

RISH MEDIAEVAL IDEAS

REVELATION FROM A HAMLET NEAR ATHLONE IN SOUTH ROSCOMMON.

**Members of the Cunningham Family
Track to Death Their Brother, a
Maniac, in the Conviction that
They Were Slaying a Demon in
Him—The Prisoners Are Hard-
Working, Abstinent, Kind to Oth-
ers, and Deeply Religious.**

LONDON, March 11.—The backward peoples who still hear the fairies in the breeze and the rustling corn, and get anguish in their waking hours from the threats of the Demons about them, have fallen upon evil days. West of the Vistula at least there is hardly any place left now in Northern Europe where they can follow their beliefs to logical conclusions without getting into sore trouble. The railroad and the telegraph have belted every land with the agencies of skepticism and publicity, and the policeman and the reporter hunt down the poor bewitched peasant who sheds blood under an enchantment, just as remorselessly as they do the most sophisticated embezzler of the town. It stands to reason that as the faith in the supernatural—I mean the pagan and indigenous supernatural—was stronger and more general in Ireland a generation ago than it is now, so there must have been then many more practical manifestations of it than occur nowadays. It happens that we hear of more of them now than our fathers did, but that only signifies that our facilities for learning about such things have been indefinitely multiplied. Forty or fifty years ago, half the peasantry of Roscommon or Tipperary might have held that under certain circumstances it was fitting to stone a man to death to get the bad spirit out of him, and might on occasion have put this belief into action, and the outside world would never have known or cared about it. But now it is all so different, that when, in the remotest bog-land barony, some fury of superstitious terror seizes upon a poor cotter and impels him to a deed of violence, the details of the crime are spread at the breakfast tables of the entire daily-paper-reading public. For the once, the whole nation is resolved into a colossal folk-lore society, and marvels at the strange glimpse into another world which the distraught victim of the "little people," away out in the Irish mountains, has opened for them for perhaps two days at a stretch. Then there comes a more fascinating divorce-court case, or a burglary in the neighborhood, and the fairies are forgotten.

Doubtless it was my great misfortune as a child that I came up without ever being able to give the slightest credence to any supernatural thing. Fairy books and tales were unknown to my boyhood, and I never so much as heard of the Arabian Nights and Hans Christian Andersen till I was well into my teens. Possibly I should not have been attracted by them at an earlier age. At all events I know that from my infancy, and going back to my very first recollections of mental impressions, I seem never to have had the slightest disposition to regard as serious the supernatural part of what I was taught at Sunday school. There was nothing in my mind which responded to notions of a devil or angels, or any other intangible and immortal beings. But I took an acute interest in the phenomena afforded by the people who did believe in such things. When I was nine years old, for example, we moved into a neighborhood new to me, where there lived close by an elderly mulatto woman who supported herself and family by fortune telling and voodoo spells. Her house burned down about the time, and she went away. I am not sure that I ever saw her, but the fact of her existence played a great part in my childhood. I used to go and look at the charred hole where the ruins of her house lay in the dismantled cellar, and speculate much upon the strangeness of her calling. It was currently understood that she was a superior sort of woman who had little or nothing to do with her own race, and that most of the patrons of her occult art were white people. It used to be believed, too, that she was the child of the author of "The Last of the Mohicans," but I know no reason for supposing that this was anything but the wildest and most slanderous conjecture, the sole foundation for which would have been the fact that her son bore the ambitious name of Fenimore Cooper King. This gossiping legend of her ancestry only came to me in later years. My real interest as a child was centred upon the thought of her as a magician, a sorceress, who actually found enough believers to make a living by them.

In our household there was a continually moving procession of hired men, who came in casually, worked awhile, and then departed to make room for others, so that there seemed always some stranger at hand to scrape acquaintance with. Quite often they were veterans of the civil war, then just ended, and by assiduous questioning I gleaned from these an immense store of more or less veracious martial narrative, which I only too deeply regret having for the most part forgotten. Now and then there was a German, but I seemed unable to get from them any conceptions of their native land which did not concern eating and drinking. For some reason they told me these things were infinitely better in Germany than with us, but always assured my mother that quite the contrary was the case. In any case, their conversation was lapsed east, west, north, and south by their stomachs.

But the Irish hired men and hired girls, and their relatives or Irish neighbors whom they knew, were my real delight. They could talk about their native country, if you like, and they had souls above, or, at least, apart from, victuals. Curiously enough, they seem to have said very little to me about the political and national side of Irish life and thought. Perhaps it was because in the sixties, when the Fenian movement occupied Irish minds, patriotism involved a certain reticence of tongue. Or it may have been that the people I met happened not to have been stirred by the ferment then working in the national blood. But if they told me little about Emmet and Wolfe Tone, they were voluble on the subject of life in Ireland as they had seen and known it. They spun marvelous tales, I remember, of the Bog of Allen, which they affirmed moved about from one place on the map to another, and which became fixed in my juvenile mind as a natural wonder, second only to the great Maelstrom off the Norwegian coast—that absurd confusion of waters which every schoolchild is agape over, and no adult ever hears so much as mentioned in all his grown-up lifetime.

