Specimens of Sguelachds

“Tir nam Beann, ’s nan Gleann, s nan Gaisgeach.”

The land of Hills, and Glens, and Heroes

Popular tales of the west Highlands : orally collected

John Francis Campbell

1890

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I find that men of all ranks resemble each other ; that each branch of popular lore has its own special votaries, as branches of literature have amongst the learned ; that one man is the peasant historian and tells of the battles of the clans ; another, a walking peerage, who knows the descent of most of the families in Scotland, and all about his neighbours and their origin ; others are romancers, and tell about the giants ; others are moralists, and prefer the sagacious prose tales, which have a meaning, and might have a moral ; a few know the history of the Feni, and are antiquarians. Many despise the whole as frivolities ; they are practical moderns, and answer to practical men in other ranks of society.

But though each prefers his own subject, the best Highland story-tellers know specimens of all kinds. Start them, and it seems as if they would never stop. I timed one, and he spoke for an hour without pause or hesitation, or verbal repetition. His story was Connall Gulban, and he said he could repeat fourscore. He recited a poem, but despised “ Bardism ;” and he followed me six miles in the dark to my inn, to tell me numbers 19 and 20, which I have condensed; for the very same thing can be shortly told when it is not a composition. For example.

In telling a story, narrative and dialogue are mixed ; what the characters have told each other to do is repeated as narrative. The people in the story tell it to each other, and branch off into discussions about their horses and houses and crops, or anything that happens to turn up. One story grows out of another, and the tree is almost hidden by a foliage of the speaker’s invention. Here and there comes a passage repeated by rote, and common to many stories, and to every good narrator. It seems to act as a rest for the memory. Now and then, an observation from the audience starts an argument. In short, one good story in the mouth of a good narrator, with a good audience, might easily go rambling on for a whole winter’s night, as it is said to do.

The “ Slim Swarthy Champion used to last for four hours.” Connall Gulban “ used to last for three evenings. Those that wanted to hear the end had to come back.” One of my collectors said it would take him a month to write it down, but I am bound to add that he has since done it in a very much shorter time. I have heard of a man who fell asleep by the fire, and found a story going on when he awoke next morning. I have one fragment on which (as I am told) an old man in Ross-shire used to found twenty-four stories, all of which died with him.

There are varieties in public speakers amongst the people as amongst their representatives, for some are eloquent, some terse, some prosy.

But though a tale may be spun out to any extent, the very same incidents can be, and often are, told in a few words, and those tales which have been written for me are fair representations of them as they are usually told. They are like a good condensed report of a rambling speech, with extraneous matter left out. One narrator said of the longest story which I had then got—“ It is but the contents ;” but I have more than once asked a narrator to tell me the story which he had previously told to one of my collectors, and a collector to write down a story which I had previously heard, and I have always found the pith, often the very words. In no instance have I found anything added by those whom I employed, when their work was subjected to this severe test.

This is the account which one of my collectors gives of the old customs of his class—he is a workman employed by the Duke of Argyll ; he tells me that he is self-educated ; and as he repeats some of the stories which he has written, from memory, his account of the way in which he acquired them is valuable.

I remember, upwards of fifty years ago, when I was a boy, my father lived in the farest north house, in the valley called Glen-na Callanach. I also used to be with my granfather ; he lived near Terbert, Lochlomond side. I remember, in the winter nights, when a few old people would be togather, they would pass the time with telling each other stories, which they had by tradition. I used to listen attentively, and hear them telling about the ceatharnaich, or free-booters, which used to come to plunder the country, and take away cattle ; and how their ancestors would gather themselves togather to fight for their property, the battles they fought, and the kind of weapons they used to fight with ; the manners of their ancestors, the dress they used to wear, and different hardships they had to endure.

I was also sometimes amused, listening to some people telling Gaelic romances, which we called sgeulachds. It was customary for a few youngsters to gather into one house, and whither idle or at some work, such as knitting stockings or spinning, they would amuse each other with some innocent diversion, or telling sgeulachds. Us that was children was very fond of listening to them, and the servant maid that was in my father's house would often tell us a sgeulachd to keep us queit.

