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"Cassidy's Rag:" The Growth of a Superstition

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Source: *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Dec., 1914), p. 246

Published by: [County Louth Archaeological and History Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27728013>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 06:05

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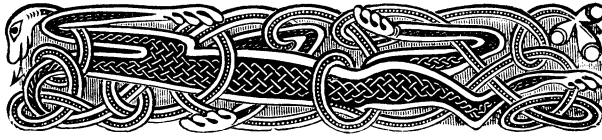
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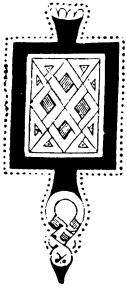
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## “Cassidy’s Rag.”

### THE GROWTH OF A SUPERSTITION.



IN parts of Ulster when a cow, horse, or other domestic animal gets sick, particularly if the illness be sudden or mysterious, one of the old people will immediately shout “Run for Cassidy’s Rag,” and a youth is at once dispatched to the nearest person bearing the surname Cassidy, and ask him for a bit of his clothing. The latter tears off a little portion of the lining of his coat, and this is burned under the sick animal’s nose, so that it may sniff the smoke, after which it is confidently expected to recover. I have traced this superstition in the following counties—Monaghan, Cavan, Fermanagh, Leitrim, and Donegal. It is a far way from Carrickmacross to Ardara in Donegal, and it is known all along this way. It probably exists in Tyrone also, but I have never come across it there. It would be hard to conceive a more foolish superstition, yet it is a growth of the last three hundred years, and we can trace it from its genesis with certainty.

Here is how it arose.

When the Maguires were lords of Fermanagh the O Cassidys (Uí Cearaíoe) were their hereditary physicians. The professors of all kinds of knowledge were at that time most conservative, and most conservative of all was the medical faculty. The knowledge and skill they possessed were carefully handed down from father to son, and in the course of ages certain families attained great distinction as doctors. The Shiels, Lees, and Cassidys were such.

In Fermanagh and the surrounding counties the fame of the Cassidys was beyond all cavil. But when the Maguires fell and became dispossessed of their lands in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Cassidys fell also. No longer state physicians they became ordinary practitioners. They now found the prestige attaching to their family name a most valuable asset, and we may reasonably conclude they now tried to invest it with as much mystery as possible, hinting that the charm alone attaching to the family name Cassidy was more valuable than any treatment by another practitioner. Popular credulity was strong, and besides, other families had charms also—acquired probably in a similar way: the MacIlroys had the cure of the King’s Evil, the MacGovernns had the cure of hydrophobia. And so as the real medical knowledge of the O Cassidys declined the belief in the charm was fostered accordingly. But every generation of Cassidys grew more and more degenerate—medically speaking—until eventually they found themselves relegated to the position of “cow-doctors.” Some of them continued, down almost to the present day, to make some show of medical treatment, but the greater number merely lent themselves to the belief in the charm, and gave pieces of their clothing when desired. Thus has the genuine medical prestige of the sixteenth century come down to us as an absurd superstition in the twentieth.

HENRY MORRIS.