CHAPTER XIII

SOME FAIRY LITERATURE

I SUPPOSE you know by this time that the word "fairy" is a very modern word as used in the sense of spirit. The original meaning of the word was magic, supernatural power, and the old English writers used it in this sense. So does Sir Walter Scott sometimes. The word used to be spelled "faerie;" and the term "faerie land" originally meant "land of magic." Much later the term was applied to a supernatural being or person, for which the real English word was El, or Elf.

The El-people were Northern fairies. But where did the whole conception of fairies come from? The Romans had their Fatæ, in many respects like our fairies. But there are a great many curious ideas regarding fairies which we must look to the history of religion to explain. When the Christian Church first began to exercise a great influence in the old Roman world, its priests never even dreamed of telling the people that there were no such things as gods or spirits. Quite the contrary. The Church said that all the gods and spirits of the Greek and Roman world really existed, only they were no true gods but evil spirits who took the shape of gods. Gradually all the shadowy people of all beliefs were transformed in the popular imagination; they were no longer worshipped, but they were feared. To worship them constituted the crime of magic.

So much for the classical part of the belief. Now when the Northern races overran Southern Europe, they brought other superstitions with them from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany—especially superstitions of the El-people. It would have been of no use for the Church to tell these

men that the El-people did not exist; moreover, the Church was inclined to believe that they did exist. So they were left to keep the belief in the El-people, on condition that they did not worship them.

The Celtic peoples in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Western France, the original populations conquered by the men of the North, had very strange beliefs of their own about spirits inhabiting woods, rivers and mountains, spirits capable of assuming a hundred forms. Christianity tolerated beliefs of this kind also. They have not yet disappeared. In Scotland, they are beginning to disappear, because of the spread of education and of industry. Ireland and Britanny remain especially the regions in which fairy beliefs widely prevail; and the attachment of the people there to religion may have something to do with the continuance of the belief in fairies.

So you see that there are three elements in the belief about fairies, the Northern, the classical and the Celtic. Mingled altogether, these three elements eventually produced a wonderful amount of romantic, poetic and also terrible imagination. In the early part of the nineteenth century a great deal of attention was given to fairy literature, principally owing to the influence of Sir Walter Scott. Fairy stories of foreign origin were translated into English in great numbers. In the latter part of the century there was for a time something of a popular reaction against the romantic and supernatural element either in prose or in poetry. But now another reaction has set in, and fairy literature has again become popular. It has one representative poet, William Butler Yeats, who himself collected a great number of stories and legends about fairies from the peasantry of Southern Ireland.

Now to give a detailed account of fairy superstitions would be of little use in this place; for a great deal of ghostly detail at one time has the effect of numbing the imagination, and the student cannot readily perceive the literary value of these details,—a fact that Walter Scott

perceived long ago. His words were: "The supernatural is a spring that is particularly apt to lose its elasticity, if too much pressed upon." The best way to learn about the romantic side of fairy beliefs is to read the poems and stories themselves, a little at a time. If you read much of this kind of thing at once you are likely to get tired of it, or at least to feel your intellect offended by the sense of the improbable. Yet I think that you will be interested by a little piece called "The Host of the Air," which is the best modern fairy poem by far that I know of. By "modern" in this case I mean produced in our own time; for the fairy poem of Yeats is also modern, in so far as it belongs to the century.

O'Driscoll drove with a song,
The wild duck and the drake,
From the tall and the tufted reeds
Of the drear Hart Lake.

And he saw how the reeds grew dark
At the coming of night tide,
And dreamed of the long dim hair
Of Bridget his bride.

He heard while he sang and dreamed
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.

And he saw young men and young girls
Who danced on a level place
And Bridget his bride among them,
With a sad and a gay face.

The dancers crowded about him,
And many a sweet thing said,
And a young man brought him red wine
And a young girl white bread.

But Bridget drew him by the sleeve,
Away from the merry bands,

To old men playing at cards
With a twinkling of ancient hands.

The bread and the wine had a doom,
For these were the host of the air;
He sat and played in a dream
Of her long dim hair.

He played with the merry old men
And thought not of evil chance,
Until one bore Bridget his bride
Away from the merry dance.

He bore her away in his arms,
The handsomest young man there,
And his neck and his breast and his arms
Were drowned in her long dim hair.

O'Driscoll got up from the grass
And scattered the cards with a cry;
But the old men and dancers were gone,
As a cloud faded into the sky.

He knew now the host of the air,
And his heart was blackened by dread;
And he ran to the door of his house:—
Old women were keening the dead.

But he heard high up in the air
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay!

