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The Cure of Elf-Shooting in the North-West of Ireland

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on which offerings could be placed for his *Ka* or "double." The offering is still made, and the bowl which I saw there containing the durra of the offering varied but little in shape from the bowls that were used in the days of Rameses II. But in these modern days the offering is made to the "Shêkh" Isa, who is no other than Jesus. That is to say, the cult must have continued without break from the age of the occupant of the tomb down to our own time, the only variation being in the name of the person to whom it has been addressed. In pagan Nubia it was paid to the *Ka* of the dead Egyptian, in Christian Nubia to Christ, and when in the 12th century Nubian Christianity was extirpated by Mohammedanism, Christ was transformed into a Moslem saint.

A. H. SAYCE.

THE CURE OF ELF-SHOOTING IN THE NORTH-WEST OF
IRELAND.

(*Read at Meeting, 21st March, 1906.*)

THE "Cure" of "Elf-shooting," which I here attempt to describe, was practised not long ago both in this part of County Leitrim, in Sligo and Cavan, and possibly elsewhere. It is just dying out. Still, amongst my fast friends are three Elf-doctors, though they are rather the worse for the wear, and have fallen, poor men, on evil days if not on evil tongues.

They fully look what they are. At a glance you would pick them out among a thousand as something "uncanny." They are very old, very "weathered" and wrinkled. One is lame; another is bent and bowed with years; and all three would do without any making up for the husbands of Macbeth's witches. Still they are kindly, guileless old souls, and as full of information as are invariably the intelligent old. For their simplicity and sincerity I have the highest respect. They have not the slightest misgiving about the value and efficacy of the

cure entrusted to them, and jealously guarded; nor could they be reasoned, or coaxed, or threatened into promising its abandonment. If they do no good, they do no harm. Better perhaps to let them die out in peace, poor fellows, not brow-beat and worry them with our assumed superior sense and knowledge.

There is too, let me say, living a few townlands off, another "Doctor" minus the diploma, Lackey Gallagher. He is likewise a specialist, his special line being the cure of the ring-worm. Lackey's birth endowed him with his powers: he is a seventh son. Further, he is the seventh son of a seventh son, *i.e.* his father before him was too a seventh son, and this rare natal peculiarity is supposed to leave a man outside the confines of the merely human, if anything does. He is an old, a very old, man now, just dying in fact of mere old age, and under my special care; I see him every week. As a Doctor, he has cured and kept himself, for one, in good health for nigh on a century, an achievement Sir Christopher Nixon himself might well envy. In all his 95 years he never once was laid up, or knew what sickness was! Some days ago I was shown by his grandson an "alt"¹ beside his house down which ten years ago he chanced to tumble, wild-cat fashion, and he carrying a load of hay on his back. "It was every other fall between the load of hay and himself," said the grandson, "till he soused into the river. Then he got up and climbed up the alt again load and all on his back, and it never took a feather out of him. In fact he put no wonder at all in it."

In February or April of this year I buried a younger brother of his, Peter Gallagher. There were three or four brothers between him and Lackey and he was only 86, but a most robust youngster, the best framed man, for a small man, ever I saw in my life, and the picture of an old veteran of perfect health of merely about 60, hardly a grey hair in his head. Last harvest, I saw him mowing away every day in late summer—the severest labour on a farm—and wet or dry it was all the same to him. A young fellow of about 20 came to me in the

¹ Leitrim term for ravine with a river at the bottom of it.

ordinary course to announce his death, about which I was, I may say, very sorry, for we were great friends. "And what was he to you?" I enquired. "Well," he replied after a thought, "he was my gran'father's gran'uncle!" We are a long-lived race down here among the hills of Leitrim.