In those days, when people killed their Marte cow they keept the hide, and tanned it for leather to themselves. In those days every house was furnished with a wheel and a reel ; the women spun, and got their webs woven by a neighbouring weaver ; also, the women was dyers for themselves, so that the working class had their leather, their linen, and their cloth of their own manufacturing ; and when they required the help of a shoemaker, or of a tailor, they would send for them. The tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, to work wherever they were required, and by travelling the country so much, got acquaint with a great maney of the traditionary tales, and divulged them through the country ; and as the country people made the telling of these tales, and listening to hear them, their winter night's amusement, scarcely aney part of them would be lost. Some of these romances is supposed to be of great antiquity, on account of some of the Gaelic words being out of use now. I remember, about forty years ago, of being in company with a man that was watching at night ; he wished me to stop with him, and he told me a (sgeulachd) romance ; and last year I heard a man telling the same story, about therty miles distante from where I had heard it told forty years before that ; and the man which told me the tale could not tell me the meaning of some of the old Gaelic words that was in it. At first I thought they were foreign words, but at last I recollected to have beard some of them repeated in Ossian's poems, and it was by the words that was before, and after them, that I understood the meaning of them. The same man told me another story, which he said he learned from his granfather, and Denmark, Swedden, and Nuraway was named in it in Gaelic, but he forgot the name of the two last-named places.

It appears likely to me, that some of these tales was invented by the Druids, and told to the people as sermons ; and by these tales the people was caused to believe that there was fairies which lived in little conical hills, and that the fairies had the power of being either visible or invisible, as they thought proper, and that they had the power of enchanting people, and of taking them away and make fairies of them ; and that the Druids had charms which would prevent that ; and they would give these charms to the people for payment ; and maney stories would be told about people being taken away by the fairies, and the charms which had to be used to break the spell, and get them back again ; and others, on account of some neglidgeance, never got back aney more.

Also that there was witches ; people which had communication with an evil spirit, from which they got the power of changing themselves into aney shape they pleased ; that these witches often put themselves in the shape of beasts, and when they were in the shape of beasts, that they had some evil design in view, and that it was dangerous to meet them. Also that they could, and did, sometimes take away the produce of people's dairy, and sometimes of the whole farm. The Druidical priests pretended that they had charms that would prevent the witches from doing aney harm, and they would

give a charm for payment. When the first day of summer came, the people was taught to put the fire out of their houses, and to place it on some emince near the house for to keep away the witches, and that it was not safe for them to kindle a fire in their house aney more, until they bought it from beil's druide. That fire was called beil-teine (beils-fire), and the first day of summer was called beil-fires day ; and also when the first night of winter came, the people would gather fuel and make blazing fire for to keep away the witches, or at least to deprive them of the power of taking away the produce of the farm, and then they would go to the Druid and buy a kindling of what was called the holy fire. The Druids also caused the people to believe that some families had been enchanted and changed into beasts, and as the proper means had not been used, the spell was never broken ; and that swans, seals, and marmaids had been different beings, familys that had been enchanted.

Beil or Beul was the name which the Druids gave their god, and the Druids of Beil pretended to be the friends of the people ; they pretended to have charms to cure different kinds of diseases, and also charms to prevent fairies, ghosts, and witches, from annoying or harming people. It is a well-known fact, that the superstitions of the Druids has been handed down from generation to generation for a great maney ages, and is not wholy extinct yet ; and we have reason to believe that some of the tales, which was invented in those days for to fright the people, has been told and kept in remembrance in the self and same manner. The priests of Beil was the men that was called Druids, the miracles which they pretended to perform was called meur-bheileachd (beil-fingering), and their magic which they pretended to perform was called druichd (druidisem), and we have plenty of reason to believe superstitious tales as well as superstition, originated among the Druids.
John Dewar.