This is not consummate verse, but as a fairy poem it could not be surpassed. It has, in an extraordinary way, the power of communicating the pleasure of fear, which is a great art in poetry. And the words, the fancies, are all of the strange kind which should belong to so strange a story. How naturally the enchantment begins: a man is amusing himself in a lonesome place by driving away the wild birds, which are protected by the fairies. Night is coming, and for the first time he notices how tall the grass looks beside

the lake, and how black against the sunset. But it is beautiful too, and makes him think of the beautiful long dusky hair of the young wife he has just married. The next moment, as he walks along the shore he finds himself in a pleasure party, among young people whom he thinks he knows, and there is his wife too. They treat him very kindly and play cards with him. He is quite happy. They are fairies, but he does not know, and he is not yet in their power. But they bring him wine and bread, wine red as blood, bread white as flesh. He eats and drinks; now the fairies have power to take their revenge. They disappear, he runs home in terrible fear, and as he comes to his house he hears a death-cry. His bride is dead. She has been taken by the fairies. It was her spirit that he saw at the dancing. At that time the spirit might have returned to the body, but when he ate the fairy bread and drank the fairy wine, he really gave his young bride's life away.

You may be here reminded of some of the old Japanese folk stories; there are many Western fairy tales which resemble them. But the fairy belief is much more terrible and gloomy; there is no humour in it; it is the subject of supreme fear. Now this little composition, simple as it looks, contains a great deal of information about fairy beliefs that you would not notice at first sight. Perhaps you did not notice the contradiction of the statement about the music being sad and merry at the same time, and about the face of the bride being at once sad and glad. One of the signs by which a fairy may be known is that even when smiling and laughing there is something very sad both in the tone of voice and the look of the eyes. And the music which the fairy plays, however lively it seems, has a penetrating melancholy tone. In many parts of the country it is generally understood that you must not annoy the wild birds without reason. If you do, fairies will take revenge. If you taste their food, there is no more hope for you. I think you will remember Miss Rossetti's poem on the subject of tasting fairy-food, the poem "Goblin Market."

This is the same idea. After eating such food one withers and dies. But how about the power to take away the life of another person who does not taste?

There is a queer imagination about this. When fairies want to take a person away from this world into fairy-land, the Irish say that they make the person melancholy, tired of life. If you are melancholy and do not care whether yon live or die, the fairies get power to take you away. You die and your soul becomes a fairy. But you can never go to heaven after that. The condition of fairy existence is happiness in this world only; there is no other world for them, and no immortality. This is one form of the belief. The darker form is that all fairies are eventually doomed to eternal fire, and that every seven years one must be taken away unless a human being can be offered as a substitute. Upon the latter belief was founded the very beautiful English ballad of "Tam Lin," the best indeed of all the English fairy ballads. Its beauty lies in the fact that it pictures the courage of love against supernatural fear.

Of course the most famous fairy literature belongs to popular literature, to the literature of the ballad; but for the moment I am intending only to call your attention to celebrated poems of a less known variety, and I shall not quote from works in dialect. So only recommending you to study the ballad just mentioned, I shall go on to speak of its theme as handled by various eminent poets. One of these was Sir Samuel Ferguson, a poet of very considerable ability, some of whose works will live long in English literature. His "Fairy Thorn" is justly celebrated, not only as excellent poetry, but as having extraordinary power in arousing the sensation of the weird. The story is of three country girls, who go out to dance upon a hillside, and on the way invite a fourth, the most beautiful girl in the village, to accompany them. They begin to dance.

The merry maidens four have ranged them in a row,
Between each lovely couple a stately rowan stem,

And away in mazes wavy like skimming birds they go,—
  Oh, never caroll'd bird like them!

But solemn is the silence of the silvery haze
  That drinks away their voices in echoless repose,
And dreamily the evening has still'd the haunted braes,
  And dreamier the gloaming grows.

And sinking one by one, like lark-notes from the sky
  When the falcon's shadow saileth across the open shaw,
Are hush'd the maidens' voices, as cowering down they lie
  In the flutter of their sudden awe.

For, from the air above and the grassy ground beneath,
  And from the mountain-ashes and the old whitethorn between,
A power of faint enchantment doth through their beings breathe,
  And they sink down together on the green.

They sink together silent, and, stealing side by side,
  They fling their lovely arms o'er their drooping necks so fair,
Then vainly strive again their naked arms to hide,
  For their shrinking necks again are bare.

Thus clasp'd and prostrate all, with their heads together bow'd,
  Soft o'er their bosoms beating—the only human sound—
They hear the silky footsteps of the silent fairy crowd,
  Like a river in the air, gliding round.

