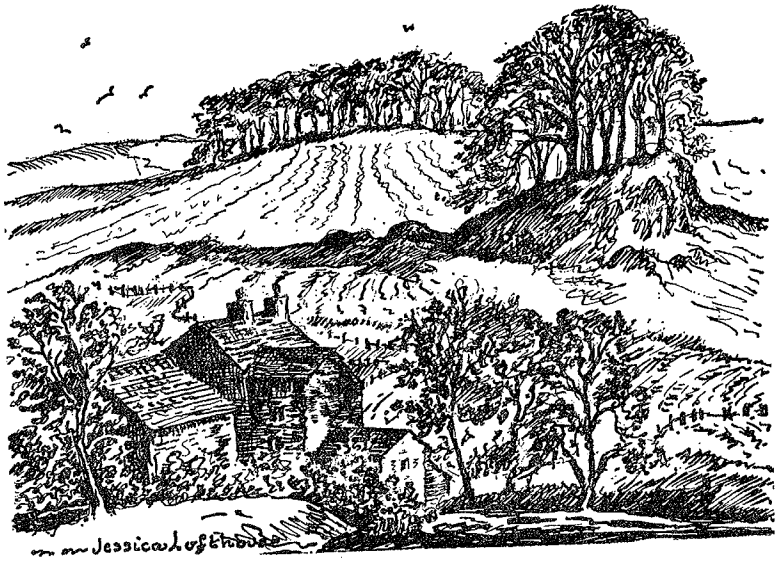
From North-Country Folklore (1976) by Jessica Lofthouse

1 *Fairy Lore*

During the last 150 years there has been a steady flow of books by folklorists analysing the why and wherefores of such supernatural creatures as fairies. They say they were of the ancient race who dwelt in Western Europe, especially in the farthest west of Ireland, the outer isles of Scotland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall (and Brittany), Wales, Lancashire and Cumbria. They were the small people driven underground by warrior bands of the first wave of invading Celts, who used implements and weapons of metal to work the ground and destroy their enemies. Run to earth, they dwelt in ancient mounds, 'fairy raths' which, when levelled, remained as fairy rings.

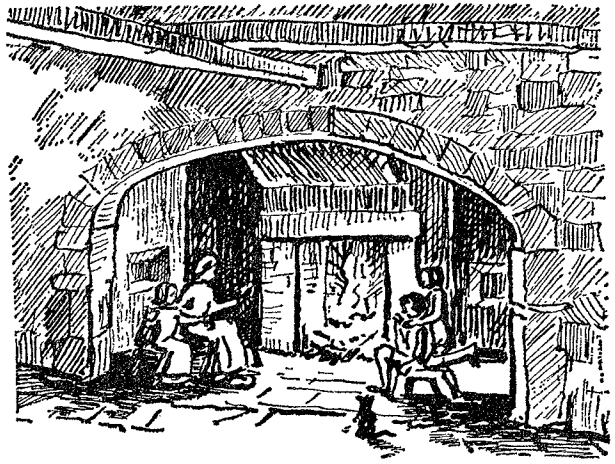
Later invaders—there were many succeeding invasions of Celtic-speaking people, with greater power and better weapons—heard tales of little people haunting burial mounds, holes and caves in the mountains. Later generations still believed in fairy folk. In all ways, they were like humans but smaller, male and female, with all-powerful kings and queens. They were becoming increasingly wary of ordinary mortals, came out by night and at cockcrow disappeared from human sight.



Fairy Rock on Downham Green

Why should fairies have given their names to so many places in the so-called industrial north-west? And why was so much north-country folklore woven round them?

Of course, when these tales were first told, and folk believed in them, the north was not industrial but a remote and rather underprivileged part of the kingdom. Not the water wheel but the steam engine scared them away for 'good and all'. Long after



Inglenook tale-telling

logic and scepticism among the educated "had freed men from the bondage of error and superstition", in isolated parts of the Pennines, in the Yorkshire dales, in lowland Lancashire, and in the mountains and fells to the north, belief in fairies, boggarts and witches died hard.