To return to the Elf-Doctor. No sooner does he get his "sick call" than he is off hot-foot to his patient, well aware of the kind and fulness of the hospitality in store for him. He does not neglect to bring his precious elf-bag. In this purse are three or four flints, a silver piece called, no matter what it in reality happens to be, a "thirteen-pence piece" and three separate coppers, usually three bad half-pence. The little stones in the pouch are sometimes as many as seven or eight, though one alone is used. They are small flint-stones, some black, but most white. Flint, black or white, is not found in County Leitrim, nor nearer, I think, than Antrim, and hence these stones are here rare. One of the three Doctors has four rather small flint arrow-heads, the reversion of which I am promised. They were found, he states, by his grandfather's father or some other far-away ancestor, near a fort,¹ on a farm which was much subject to the disease; and he shows them once in a while as a very special mark of favour as the identical arrows that are discharged by the "gentry" to drive off too-meddlesome milch-cows from precincts sacred to their honours. Marauding milch-cows alone seem to bother the fairies: they alone are victims to their ire. Innocent calves or sheep they will let alone, roam where they will.

"The thirteen-pence piece" (so called) must be of silver and must have a cross on it. Nothing further is essential. A two-shilling piece would, I am told, answer very well. But cross-marked silver coins that are impassable, or considered so, are in greatest vogue. I should advise those interested in numismatics—or coin-collectors, *old* coin-collectors I mean—to have a look out for those elf-bags. There is a good Queen Anne shilling in mine (that is to be), and the silver coin in another was exchanged with me for a two-shilling piece,

¹ Generic term in Co. Leitrim for any rath, dun, or mound covered with bushes and brambles.

("though it's bekeys it's yerself what's in it," I was told); I hope the spell is not thereby broken.¹

Well, off goes the "wise-man" with his bag, and his best foot foremost. And he has his eyes sharp about him, Should the first person he meets be a red-haired woman, his heart goes down; but if it be a man of fire-touched locks it is a good omen.

Arrived, first thing is to find out, Has the beast been elf-shot at all? She is ailing, and has gone back in her milk of course. But if, besides, her hair is standing along her back like a porcupine's quills, if her ears are lifeless and hanging, and her tail when twisted fails to manifest its usual anxiety to right itself, she has most of the symptoms of being "struck."² To make assurance doubly sure he measures her.

The measuring is a decretorial test, and the manner of it as odd as it is ancient. An eagle is taped across its outspread wings, from tip of flight-feather to tip of flight-feather, and is said to be so many feet across. A steed is ruled by a cunning contrivance hid away in a cane rod, and is appraised as so many hands high. But our patient is spanned from end of last joint of her tail to back of her head at the junction of the horns, if she have such, and the result is carefully recorded in the memory. The scale made use of is none of your foot or metric standards but the space from the mid-finger tip to the knuckle of the elbow (*i.e.* to the "funny-bone"). This is the ell, the genuine and naturally-variable ell evidently

¹ It is a very curious coin. I have never seen the same as it. It is just the size of a Queen Anne shilling, but only half the thickness and weight. On the obverse is a King's head and the Roman figures VI. The face is a good one with a long, peaked beard. The crown is evidently the French crown, crosses and fleur-de-lys alternating. Round the head on the verge of the disc is, as far as I can make it out, CAROLUS : D : G : MA : BR : FR : ET : HI : REX : On the reverse are quartered the arms of France, Ireland and of another nation (three lions *passant*). The cross forms the four quarters of the shield and its points reach a good way beyond it. Only the words CHRISTO...REGNO are distinct round the margin; others intervening have been sheared off.

² The unknowledgeable might profanely imagine she was merely out of sorts or "sick."

retained in our out-of-date English system of weights and measures for the express purposes of the Elf-doctor, for by other mortals it is now used never.

The cow is spanned once, she is spanned twice—beginning now at the horns and ending with the tail. She is spanned a third and last time, in reverse order from last time before. If she grows shorter every spanning, or if no two spannings correspond (which let me whisper never does *not* happen), this is a triumphant argument. There is no more about it. Of the calamity that has befallen the poor animal there is any longer “no possible doubt whatever.”