Nor scream can any raise, nor prayer can any say,
  But wild, wild, the terror of the speechless three,
For they feel fair Anna Grace drawn silently away,
  By whom they dare not look to see.

They feel their tresses twine with her parting locks of gold,
  And the curls elastic falling, as her head withdraws;
They feel her sliding arms from their tranced arms unfold,
  But they dare not look to see the cause:

For heavy on their senses the faint enchantment lies
  Through all that night of anguish and perilous amaze;
And neither fear nor wonder can ope their quivering eyes,
  Or their limbs from the cold ground raise.

So they remain until morning, when the enchantment is dissolved; then they fly home in terror. But from that night they pine away, and die within the year. As for the girl stolen away, she is never seen or heard of again. I have not quoted the whole of the poem, but it is all very beautiful and very weird. Notice even the weirdness of these lines describing the dance:

They're glancing through the glimmer of the quiet eve,
  Away in milky wavings of neck and ankle bare;
The heavy-sliding stream in its sleepy song they leave,
  And the crags in the ghostly air.

Now this has wonderful merits, especially because it embodies the sensation of a bad dream; it describes the feeling of nightmare with which everybody is familiar. As the girls dance, the air seems to become sick and strange about them, and the voice makes no sound. This is a dream. Next, they cannot move. This again is a dream. They dare not look to see what is coming, but they hear it come. It does not touch them; but they feel their friend being silently pulled away from between them, and cannot help her. All this is very faithful to the experience of an evil dream. Indeed, most kinds of supernatural fear are believed to have had their origin in the experience of sleep.

Ferguson's poem is perhaps the best minor work in this direction, but a greater poet than he in some respects, Mr. Robert Buchanan, has also produced a very strange fairy poem, "The Faëry Foster-Mother." This brings us to a new phase of the superstition.

It is believed that occasionally, when a fairy mother is not able to nourish her own child, she will steal away some human mother who has milk, and force her to act as foster-mother for the fairy baby. Mysterious disappearances of peasant women are sometimes thus accounted for in Ireland. Very possibly the woman has been killed, or lost in a bog. But the people say, "She was taken by the little

folk for a foster-mother." Mr. Buchanan attempts to imagine the feelings of the mother in such a situation. His poem is very interesting, but it has not the same kind of value as Mr. Ferguson's, nor is it put into that dreamy verse which adds so much to the effect of "The Fairy Thorn." I shall quote a few lines. The poem is a monologue; the mother is speaking to the fairy child.

Bright Eyes, Light Eyes! Daughter of a Fay!
I had not been a wedded wife a twelve-month and a day,
I had not nurs'd my little one a month upon my knee,
When down among the blue-bell banks rose elfins three times three,
They gripp'd me by the raven hair, I could not cry for fear,
They put a hempen rope around my waist and dragg'd me here,
They made me sit and give thee suck as mortal mothers can,
Bright Eyes, Light Eyes! strange and weak and wan!

Dim Face, Grim Face! lie ye there so still?
Thy red, red lips are at my breast, and thou may'st suck thy fill;
But know ye, tho' I hold thee firm, and rock thee to and fro,
'Tis not to soothe thee into sleep, but just to still my woe?
And know ye, when I lean so calm against the wall of stone,
'Tis when I shut my eyes and try to think thou art mine own?
And know ye, tho' my milk be here, my heart is far away,
Dim Face, Grim Face! Daughter of a Fay!
Gold Hair, Cold Hair! Daughter to a King!
Wrapp'd in bands of snow-white silk with jewels glittering,
Tiny slippers of the gold upon thy feet so thin,
Silver cradle velvet-lin'd for thee to slumber in,
Pygmy pages, crimson-hair'd, to serve thee on their knees,
To fan thy face with ferns and bring thee honey bags of bees,—
I was but a peasant lass, my babe had but the milk,
Gold Hair, Cold Hair! raimented in silk!

The weakness here is in the human interest. Although full of imagination and not without art, this poem touches neither our sense of pity nor our sense of fear. But it is worth reading, and it illustrates a side of the fairy belief very seldom touched upon. That is especially why I quoted from it. But I had another reason. In the first stanza the fairy child is addressed as "Bright Eyes," and the sugges-

tion is of beauty; in the second stanza the child's face is spoken of as dim, grim. This is not a contradiction; the face of the fairy child is supposed to change suddenly and strangely. And because of this supposition the horrible superstition about changelings once prevailed very extensively in all English-speaking countries. What is a changeling?