In all these 'undeveloped' areas, every market town, village and hamlet kept its old traditions, and every child grew up hearing its own folk-tales—orally transmitted. The folk of Fylde, Bowland, Pendle, Trawden and Rossendale, Cartmel, Furness and Lonsdale —northwards and eastwards—rarely went to town, market days excepting, fair and feast days their rare communal pleasures. From the back-end in late October to Shrovetide, in wilder places from Michaelmas to Eastertide, rains, floods and storms made travel impossible. Families dug themselves in for the duration of winter. Then they settled down on dark nights by roaring log fires and the storytellers began their spell-binding tales of fairies, strange hauntings, spirits unseen, apparitions 'felt', all part of their own background and heritage. William Wordsworth and Dorothy, and

their little brothers "grew up on fairy tales and ballads" in the Cocker valley in Cumberland.

SEEING FAIRIES: EYE-WITNESS REPORTS

Thomas Tattersall-Wilkinson in the 1870s collected local folklore around the Pennine villages, in the Calder valley, from "those who had seen" what none of us in the twentieth century are likely to see. A relative, he said, wandering on Mellor Moors had been startled when "a troop of tiny men, top-booted and spurred as for hunting, all in green jackets and red caps," passed by running and jumping over walls.

Had his relative exchanged notes with the Goosnargh man who had seen fairies cavorting in a field one night dressed also as for hunting, clapping their hands and whistling, but not mad-mounted as the Manx 'little fellas'? These witnesses were among the chosen few.

In the 1820s Thomas Weld of Leagram Hall near Chipping held some interesting conversations with tenant farmers in Little Bowland. Joseph Holden of Park Gate had more than once come upon fairy washerwomen pounding their linen at Buck Banks. Old Procter lived at Dinkling Green—a place so enchanting, low between limestone knolls, sheltered by high fells, that I feel, if anywhere, here is the fringe of Faery. He too spoke of meeting fairy folk on White Stone as an everyday occurrence, his neighbours agreeing. "Aye," they said, "there used to be such things." The little folk never remained long after such meetings, disappearing swift as rabbits down their holes. The men who were lucky to see them were usually the most respectable and respected members of society!

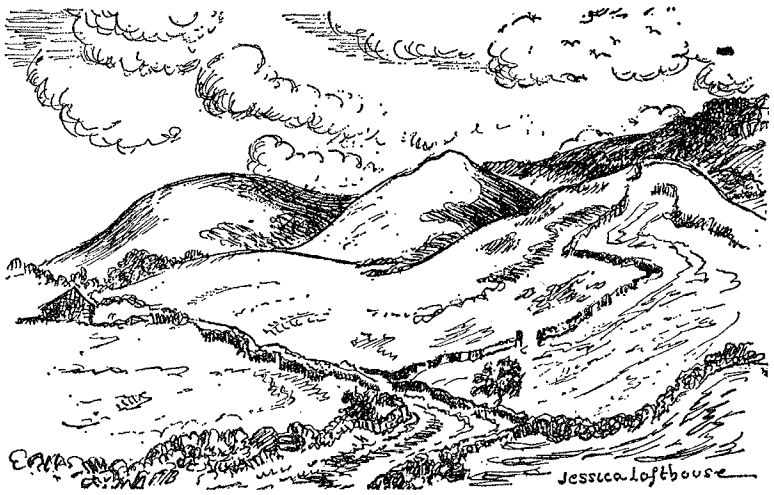
Take the case of the verger of Grindleton church. He took a quiet evening stroll into a pretty wooded dell not far from the village. We call it West Clough Wood, and the steep path down to the brook, Cat Steps. I remember one balmy June night there, and a full moon—the woodland pure enchantment. Long ago the verger approached the same path and as he halted to light his pipe he was conscious of pattering feet approaching, tinkling bell-like voices and laughter. He recalled how two village lads had told disbelieving parents they had heard fairy music in West Clough, and watched little people half their size running between the trees—until one boy laughed, and all darted into holes among the tree roots. A moment later the boys wondered had they in truth seen such wonders? The verger waited—and he saw for himself.