Notwithstanding all, and the finding of even the stroke dints beneath the beast’s body, the doctor is sometimes out. What professional gentleman is there but is now and again at fault? Last year a rather viciously-inclined neighbour of mine played a nasty trick. He brought one of my old friends to his stable and showed him the wrong cow, a cow in fact in perfect health. My friend examined the beast, twisted her tail and spanned her the magic thrice. “Badly sthruck! Badly sthruck!” he emphatically declared. “She’s at death’s doore.” Forthwith he was shown to the byre¹ “doore” rather unceremoniously indeed and was pelted from it with many aggravating epithets, “quack” and “swindler” being the most parliamentary of them.

It was a mean advantage, a mean, mean advantage!

As against this let me detail another “case.” The lamest and hoariest of my good medical friends often rehearses it, and with it routs, as he imagines, the scoffers and sceptics all, horse and foot. Yesterday evening I had purposely a long chat with him. We sat together on a nice dry-sod “ditch”²

¹ The common word for “cow-house” in County Leitrim.

² In Connacht, and in Ireland generally, the “ditch” is usually not the trench, but the clay bank or fence. The trench alongside of it we call the “sheugh.”

“It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
Nor yet in ony sheugh,
But at the gates of Paradise
That birk grew fair eneugh.”

The Wife of Usher’s Well.

under the far-spreading shade of an ancient fairy thorn. He was clad in the royal apparel in which, according to Carlyle, Louis XVI. of France was guillotined, a sleeved waistcoat of white flannel, and he reeked away at a beautifully burnished old stumpy clay pipe, punctuating his clauses by puffs.

"An' do you know Mr. M——, the big grazier?" (Puff.) Yes, I knew him.

"An' do you know Mrs. McSharry, his hurd, his hurd at Cloone?" (Puff.)

Yes, I knew Mistress McSharry too.

"Well, there some years ago, when the praty-stocks were stealin' about the groun', her wan cow got bad. She was badly sthrudd, that's what it was (puff); so she sent for myself. (Puff.) Off I goes to the daycent woman and makes the cure. An' what would you have ov it? (Puff.) Next day there she was in the mornin' routing¹ at the stake, wild wid th' 'unger." (Puff. Then the stumpy pipe was taken out of the mouth, the stem politely wiped by the palm of the hand, offered to me, and respectfully declined. This gave time for the wonder to properly impress.)

"That fared well till the Sunday afthur, when lo and behold you! wan ov Mr. M.'s own prize shorthorns got bad—an' a power of them he has. (Puff.)

"'G' off,' says she to Johnny th' son, 'an' tell himself!'

"'An' what may be th' matther wid hur?' says he, as Ingulfied as you plaze.

"'It's just the peel moral of what was on our own cow,' says Johnny, says he, 'an' troth if I were you I'd get some

¹ "Routing" = lowing, a term never heard in North Leitrim. "Routing" is a Scotticism. But then we in North Leitrim learned our English in a great measure from the Scotch moss-troopers of Sir Frederick Hamilton, the Earl of Arran's grandson. Burns's use of the word corresponds exactly with that of Leitrim:

"Now, auld Kilmarnock, cock thy tail,
And toss thy horns fu' canty;
Nae mair thou'lt *route* out-owre the dale,
Because thy pasture's scanty."

(The context assured me that it was the cow, and not the "daycent woman," that was hollering at the stake in the mornin'.)

one to make the cure.' (Puff.) But he wouldn't." (Two or three puffs—as diplomatic as a newspaper controversialist who replies to his opponent of a Saturday—to give me time to appreciate his foolishness.) "Over he trots himself in the evening, and he fasted her and he hurricaned her with this and with that. (Puff.) That was Monday. And on Wednesday he skinned her, so he did, with his nose in the air and his knowledgeablebleness and all. But next time a baste is sthruck, never fear, he'll not spare shoe-leather. People may be talkin' and talkin', but when it comes to the bit——" The sentence as a sentence hung fire; but the meaning was rendered unmistakeable by energetic head-shakings.

I did not annoy my old friend by telling him that Mr. M. was still as unregenerate as ever, and like very many others had no faith in "cures." What one does not know never bothers one.

As soon as the diagnosis is declared, the proximate preparations for the cure are taken in hand. If you fancy anything of worth can be effected without much trouble, you are but young in the world.