One method which the fairies had of stealing human children, according to popular fancy, was to leave a fairy child in place of the human child. At first the fairy child resembled the stolen child so much that the mother was deceived; but later on the child would become ugly and fierce, and show all the dispositions of a goblin. If ill-treated, it would first revenge itself and then vanish away. Now you all know that during the first six months after birth the face of the little child changes very curiously, so that you hear the parents saying one day, "He is like his uncle," another day, "He is like his grandfather." In the time when people were superstitious in Europe, this changing of the child's face seemed to them supernatural and suspicious. Many a mother thought that her real child had been stolen and in exchange a fairy child put in its place. How was she to find out the truth? Only in one way—by putting her baby upon burning coals or burning wood. Hundreds of children were actually burned alive by their own mothers, because of this frightful fancy. The mother thought the fairy child would disappear, when placed upon the fire, but there was nothing supernatural to be seen. It is very curious to notice that this belief crossed over the Atlantic to America with the first English settlers, and the Puritans of New England appear to have been affected by it. One tradition of the kind, preserved among the Quaker people of New England who fought bravely against superstition, has been made the subject of a very touching poem by Whittier, entitled "The Changeling." Like most of his best works, it is written in the simplest quatrains, and is worth quoting chiefly because of the emotional truth and tenderness which it expresses.

First we are told about the happy marriage of a young girl in the town of Hampton, and her fortunate choice of a husband. She has a little girl at the end of the year, and at first she is very happy with the child. But within another year the superstition takes hold of her. She has seen the face of the child change, and she begins not only to fear but to hate it. She actually asks her husband to prepare the fire upon which the child is to be placed.

"It's never my own little daughter,
  It's never my own," she said;
"The witches have stolen my Anna,
  And left me an imp instead.

"O, fair and sweet was my baby,
  Blue eyes, and hair of gold;
But this is ugly and wrinkled,
  Cross, and cunning, and old.

"I hate the touch of her fingers,
  I hate the feel of her skin;
It's not the milk from my bosom,
  But my blood, that she sucks in.

"My face grows sharp with the torment,
  Look! my arms are skin and bone!—
Rake open the red coals, goodman,
  And the witch shall have her own."

For it was thought, when the child was put in the fire, the evil spirit would come to save it. Happily the "goodman" in this case was a man of common sense and kind heart, and he answers his wife's cruel wish by simply kneeling down and making this touching prayer to the great All-Father:

"Thy daughter is weak and blind;
Let her sight come back, and clothe her
  Once more in her right mind.

"Lead her out of this evil shadow,
  Out of these fancies wild;
Let the holy love of the mother
  Turn again to her child.

"Make her lips like the lips of Mary
Kissing her blessed Son;
Let her hands, like the hands of Jesus,
Rest on her little one."

By this method, kind and wise, of meeting the superstitious terror, the illusion is dissipated; the mother soon becomes shamed and horrified at her fear, on finding that her husband only considers it a madness of the mind. This poem, founded on fact, is followed by another which is well worth reading, called "Kallundborg Church." This is the story of a man who, in order to obtain a girl in marriage, makes a bargain with the fairies of the ground to build him a church. The fairies agree, but on the condition that when the church is finished, he must be able to tell the name of the builder; otherwise they will take his eyes and his heart out of his body in payment. Happily he is saved by hearing the fairy wife of the builder singing a song in which her husband's name is mentioned. This is little more than a translation of a very famous Norse poem upon the same subject.

Even the serious Wordsworth touched a little upon fairy lore; you will find a sonnet by him entitled "The Faëry Chasm." This is not remarkable enough to quote here; I mention it only to show how far the influence of fairy superstitions colour the work even of so solemn a poet as he. All the poets of note at the beginning of the century gave attention to this subject. Scott's influence, as I said, was the greatest of all in making fairy literature fashionable, in lifting it up to the highest level of romantic poetry. He did this especially by collecting all the peasant songs and legends that he could find, writing them down from the lips of the peasants themselves, and afterwards publishing them in the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border." Southey did much work in the same direction. Shelley was almost a fairy himself; and though in no page in his work will you find a real fairy poem, the spirit of all his composition is strongly coloured and etherealized by the study