"Aye, it's true enough. I saw the fairies at Cat Steps with these

two eyes. Little they were, two feet high, all in green coats and red caps with nebs on 'em." So he reported later to his neighbours.

An equally respected Yorkshire eye-witness, Dr Dixon of Rylstone no less—and would he indulge in romancing?—was passing from Thorpe in the Hollow (not far from Burnsall in Wharfedale) on his way home one evening. The lane runs along the foothills of the high, rock-edged Rylstone Fell, between a succession of smooth, green limestone knolls. Thorpe Kail, Elbolton, Stebden, Buttray, rise on one hand, and the old flax-growing mosses of Linton lie low on the other. Everyone knew Elbolton was home of fairies, its caves convenient for them, but few were as lucky in catching sight of them at their revels as he. He later confessed to being at the time 'market-merry'—Sober, his better judgement would have been a deterrent. On coming near to a "tribe of fairies dancing in a ring in the moonlight", he broke into their midst intending to join hands and caper with them. But they reacted in anger, jostling and hustling him till he took to his heels, running for his life, but not until he had captured the tiniest of the little folk and pocketed it. A pity it had escaped before he reached Cracoe!

Dr Dixon deliberately captured his fairy, but in the Pendle country, where witches were more often mentioned than 'feeorin', two local poachers bagged a pair unbeknown. In the darkness they had stolen into a warren, put their sacks over two holes and caught



Where Rylstone's doctor pocketed a fairy

their rabbits—or so they thought as they walked away towards Barley. On the steep hill the men remarked their rabbits "were wick"—squeaking as they twisted and turned. To their astonishment the squeaks became tiny voices. From one sack a plaintive, "Where arta, where arta?", and the answer from the other, "Here I am, in a sack going ower Barley Brew." The poachers threw down their catch and took to their heels. Next morning two neatly folded poachers' bags were found at the roadside—on the steep brow to Barley!

My great-grandfather was probably 'market-merry' also when he struck out at a spectral white horse at the Skyrholme three-lane ends near Appletreewick—and his stick passed through it! One evening a flaming-eyed barguest chased home his young brothers from choir practice at Burnsall church. (A barguest is a Yorkshire bogey.) But he *must* have been sober at his rendezvous with the Barden (or Bolton Abbey) constable one morning early at the Strid when a white apparition rose from the foaming waters of the rock-pent Wharfe.

These Lofthouse family tales belong to a period somewhat earlier than 1850. This was the year the fairies of Martindale made their final departure, a man of Sandwick (on Ullswater's eastern shore) being an amazed eye-witness as they filed up a ladder, its feet in the dale bottom, its top far out of sight in the night sky. And never did folk in Cumbria "see their like again".

Sometimes fairy folk stole a bonny babe from its cradle, substituting a wizened fairy infant, destined to become a problem child, the odd one out in a normal family. Especially fond were they of boy babies; parents in western Ireland dressed their small sons, the under sevens, in petticoats. I once met a merry band of children on the banks of Lough Gill (the airy mountains and rushing glens of the 'fairy poem' all around us). They were a family of seven, all girls, I decided, until the smallest was named as Brendan. Brendan in a red patched frock! "Because of the fairies?" I asked. They all laughed. It was a matter of family economics. The clothes passed down from sister to sister eventually were worn by little brother, "Until he goes to school. No one ever sees him here. It doesn't matter. And he doesn't mind."

FAIRIES AS WATCHERS OVER HIDDEN GOLD

Belief in fairies lasted long. They were guardians of secrets deep within mounds, in castle ruins and old halls. They watched over hidden treasure and told to the rightful owner its whereabouts. Children wandering on Castle Hill mound at the north end of

Bassenthwaite lake came upon fairies on the old site where, folk said, treasure was hidden. Little men lurked around stone piles by Gaits Water beneath Coniston Old Man (the Allt Maen or high rock) of the Cymri of Cumbria). Folk believed stone piles were all that remained of ancient cities, lost treasures within and fairies on guard.