But best of all, there was usually a hint of fairies about these Irish friends of my boyhood. I was always just on the point of encountering some one who actually believed in the "little people." My friends knew plenty of others who did believe in them, and who swore to having seen and conversed with them, but somehow they themselves were not quite up to the mark. Doubtless it was the keener, brisker atmosphere of America which had cleared their brains of visions or at least rendered them matters not to be alluded to in speech. They would not say out frankly, either, that they didn't believe, but smiled a little,

and wagged their heads and let me have an exciting, if wholly vague, sense of mystery.

Twenty years later it was in my power to go to the island these kindly folks had come from, and to find there still on the soil, working, living, transacting the small business of a narrow life quite like their neighbors, whole hosts of Irish men and woman, young as well as old, who are loyal and devout subjects of the fairy realm. In the little peninsula of Southwest Ireland, which I know best, it is a difficult matter to find any one who isn't to some extent controlled by these ancient beliefs. There are many, of course, to pretend to be above them, but on a pinch this assumption of skepticism would vanish quickly enough. I have not heard, however, of this mystic survival of forgotten faiths having wrought any mischief in our time in this part round about Schull and Ballydehob. There is a wizard living half way between these two towns who is reputed to cast no shadow, and who is enabled to live in fine idleness by merely writing on pieces of slate cabalistic charms against the pig-fever, and there are numerous "herb doctors" heard of here and there who combine with a little knowledge of pharmacy a vast lot of primitive necromancy. But beyond spending money on these fellows, and leaving unplowed a good deal of land inside "forts," or otherwise, suspected of being sacred to the "little people," the inhabitants of this district do not go in for testifying to the faith that is in them.

Southern Tipperary, in the country lying about Clonmel, keeps alive a particularly virile form of these old superstitions. Twelve years ago two women were convicted there of having gone into another woman's house in her absence, and placed her naked child on a shovel which they heated red-hot for the purpose, their idea being that the child, which had not the use of its limbs, was a changeling, and that by this savage treatment they could break the charm. The townspeople of Clonmel hooted these two fanatics on their way to and from court, but in the country just outside they are not thought ill of. It was in this same neighborhood of Clonmel that only last year, as will be well remembered, a whole family of Clearys joined in doing to death a wife and mother to whom they were devotedly attached in the effort to drive out the evil spirit which they believed had entered and taken possession of her body. The law dealt harshly with them, as I suppose it was bound to do, but it requires no imagination to perceive the essential difference in character between them and the criminals with whom they are herded in prison to-day.

Now, a tiny hamlet in South Roscommon, only a dozen miles from the busy town of Athlone, furnishes a tragedy of much the same weird nature. In this little cluster of seven huts live as many families, all more or less related, and all named Cunningham. This grouping together of offshoots of a common stock in an isolated bunch of hovels is common in the more poverty-stricken parts of Ireland, and it usually signifies extreme want, and naturally involves very little association with outsiders. Here all tilled the soil, except a son of one of the families, named James Cunningham, who learned the trade of a cobbler, and practiced it, living with his father, sister, and brothers. This James, according to the neighbors, was a sort of omadhaun, or silly fellow, at best, and latterly developed into a plainly vicious idiot. But his family took the view that his mental change for the worse was the work of malignant and demoniac agencies. When he showed signs of active aberration they also grew excited and nervously disturbed, until the priest and doctor of the district came and calmed them down, and the police, who had been watching over them for some days, relaxed their surveillance. Then the other evening, as the whole of the family were on their knees repeating the rosary of the Lenten devotions, the maniac cobbler suddenly leaped up, and hurled himself upon his father with his hands at his throat. The brothers sprang up, rushed upon James, dragged him into the little room where he worked, and literally hacked him to death with his own shoemaker's knives. Then, leaving the terribly mutilated corpse where it fell, this whole Cunningham family ran out, and forced their way, against strenuous resistance, through the door and window of the Cunningham family next door, protesting that their own abode was "filled with thousands of devils."

The Coroner's jury has found that they acted in "self-defense," but probably the Crown will disregard this preliminary acquittal. All the evidence, however, showed that the prisoners were a most exemplary family, hard-working, abstinent, kindly to their neighbors, and deeply religious. It was shown that when they burst en masse into their neighbor's cottage, they were in a frenzy of exultation at having slain the demon which possessed their brother. The police, too, told of a wild fit of hysteria which seized upon them all, six hours or so after their arrest, from no apparent cause save some shifting mental state which frightened and stung them into the most frantic outbreak of violence, which the whole police force with difficulty overcame. They shrieked out that they were surrounded by evil spirits, and, breaking out of their temporary place of confinement, fought like lunatics till subdued by main strength.

It is easy enough, of course, to lay hold of a tragedy of this sort as a text from which to dogmatize about a race or a country. Looking at it from another point of view—and really there is just as deep-seated a faith in the occult in the other British kingdoms, only it is less fervent and logical—one feels that here is a momentary revelation of the actual mediaeval character, worth a hundred of the most learned and inspired attempts to revive a dead past for us in the shape of historical romance or romantic history.

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