First a runner tears off for the "three-mearne-water," if the Cattle-Doctor has not come provided with a bottleful—a thing a self-respecting professional would rarely do. He is strictly charged to scoop up the water against the stream, and on no account to speak to any one going or coming. Else he would have to make the journey over again.¹

The messenger so commissioned is usually a "cub" (*i.e.* a young lad)—who is much better away from the intervening little festivities. And it is a curious fact that the "gorsoon" about the place that is "souplest" is never the one whose services are commandeered for this duty.

¹ On this condition they do not insist so much in Leitrim as in parts of Cavan, about Bailieborough, for instance. One too astute old gentleman I know of, who further thinks it right to draw the water up "in the name of the King of the Fairies." His "cure" indeed has no essential resemblance to the one above described, and my own opinion is strong that amongst Elf-Doctors he is a genuine and conscious humbug, and all his passes and mummeries mere devices "to make a fat bit for himself."

Three-mearne-water is used in several obscure rustic rites. The name explains the article: it is running water taken from a spot at which three townlands meet. (I have noted many such eerie places, and in particular, one at the junction of three parishes, whose virtue was formerly famed far and near.)

Its influence is most powerful if it be dipped up before sunrise, in that "darkest hour before dawn." One of my authorities thinks most highly of the moments before sunset, of that interval between the genuine and apparent sinking of the "westerling sun" below the horizon. Doctors indeed, Elf Doctors included, differ on many points, but I will merely follow steadily what I believe to be the safest authorities, and will ignore minor details.

While the light-armed errand-boy is executing his commission of trust, the Elf-Doctor himself steals out softly and alone to gather "erribs"—*vulgo* "herbs." What these "erribs" are is a secret beyond price, and none dare ask it. Still, for the sake of humanity and cattle, I will venture to disclose it.

It springs up profusely in light moss, or in a track where a last year's "whin-bush" (as we call "furze" around here) was burned down. It grows close to the ground with corymbs of yellow-green flowers. Its popular name is Lady's Mantle, (more properly, Our Lady's Mantle), and its botanical one *Alchemilla vulgaris*. It is a modest, pretty little thing to look at, but its beauty is eclipsed by its hardy northern sister, *Alchemilla alpina*, with its serrated leaflets, underlined with grey satin. The two must by no means be confounded.

As soon after the messenger's return as they can detach themselves from the enchantments of good-fellowship, all attention is once more focussed on the stricken cow, and the cure at last is made, with all due solemnity. It is simple enough. In a pail are put (a) the expressed juice of the "erribs," (b) the coins, copper and silver, and one flint from the elf-pouch, (c) a pinch of salt, and (d) finally the three-mearne-water, with ordinary spring water *ad lib.*

It is the supreme fact of the cure that the cow takes *three* sups of this concoction. The three sups, as any open-minded logician can see, are implicitly contained in a hearty drink of

it. If she refuse it, it has to be bottled down her throat, three several glugs of it, for her health's sake. The last tinpannikin-full¹ is reserved and sprinkled along her spine, where the hair is most rebellious, with slight massage treatment and a carrying of some of the dirt out of the cleets of the forefeet over the back. Finally, the last drops are tossed into her ears. If she keeps on never minding, it is a very bad sign. But if, on the other hand, she rouses up and shakes herself, the "cure" is already working, and the little festivities are gone back to with a light heart.

Details in the ritual vary slightly with the individual practitioner *in se*, but much with his training, carefulness, and experience. Herbs, however, are invariably used in this as in all other "cures" that I know of, one or two excepted. Seeing this, and noting moreover that in all formulas for particular ailments, particular plants are constants, the present writer is not prepared to say there is nothing in these remedies. But if there be, the whole efficacy of the ceremonial resides, we may admit, in the medicinal properties of these herbs. The knowledge of the specific plant is hidden away with most jealous care, and may not the sufficiently elaborate ceremonial have been devised to still further cloak up from prying eyes the kernel of the cure?