On the flat top of Addlebrough, which proudly overlooks Semerwater and Wensleydale, is Stone Raise. This large cairn, 360 feet around, is Iron Age or earlier in origin.

Druid, Roman, Scandinavia,
Stone Raise in Addleboro'.

Treasure was concealed thereunder, a chest of gold which sank into the earth when a weary giant dropped it as he walked from Skipton to Pendragon Castle.

A Yorkshire 'fairy' of Addlebrough will one day reveal the treasure to some lucky mortal. Then it may be lifted with ease, if the finder neither speaks nor swears. One man was given the secret by the guardian fairy but he shouted with joy, and the chest sank deep into the ground once more. So wrote Walter White in 1840. The Stone Raise was excavated twenty years later.

Not only hidden treasure was watched over by fairies. They knew of riches in mines. At the head of Little Langdale are old mines where copper veins were worked until the last century. A Greenburn miner was rewarded after having done some small service to the resident fairies. They disclosed where he could strike an hitherto untouched rich vein of copper.

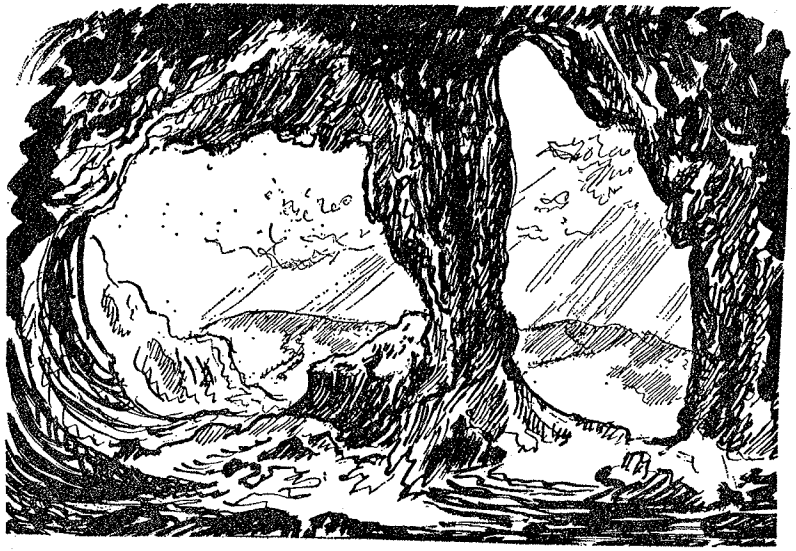
Named fairies are not common. Lob and Mikel occupied a large cave by the Ribble, where the river makes one of the loveliest bits of scenery between Sawley and Gisburn bridges, Denham wheel overlooked by a 90-foot cliff rightly called Rainsber Scar. As a 'thank-you' for Pudsay's allowing them to live in the cave, Arthur's Hole, they gave him broad hints as to the whereabouts of ores rich in silver. Their advice was followed. Miners at Skelhorn lead mines rushed to Bolton Hall to tell Pudsay the good news. Soon the old mill near the village, its wheel turned by Skirden Beck, was busy minting silver shillings. The house is still named Mint Cottage. Pudsay knew the act was illegal but hoped to avoid detection. He had a good run of luck. When constables came to arrest him, because of the gift of the cave fairies—a magic silver bit to give his steed magic powers from dawn to dusk—he was able to evade them. Even the 90-foot cliff was no hazard to his mount, and thereafter dubbed Pudsay's Leap. Safely over the Ribble he proceeded south at full speed hoping to reach his

godmother, Queen Elizabeth, to tell her his side of the story before the official account caught up with him. She forgave him, with a caution.

HUMAN MIDWIVES AT FAIRY BIRTHS

In Bowland and in Craven, on the whole, relationships with fairies were good, the little people entering into numerous necessary transactions with ordinary humans. For instance, fairy-child births often needed the ministrations of a human midwife.

