

NOT WITCHES, BUT FAIRIES

A New Explanation of the Strange Tragedy in Tipperary.

An Irish correspondent of The London Spectator writes to inform the readers of that paper that the English papers seem to have missed the real point of that horrible chapter in the history of superstition—the murder of Mrs. Cleary in the County of Tipperary. She did not fall a victim to the belief in witchcraft or in demoniacal possession—neither has any real hold in Ireland. She perished owing to the belief in the fairies, a belief to this hour singularly prevalent through the whole of Munster, and, I am told, also in the North and West. A prominent tenet of the believers in the fairies and their powers is the superstition of "the changeling." Spenser, in the "Faery Queen," writes:

From thence a Fairy thee unweeting reft,
There as thou slepst in tender swaddling
band,
And her base elfin broods there for thee
left;
Such, men do changelings call, so chang'd
by fairies theft.

In Munster, when a child appears delicate, or a young woman consumptive or hysterical, the conclusion often is that the child or the woman has been carried off by the fairies, to be made a playmate or nurse to the young fairies, and that a fairy substitute resembling the person taken away is deposited in its place, which gradually declines, and ultimately dies. The belief is that if the changeling be tortured by fire, its fairy parents will hear its cries, rush to its aid, carry it back to fairyland, and at the same moment restore the real person, who will be found sleeping calmly in the bed.

Cleary and "the neighbors" evidently believed that the being they tortured was not Cleary's wife, but a changeling. He addressed her: "In the name of God, are you Bridget Boland?" (her maiden name,) believing that thus adjured the being would confess it was a fairy. He said when he set fire to her: "You will soon see my wife come down the chimney," believing that the fairies would snatch away the tortured fairy and restore his real wife. Again, after the burning, many of the men of the locality sat up all night in a "fort," (earth embankment of ancient Irish village,) armed with black-handled knives. These poor people thought that a fairy procession would pass by; that in its midst would be Mrs. Cleary riding on a gray horse, and that if any one rushed forward and cut her bonds with a black-handled knife, (a potent weapon against all evil spirits,) she would at once be restored to the world. In the "Tales of Terror and Wonder," it was thus that Fair Janet rescued Tam Lin from the fairies. She sat at Giles Cross on Halloween, at the "murk and midnight hour," when she sees the fairy host go by:

"First she let the black pass by,
And next she let the brown,
But quickly ran to the milk-white steed,
And drew its rider down."

Thus Fair Janet rescued Tam Lin; thus the poor dwellers on the slope of Shere-namon, (the "Witches' Hill," a haunted mountain,) believed that they would rescue Bridget Cleary.