of fairy beliefs. Keats produced the most beautiful original fairy ballad of his time, perhaps the most beautiful of all modern time, "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Even Byron attempted fairy stories in verse, but his genius did not lie in that field, and his work in that kind only served to show how the spirit of Scott had affected him. Minor writers did a great deal towards fairy literature during the same period; and Lewis's "Tales of Wonder" embodied much valuable research in regard to fairy beliefs. With the new poetry of Tennyson, and the Tennyson group, there was a change, but a change of method rather than of substance. Tennyson himself has touched fairy topics with extraordinary skill, and all through his "Idylls," as well as in his earlier poems, you will find evidence of the manner in which he comprehended the romantic side of fairy superstition. Rossetti has embodied many of the superstitions in his extraordinary work, for instance, in the story of "Rose Mary." Browning shows fairy lights here and there, and very weird ones; perhaps the most notable example of his skill in this field is the wonderful tale of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," an old German goblin-story, which he put into poetical form for the sake of a child friend. Swinburne has used some fairy literature in imitation of the Northern dialect ballads; but one of his most notable compositions, "Laus Veneris," though not avowedly what is called commonly a fairy tale, really is a fairy tale, perhaps stranger and more touching than all the fairy tales of the Middle Ages. Then in William Morris's "Earthly Paradise" you will find an immense collection of fairy legends beautifully told; and numerous other such legends are scattered through other volumes of his, about which I hope to give you a short lecture before long. Previously I spoke to you about what several of the later minor poets, notably Miss Rossetti, had done in the fairy tale. You will see from such brief notes as these how large is still the relation of the fairy superstitions to English literature. Even such grave critics as Edmund Gosse and Stopford Brooke have con-

descended to sing fairy songs. And perhaps among the now living poets of genius the best imitator of fairy ballads is Rudyard Kipling. Whenever Kipling writes a poem or a ballad, however, he usually has a larger purpose than at first appears, and his "Last Rhyme of True Thomas" deserves mentioning here, not simply because of its wonderful excellence as weird poetry, but because it expresses the nobility and the power of the poet as a teacher and an artist. It was written when there was some discussion about calling Kipling to the laureateship, which you know was given to Alfred Austen, a very low fourth or fifth class poet. It then occurred to Kipling to express his thought about that matter in the form of a ballad. A king comes to make a knight of "True Thomas," the famous hero of many old Scotch ballads. But Thomas laughs at the offer of such honour. He takes his fairy harp and sings, and the king weeps. He plays again, and the king laughs. A third time he plays, and the king wants to go to war; a fourth time he plays, and the king becomes humble and gentle like a little child. Then says Thomas, "I can make you do whatever I wish, can make you laugh or weep or rage at my will; is it not ridiculous for you to talk about making me a knight?" I need scarcely explain the excellent irony concealed behind these quaint verses. Were they not written in dialect, I should like to quote them.

Now you may be interested to know that even to-day serious fairy dramas are written. Of course, on the Celtic stage a great deal is borrowed from fairy tales, and operas and the most extravagant of what are called spectacular dramas are made more interesting by the introduction of fairy personages and fairy dancers. The dark side of the belief is less often dealt with. But "The Land of Heart's Desire" is the name of a fairy drama recently composed by William Butler Yeats which has been acted with some success, and which is interesting as showing you some new possibilities. It is a very short composition treating only of a single episode. A family at night, seated about the fire,

are startled by the entrance of a little child who appears to have lost her way. In the house there is a priest, who at once suspects that the child is not a human being. The interest of the whole action is made to lie in the way this fairy child deludes priest, parents, husband, and servants successively, in order to steal away the daughter-in-law, the new bride. Though the conditions are supernatural, the play of emotions is purely and intensely human and thus an impossible situation is made to become intensely interesting. For example, the strange child observes a crucifix upon the wall of the room as she enters, and she makes them take it way. The method by which she obliges them to take it away, notwithstanding their zealous belief in its power to protect them, is delightfully managed.

THE CHILD

What is that ugly thing on the black cross?

FATHER HART

You cannot know how naughty your words are!
That is our Blessed Lord.

THE CHILD

Hide it away!

BRIDGET

I have begun to be afraid again.

THE CHILD

Hide it away!

MAURTEEN

That would be wickedness!

BRIDGET

That would be sacreledge!

THE CHILD

The tortured thing!
Hide it away!

This and what follows is supremely natural, and we are not at all surprised when the priest is eventually overcome by the appeal to his human and paternal side. The single expression "tortured thing" is here sufficient to show the artist.

You may ask perhaps why I give so much time to a discussion of foreign superstition in foreign literature. This is really worth while. I am quite sure that it is, but not because the superstition happens to be Western. When you can judge of the value that such ideas have been to European poetry and romance, you will be better able to understand the possible future value to your own literature of Eastern beliefs that are now passing or likely to pass away. To an unimaginative and dryly practical man such things are simply superstition, absurd rubbish. But to the true poet or dramatist or story-teller they are all, or nearly all, of priceless value. The whole question is or should be how to use them.