A little grey man leading a little grey pony made his way, invisible, between the stalls on Keighley market place. He pulled at the apron of a local 'butter wife'. She was seen to leave the crowd. She followed the strange little man to the place where his wife was expecting a child. Nothing did she see on the way, but when her guide told her they were there, one of her eyes was 'touched'. She very soon delivered a fairy babe, as far as she could see, in a limestone cave, probably near Thorpe. Tiny women took the child and one, dipping a feather into a crystal phial, proceeded to anoint its eyes. The Keighley woman, keen witted, waited her chance to appropriate a drop of what she guessed was 'seeing magic'. The little grey man took her back to Keighley, as they parted handing over her fee, a bag of fairy gold.



Fairy holes, Wharfedale

With the gift of seeing fairies still with her, weeks later she spotted the grey man sneaking corn, and called "How are your wife and child?" Startled, he jumped on her stall. "Which eye see you with?" he demanded. She pointed, and blowing into it he vanished. She saw no more fairies after that unfortunate slip!

A Little Bowland farmer, James Leeming of Saddle End, told of a similar fairy birth in a cave above the Hodder gorge near Whitewell. The midwife was brought from Clitheroe one market day, seeing nothing of the way they travelled, her eyes being 'touched' only when she came to the fairy wife's side. The baby was born, her fee in fairy gold, and the return to Clitheroe performed in 'the wink of an eye'. She, like the Keighley midwife, must have acquired a drop of the magic 'seeing' liquid—or known of elder juice—for one market day she recognized that the apples in her basket were being stolen by the fairy husband. "I see you," she cried. "I see you, fairy father." He peered at her. "Which eye is it you see me with?" She pointed. His finger touched it. He was gone, and no longer could she see what the fairies considered did not concern her.

CALDER VALLEY FAIRIES AROUND CLIVIGER

The Ribble valley, Pendle Forest and the wild Pennine moors, including Trawden Forest; the heights of Cliviger and Rossendale, were even more "wick wi' fairies". Fortunately, T. Tattersall Wilkinson and J. F. Tattersall were on the spot in time to record such tales as these.

Prehistory is at the back doors of Hurstwood, Worsthorne and Extwistle. Children allowed to see what grown-ups were denied, walking through the high, windy pastures between villages frequently came across little folk playing by the springs or washing their linen. Early risers after mushrooms on summer mornings caught sight of little folk carrying away cans of milk from Worsthorne fields, before the dairymaids had shaken sleep from their eyes—"Little men in green jackets, fairy women in white stockings and low shoes, milking cows into tiny cans." Some stayed behind for a fairy churning session at the Old Jam Well, leaving behind as gifts for villagers butter-pats no more than an inch across, each with a cow moulded on top. Good neighbourhood relationship?

Not so good the prevalence of wild, unbiddable children in certain families, changelings for sure. One young mother was convinced the wizened babe in the cradle was not hers. She carried out a proven test as told her by a wise woman.

Little folk, she said, have the wisdom of many thousand years stored in their heads. But they show intense curiosity in anything unusual or new. The same traits born in fairies stay with changelings too. The mother placed the cradle near the hearth. She broke an egg carefully, filled the half-shells with water, and placed them on the fire to boil. The babe's eyes sharpened and in a shrill, piping voice he declared, "Well, I'm over four score years and ten, I've seen a nut grow into a hazel tree and an acorn become an oak, but I've never seen water boiled in egg-shells before!" The woman snatched up the squawling changeling and ran out to the well, beating it all the while. Long after they have abandoned their own, fairy women take an interest in their well-being. As the cottager expected, the watching fairy, unable to see her own child treated so, made herself known—a wrinkled old woman, very tiny. In quick-sticks she was away, out of sight, having restored the bonny chuckling mortal babe to its mother's arms.

So remember, to discover a fairy or catch one unawares, try boiling water in egg-shells: a tried test.

