Night" has magic enough and to spare for the purifying of the haunts of men; as the twilight fades dust and defilement are cleared away, and there comes forth a shadowy host—the thronging dreams of the children. And then the trees—

> *At night this City of Trees*
> *Turns to a tryst of vague and strange*
> *And monstrous Majesties,*
> *Let loose from some dim underworld to range*
> *These terrene vistas till their twilight sets. . . .*

Yes, at night the fairies may go and come unquestioned under the protection of their native wizardry and the dusky enchantment of the trees and flowers. But by day

they are there as well, only they come with circumspection, disguised it may be, or invisible; with blithe boldness even—if they see that our eyes are holden. Do they not play tricks upon us just as readily in the town flat as in the country cottage ? They are as eager in the one place as in the other to steal our collar-studs and our thimbles, to tamper with our razors and our shoe-laces—and then suddenly to restore them and make all good. And if there is one who doubts that disconcerting trifles of this kind are the outcome of fairy magic, we may be sure that some day his eyes will be opened.

Yes, the Little People may come in multitudinous disguises to our cities, but they are there. They enter in, for instance, when the sun shines, as jack-o'-lanterns, and dance gaily upon the walls of the humblest room; give any child the broken fragment of a mirror to flash, and he will set about capturing the elf with his two hands.

Or again they may curl themselves up for sleep in the round swinging tassel of some plane-tree and go dancing at seed-time almost invisible on its fluffy down. The fountains must allure them sometimes, the lamps and the swirling fogs; and for their dwelling-places there are always the cracks and crevices of the masonry—" cubby-holes" as the children call them—and the homes of the pigeons high up among those blackened figures and carven monsters which adorn so many of our Gothic buildings. It is inconceivable that some, at any rate, of the fairies should not make themselves here, as it were, a town-residence. Think for a moment of the soaring towers—Oxford has them, and

Winchester and York, London, Paris, and Rouen. What excitement for the meek saints and the writhing gargoyles, when on some still night of starshine and flickering shadows they are visited by a troop of fairies, house-hunting . . . what sudden shiver of life in the grey stone, what stirring of warm hope. It may be that the Little People can set them free for a while, these imprisoned spirits, and the air when we know it not may be full of liberated wretches, grotesque and gay, full of an eerie morris dance never to be seen with mortal eyes.

It is in view of all these powers and of others like them that we think of the fairies as a race apart, a race whose wonder-working qualities make them both more and less than ourselves. Yet in this as in everything else we must expect no consistency in the mass of legend.

It would appear from the old romances that in the days of chivalry the fairies were understood to be men and women with like passions to our own, but endowed whether by nature or grace or learning with the arts of magic. Merlin and Vivien then were fairies, Morgue too, and many others, including of course all the medieval witches who form indeed a valuable link between the two worlds. The old French story of Huon de Bordeaux, who is later the heir and successor of the elf-king, shows Oberon himself to be a fairy only on his mother's side. For the surprising statement is there made that he was the son of Julius Caesar. When we reflect that the fay his mother had also been, for some centuries, the ancestress of Alexander the Great, and that (according to the same group of legends) the Grecian conqueror was himself the father, by "Sebille la Dame du Lac," of King Arthur,

we are carried far indeed from the sober reckonings of man. "Le petit Roy Oberon" is a most interesting personage. Of the guests that come to his christening a mischievous fairy, whose invitation had been forgotten, forbade him to grow after his third year, but repented later and bestowed upon him the gift of beauty. We read therefore : " Il n'a que trois pieds de hauteur; il est tout bossu; mais il a un visage angélique; il n'est homme mortel qui le voye, que plaisir ne prengne a le regarder tant a beau visage." We find this dwarf-magician in his enchanted forest busied with spells and wonders, and it is recorded of him that having passed thus several hundred years "he desired no more to live in Faery, but went unto the seat prepared for him in Paradise. For Oberon was a good Christian." This last is important when we remember that many writers consider the fairies to be the survivors of a pagan world, and that theories abound which would establish them as the offspring of unchristened children. We are here in fact face to face with yet another delicate paradox belonging to our theme. The elfin folk we are told is immortal, dwelling in the land

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue

—but on the other hand it is without soul, it is even rumoured without heart as well.

Now it is, happily, no part of our business to reconcile such conflicting statements, but we may at any rate examine them. It certainly seems hard that while Oberon was so sure of his place prepared in Paradise,

the little river trolls of Scandinavia should spend mournful days of uneasiness as to their hope of redemption, and we wonder whether our ancestors were unduly influenced in their conclusions by the well-known fairy dislike of church bells. Because any loud noise, it seems, is offensive to them, and they fly far more quickly from the beating of drums and the clash of arms than from the mellow chimes that ring the villagers to prayer.