Culpeper,² indeed (*Student in Physic and Astrology*, as he modestly describes himself), saith of *Ladies Mantle*, under heading of "Government and Virtues"—"It is one of the most singular wound-herbs, and therefore highly prized and praised by the Germans, who use it in all wounds inward and outward, to

¹The household name of this useful kitchen utensil is no more liked by the Muse of prose than by her of poetry. It is "porringer."

²"The British Herbal and Family Physician, For the Use of Private Families, by Nich^s. Culpeper, Student in Physic and Astrology"; a very old edition without date front or back, printed by Milner & Co., Halifax, a firm long since, I believe, dissolved.

Parkinson's *Theatrum* (London, 1640) is a storehouse of quaint information on medical plants, as is Gerard's *Herball*, edited by Johnson (London, 1633). Parkinson was the King's Herbalist, and this very year there has been "Faithfully reprinted from the edition of 1629"—as the title-page declares—his notable book, *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus terrestris*. It is a perfect facsimile brought out by Methuen & Co.

drink a decoction thereof, and wash the wounds therewith, or dip tents therein and put them into the wounds."

Away back, before even the twilight of history, Diancecht, chief physician of the Tuatha-de-Danaan, had, at the battle of the Northern Moytura, fought in Carrowmore in Sligo, a wonderful bath or fountain "prepared with the essences of the principal healing herbs and plants of Erin." Into this bath the wounded had only to be plunged, and forthwith they were ready for battle once more, more formidable than ever. The story is doubtless but a myth. But that there is such a story proves that there was in ancient Ireland a vast amount of herb-lore. This plant-knowledge was the free property of the many. It is scarcely to be wondered at if there was much that was restricted to but a few. Possibly the rustic "cures" we have been speaking about were of the latter kind: they may be the last relics of the science of pre-Christian Schools of Herbalists, and so have come down to us from the dawn of medical science. In view of this opinion it might, we submit, be worth investigating whether or not there be in the "errib" above revealed some strong medical property, whose influence would help an animal shake off a passing indisposition, whether lassitude from the effects of a burning sun or of too hearty a meal, or a cold, etc. Indefinite ailments of endless variety, I may venture to say, crystallise in the mind of our cattle-medicine-men under the one appellation, *elf-shooting*.

The skill and knowledge of the Cow-Doctor may be but the superstitions of a School of Medicine which had its day a thousand or two thousand years ago. Or they may be the relics of the superstitions—always using the word in its primary sense—of a long extinct Paganism, which expression of opinion is barely another way of presenting the former. But have we not, in either way of regarding them, to admire the energy and hardihood which have lived so long, and live on still in remote districts, despite the uninterrupted persecutions of fifteen or sixteen centuries of enlightenment? Rustic beliefs are as tenacious of life as are the rustics themselves, as my old friends of the Gallagher clan for example.

But they are at last, long as they ran, giving up. They are

dying out even in the most backward districts. They were considered beneath notice and are unrecorded. Unless an effort be made, all trace and memory of them will pass away with the present generation, just as much of the knowledge of the plants used a century ago for dyeing purposes is already irrevocably extinct. So will a chain connecting us with a simple past and the infancy of the nation, perhaps linking us in origin with some of the peoples of Europe, be broken for ever.

JOSEPH MEEHAN.

Creevelea, Drumkeeran, County Leitrim.

ADDITIONS TO "THE GAMES OF ARGYLESIRE."

(Continued from *supra*, page 106.)

SELLS.

(P. 220, after line 26.)

A somewhat similar sell is

Lifting a Man with a Straw.

Having found a probable victim, the operator says to him, if he will lie on his back on the ground, shut his eyes tight and hold the end of a straw, with that straw he will lift him to his feet. The victim lies down, firmly holding the straw, the other end of which is held by the operator, and shuts his eyes and probably, in addition his mouth. "It will not do to open your eyes like that," says No. 1, but No. 2, aggrieved by the false charge, repels it, opening his mouth of course, into which No. 1 empties a good handful of salt, which generally has the effect of bringing No. 2 to his feet, and as the other has carefully retained a grasp of the straw, he claims to have performed what he undertook.