Or, if in search of fairies, watch *before* cockcrow, when they melt into the air. They are most likely to be seen at midnight, "dancing under the moon, in magic circles, playing on pipes of reeds or stems of oats". But the slightest movement sends them flying, and nothing is left but small footprints in the dew-wet grass. This from Wharfedale eye-witnesses!

I have done no more than touch upon the many places reputedly the haunts of fairies and where, at certain seasons of the year, at certain times of the day, one can half-believe that our 'believing' forefathers were right.

FAIRY HAUNTS IN BOWLAND AND CRAVEN

I knew from early childhood the Fairy Bridge over Bashall Brook, on an ancient track from Edisford and Bashall Hall to Browsholme and Whitewell, which the little folk threw up in a trice when a local woodcutter was fleeing before a pack of howling witches. Given parapets for added safety in the 1940s, the 'Saddle' Bridge is still part of a scene, enchanting on spring mornings, when every songster is 'going it' and the brook prattling in the sunshine.

High on the skyline above the Hodder valley is a rocky place marked on maps as Queen of Fairies Chair, a meeting place for "the lordly ones who dwell in the hills, the hollow hills". I have often seen wizardry at work up here, wrought by sun and wind, with cloud shadows, sungleams, and unrolling mists on mid-

summer dawns. Then the Craven mountains seem part of 'the other world' of fantasy and faery.

There was enchantment one April morning on Downham Green, the high limestone ridge between Rimington road and Downham village, when a shower dissolved in diamond sparkle, a rainbow arched Ribblesdale, one end a blinding dazzle on the Fairy Rock. A family of leverets playing ring o' roses round a thorn bush at the rainbow end completed the magic.

From the Fairy Rock the prospect northwards takes in a wide sweep of the Craven dales and the high West Yorkshire fells between Aire and Wharfe. One long ridge is Fountains Fell, one white limestone rampart Malham Scar. That was a haunt of fairies. In those many-coloured fells are caves which sheltered prehistoric man. One is Calf Hole near the fell road from Skyrethornes to Malham Tarn, taken over by fairies once upon a time. Not so many miles away, towards Skipton, is Flasby Fell and Crookrise where the folk of Scale House discovered a fairy kist or chest.

Carry on to Mastiles road (the Romans marched this way and Fountains Abbey tenants drove along their sheep in great flocks), and down Lee Gate lane to Gordale. The old, low-arched bridge has been replaced by a plain functional one. But take the path on the left bank to a bathing place fit for the Queen of Faery. The beck has its most dramatic moments here, plunging over black rocks in a waterfall called Jennet's Foss, a veil of water half concealing Jennet's Cave behind it. A place for water sprites or naiads, or Neck, the Scandinavian 'devil', who chose such places to fiddle to the accompaniment of falling water. Old folk-tales make it a gateway of Faery, and Jennet its queen.

FAIRY WELLS AND FAIRY STEPS AT WARTON AND BEETHAM

One would expect a good sprinkling of such myths around Morecambe Bay, a last refuge of the Celts who believed in spirits of mounds, caves and wells, already known for two and three thousand years. John Lucas of Warton, near Carnforth in Lancashire, writing from 1710 to 1744, was a great believer in strange happenings around his village, listening eagerly to those who claimed they had seen little men dancing in rings around piles of silver and gold on Warton Crag, near the Fairy Holes. This, Leland the antiquary had reported also over a century earlier. Other Wartonians watched fairy women in homely tasks by the crag-foot wells—a string of crystal-clear fountains springing from the limestone—where they bleached their fine linen on the smooth green turf, or thrown out in the sun over blackthorn or gorse bushes.

Above all fairies were clean, house-proud people, who could not bear dirt or untidiness, punishing the slattern, the slut and the blowsy kitchen wench, but rewarding the good servant with fairy gold. There is fairy gold in plenty on the limestone slopes today—primrose yellow in April and golden cowslips, broom like golden rain, the rich gold of gorse in summer, and the glory of red-gold beech leaves before October strips the woods above Yealand and Beetham.