Now we must bear in mind that only in our human world of logic and morality could any such question arise at all. We may think solemnly: the fairy race must either be saved or lost; but let us beware in what company we state our proposition, for if any members of that race should be within hearing it is not unlikely that they would laugh at us. They do not admit the law of the exclusion of opposites; it would strike them as a pompous thing and dull, and as for a theory of their origin—well, they might remind us that they are immortal at both ends—in which case they never had an origin at all. Mr. Yeats has a story of an Irishwoman, who getting speech on one occasion with the fairy queen was persuaded to question her as to the place held by her people in the universe, but she could obtain no sort of satisfactory answer.

Some of them indeed might incline to support Sir J. Barrie: "When the first baby laughed for the first time, his laugh broke into a million pieces, and they all went skipping about. That was the beginning of fairies." Perhaps it was. At any rate we need some such broken laughter to show us the world of nonsense as it is. We forget so soon, just as we forget our dreams. Lear

indeed brought back a partial picture of the "lands where the Jumblies live," and so did Lewis Carroll, but most of us have much ado to understand the holiday inconsequence of that world—to realize it as the home not only of the "demi-puppets," Robin Goodfellows, and wee folk in green, but of the merry, shapeless nonsense people as well—Jumblies and Jabberwocks, Boojums, Pobbles, Mome Raths and the rest of them. One real glimpse into this bewildering topsy-turvydom and all would be well—if only circumstances were more propitious for taking notes. But it would seem that discretion is forced upon those who come back from Faery. Three roads, we remember, the three "ferlies," were shown in olden days to Thomas the Rhymer, the "narrow road So thick beset wi' thorns and briers," the "braid, braid road" (these being of course the Paths of Righteousness and Wickedness respectively),

And see ye not yon bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae ?
That is the Road to fair Elfand,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

But when True Thomas came back along the enchanted way nobody was told what he learned in the fair Elfiand—perhaps that two and two do not make four there—or even five, but something quite different, a "ferlie" possibly which no mortal intellect can grasp at all.

When all is said, however, there remains for us to glance at that widespread set of opinions by which the Little People are indeed outcasts from Christendom.

Bacon speaks of them as "degenerate and revolted spirits" the contemplation of whom is nevertheless a part of spiritual wisdom. Many of the Elizabethan writers regard them as positively evil, grouping them with witches and devils; they are

bastards of the Night and Erebus,
Fiends, fairies, hags that fight in beds of steel,

and Shakespeare makes Imogen pray for protection against them.

Milton, though he can take the happier view of them as

gay creatures of the element
That in the colours of the rainbow live
And play ? the plighted clouds,

yet earnestly warns the night wanderer of all malignant fairies, and according to ancient legend these would have injured man but for the protective powers of horse-shoes and rowan branches over the door, and other charms. "Blesse this house," we read :

Keep it from all evil spirits,
Fairies, weazzles, rats and ferrets.

In Mr. Yeats's beautiful play "The Land of Heart's Desire" we get contrasted views.

"For are not they, likewise, children of God ?"

asks the bride, and the priest (rather brutally) replies:

"No, child; they are the children of the fiend,
And they have power until the end of Time,
When God shall fight with them a great pitched battle
And hack them into pieces."

But Maire answers dreamily:

"He will smile,
Father, perhaps, and open his great door,
And call the pretty and kind into his home."

Our sympathies are with her here, but Father Hart is apparently proved right by the event. For Maire is spirited away that May Eve by a fairy disguised as a little child who comes to fetch her. In the struggle between priest and fairy the latter sings

We have great power, to-night, dear golden folk,
For he took down and hid the crucifix.

From this we see the protective influence always attached to holy symbols and seasons; and we know on high authority that at Christmas when

The bird of dawning singeth all night long
. . .
No fairy takes nor witch hath power to charm;
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

Shakespeare indeed seems always to have supported this pagan view of the fairies. The little scene between Ariel and Prospero is not without its pathos. The spirit has described to his master the sorry plight of the island prisoners, and the tears of old Gonzalo.

. . . Your charm so strongly works 'em,
That if you now beheld them your affections
Would become tender.

PRO. *Dost thou think so, spirit ?*

ARI. *Mine would, sir, were I human.*

PRO. *And mine shall.*
Hast thou (which art but air) a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind that relish all as sharply,
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art ?

Yet if we are saddened by the thought that the fairies, who are but air, must miss for ever the warm delights and generous passions of humanity, we may be comforted by the wind-born fragment of Ariel's freedom song:

Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough,

and by that still more distant echo:

Come unto these yellow sands.