Centuries ago when Beetham parish was wider flung, parishioners came from distant villages to feasts, on holy days, for baptisms, weddings and for burial. "T'old coffin track wheer they cam fra Arnsett tull Beetham carrying t'dead," is now a straight way from Hazelslack Tower to Fairy Steps. This Corpse Road passes through most beautiful copses where it is not wise to leave the straight track. On either hand the limestone is riven with water-worn grooves, each fissure filled with ferns and flowers, every cranny providing root-hold for hazels, oaks, ancient hollies and yews; dark, mysterious, unearthly stillness and eerie light held between the trees. The path comes to a wall of rock where in the past heavy-burdened country-folk could make use of a rope and iron rings fastened to the rock face to haul up their sacks of meal or flour, or to lower their produce when returning from Beetham, which boasted one village shop.

Among them were those possessed of second sight; they alone saw fairies running up and down the fairy staircase which is a narrow cleft, a natural shaft, its walls polished by folk squeezing through. A tight squeeze, a fat man's agony, elbows to the side—and all the time wishing a wish.

Fairies had a preference for limestone country, here and south on Warton Crag, showing admirable, exceptional, good taste in scenery. They occupied Fairy Holes on the Crag, small caves which Victorian 'antiquarium chaps' discovered and in which modern archaeologists are showing renewed interest. Being fortunate in having friends hereabouts I can climb the Crag early and late, the best times for feeling the enchantment if not seeing fairies. Honeysuckle and wild rose time is best; or primrose and cowslip time, and with sunsetting and moonlight silvering the Kent and Keer channels.

FAIRY LORE IN THE ISLE OF MAN

The north's fairies, 'feeorin', 'pharisees', have much in common with Manxland's 'little fellas', 'them ones'—never named. The word 'fairy' was unknown in the Isle of Man. The islanders believed in their existence and howled down any minister who spoke against them. Respecting their desire for unwatched activities between dark and daylight, Manx folk kept respectable hours, early to bed, early to rise, not to become involved.

They believed 'them ones' were the first island folk, tiny men in green mounds, who kept lit perpetual fires, the smoke therefrom protecting Mona from invasion. Once only the smoke screen lifted enough for one fisherman to glimpse the land of purple mist, and he spread the news. Invaders came, curious; they were waves of Celts who overran the island, drove 'them ones' deeper underground.

A few had seen them. They were like mortals they said, very small, delicate and fine, beautiful far off, withered and ancient near to. They were male and female; they could be kind, and very cruel.

Only a chosen few ever witnessed fairy gatherings, when 'them ones' wove fairy rings round the green lowes at midnight, to the strains of ineffably sweet music on reed pipes. Some actually saw wild hunting parties, standing well aside on mountain ways when the little fellas careered by like mad things, whipping their fairy steeds so swift their hooves barely touched the earth. They knew better than intrude. 'Them ones' shot elf arrows, never felt but death followed. They ensnared mortal men and maidens, never to be seen again.

Fortunately 'them ones' were more often kind than cruel, took off ill luck rather than imposed it, healed more often than destroyed. If you were in real trouble you consulted a local charmer, or used known cures. Some were known in the north-west, too. Salt was a preventive. Yellow flowers on the threshold kept out evil ones. Rowan wood turned back the malevolent. Manxwomen kept fires going all night, left butter and bread dough perchance 'them ones' wanted to bake, and *never* forgot to put out clean water, for perhaps they wanted to wash their linen. No woman ever worked at her spinning wheel on Saturday evenings!

Most vulnerable to the wiles of the little fellas were helpless newborn infants. Boy babies had to be protected by placing on the cradle an iron poker, and with a string of red thread tied around his little neck. On the way to his christening special precautions had to be taken perchance someone was waiting for an exchange! The mother put in her pocket both bread and cheese to offer to the first person encountered, for good luck, and to foil the intentions if she were a fairy woman disguised, a baby stealer.

All these were practised a century ago, to please 'them ones', not