And we shall not do ill if we trust in this the judgment of the greatest among the poets. What if the fairies are just that—the unchristened children of our minds, immortal as the spirit of youth is immortal, the ever graceful pagan spirit which delights in all the dancing joy of the old earth, in sunshine and rain and all simple growing things ? What have such airy creatures to do

with that sterner man within us, whose dark heart is full of hidden unquenchable fire, of brooding thoughts, and love that will be giving at all times, and pity and the pain of pity ? The fairies will but peep, finger on lip, at this dweller in our midst, or will try to charm him if they can by some snatch of song :

Lo ! I knock the spurs away;
Lo ! I loosen belt and brand;
Hark ! I hear the courser neigh
For his stall in Fairy-land.
Bring the cap and bring the vest;
Buckle on his sandal shoon;
Fetch his memory from the chest
In the treasury of the moon.

Whether or not they are always potent to fetch this" memory" of man's from the lunar coffers, it is a fact that much of the bafflement and perplexity of life may be forgotten in the presence of the Little People or at any rate of their lovely handiwork. For we think of them as busied constantly about their gracious tasks; they weave the magic of the morning, setting the dewdrops upon flower and grass-blade; they launch the mad and merry dreams of the May-time, harness the cool night breezes and come tumbling in the rainbow spray of every waterfall.

And in the autumn they are with us, and "their pastime is to make midnight mushrumps," to pluck the long gray-green lichen beards of giant trees, to work their will in the fantasy of the mist.

They come in winter too, soft and gray, disguised as whirling snow-flakes; they paint our windows with a white fern-tracery of beautiful frost; they adorn every bush and tree with a shining robe that is lovelier than summer leaves; they imprison the streams in crystal and raise upon them for their wintry revels the domes and columns and bridges of the city of ice, knowing well that they must soon break down the structure, release the chafing waters, and set them singing.

But the spring is their great season of adventure, or the time at any rate when our mortal eyes are most likely to be opened that we may see them. What if they grow naughty then with their sudden tricks of wind and rain ? We forgive it all for the sake of the fluffy tassels which they hang on boughs that are still bare, and we cannot but laugh when they set the lambs a-jumping, and the absurd calves frisking in the fields. Quite elderly beasts indeed will not always resist the infectious elfin youthfulness, and there comes a moment in the midst of

All that left and fun and romping,
All that frisking, and twisting, and coupling

—perhaps on some gusty morning of March, some happy hour of wind and sun and bird-song when an old horse will start capering in his paddock, or a company of solemn, ancient geese will be inspired to run together, vaguely, with ridiculous wings outstretched; it is all some fairies' prank—of course it is—but in the divine swift gaiety of that moment we are drawn close to all birds and beasts, and we see (as children perhaps can see always) the innocent meek heart of the creatures, their patience and their

trustfulness. We have come near to the secret of earth and her "good smile," and perhaps by so doing we have passed through the gates of ivory and gold into the enchanted land of Faery. Well for us if while we are there we can keep our eyes wide and our minds clear for memory. The legends tell us that such a sojourn is but a doubtful blessing: a man will come back "fey." But what if this means only that the values and proportions of that country are not as ours, that they are indeed something quite other

which puts the cheap old joy in the scorned dust ?

Or he will return, some say, laden, as he thinks, with riches—with fairy gold. And behold, by the light of this world he is clutching earth only, and withered leaves. Well, what then ? It hardly needs a special faculty to see, on some October morning, that the dead leaves of the forest are fairer still than much fine gold. And earth ?

By my faith . . .
. . . she has wonders in loom,
Revelations, delights . . .

Let us have a care lest in despising too readily the dazed visionary with his handful of fairy gold we are casting scorn upon the currency of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is, at any rate, clear that the little citizens of Faery have one supreme quality in common—that of single-mindedness. Whatever their whimsies they are steadfast in their love and gratitude, in the fierce tornadoes of their childish hate, and in revenge. They are certain to keep all promises; they never waver in

their serene conviction as to what is evil and what good. Kindness is good, and gaiety, and honest labour, and the fruits of the earth, and the alternating beauty of day and night. It is of these things that their lives are full, and they will come about us, the elves and fays, in proportion as we can share with them unregretfully this clear simplicity. Then they will bring us gifts—the cap of darkness, maybe, which can hide us from the prying eyes of the world; the tiny phial of juice distilled by them from who knows what magic herb, a sovereign remedy against melancholy; and best of all, that palace of delight reared up for us at the waving of a wand upon any spot whence we behold the glory of the world. If we are not of these, of the elect; if we cannot receive and do not desire their gifts; if we do not see with our own eyes their tiny dancing forms, but only that sudden glamour and fair twilight which attend them; if in short (as is more than likely to be the case) we are just ordinary men and women, we may yet believe in the fairies; we may set their cream-bowl, a little wistfully perhaps, upon the hearth; and in the absorption of our worldly occupations, and our haste, and our ambition, we may love them well, and think of them as existing through all ages, the dear companions of the child-hearted.