" J. Campbell, Esq.

" Sir—I hope you will correct aney errors that you may find on this piece which I wrote."

I have corrected only two or three errors in spelling, and the writing is remarkably clear, but I have left some words which express the Gaelic pronunciation of English.

The derivation of MIORBHUIL, *a marvel*, from the finger of Bel, was suggested by Dr. Smith (see Armstrong's DiC.) J.F.C.

Now let me return to the cottage of old Macphie, where I heard a version of the Sea-Maiden, and let me suppose that one of the rafters is the drift log which I saw about to be added to a roof in the same island.

The whole roof is covered with peat soot, but that may be scraped away, and the rough wood appears.

There are the holes of boring sea shells, filled with sand and marine products. It is evident that the log came by sea, that it did not come in a ship, and that it was long enough in warm salt water for the barnacles to live and die, and for their dwellings to be filled with sea rubbish ; that it floated through latitudes where barnacles live. The fairy eggs, which are picked up on the same shore, point to the West Indies as a stage on the way. Maps of ocean currents shew the gulf-stream flowing from the Gulf of Mexico past the Hebrides, but the tree is a fir, for there is a bit of bark which proves the fact, and it appears that pines grow between 40° and 60° in America. It is therefore possible that the rafter was once an American fir tree, growing in the Rocky Mountains ; that it was swept into the Mississippi, and carried to the Gulf of Mexico ; drifted by the gulf-stream past the West India Islands to the Hebrides, and stranded by a western gale on its voyage to Spitzbergen. But all this must have happened long ago, for it is now a rafter covered with the soot of generations. That rafter is a strange fact, it is one of a series, and has to be accounted for. There it is, and a probable account of its journey is, that it came from East to West without the help of man, in obedience to laws which govern the world.

That smoked rafter certainly was once a seed in a fir-cone, somewhere abroad. It grew to be a pine tree ; it must have been white with snow in winter, and green in summer, and glittering with rain drops

and hoar-frost in bright sunshine at various times and seasons. The number of years it stood in the forest can be counted by the rings in the wood. It is certain that it was torn up by the roots, for the roots are there still. It may have formed a part of one of these wonderful natural rafts of the Mississippi, of which one in 1816 was " no less than ten miles in length, two hundred and twenty yards wide, and eight feet deep." [1] It has been to warm seas, and has worn a marine dress of green and brown since it lost its own natural dress of green branches. Birds must have sat on it in the forest, —crabs and shells have lived on it at sea, and fish must have swam about it ; and yet it is now a rafter, hung with black pendants of peat smoke. A tree that grew beside it may now be in Spitzbergen amongst walrusses. Another may be a snag in the Mississippi amongst alligators, destined to become a fossil tree in a coal field. Part of another may be a Yankee rocking chair, or it may be part of a ship in any part of the World, or the tram of a cart, or bit of a carriage, or a wheel-barrow, or a gate post, or anything that can be made of fir wood anywhere ; and the fate of stories may be as various as that of fir trees, but their course may be guessed at by running a back scent overland, as I have endeavoured to follow the voyage of a drift log over sea.

Macphie's story began thus :—" There was a poor old fisher in Skye, and his name was Duncan ;" and every version of the story which I have found in the Highlands, and I have found many, is as highland as the peat-reek on the rafters. The same story is known in many districts in Scotland, and it is evident, that it has been known there for many years. It is a curious fact. It is worth the trouble of looking under what is purely highland, to see if its origin can be discovered.

First, then, the incidents are generally strung together in a particular order in the Highlands, but, either separately or together, every incident in the story is to be found in some shape in other languages. Norse has it as " Shortshanks." Irish has it. German has it. It is in the Italian of Straparola as " Fortunio." In the French of le Cabinet des Feés, 1785. It is in every language in Europe as " St. George and the Dragon." It is in Mr. Peter Buchan's English of 1847 as part of " Greensleeves." It is in "Perseus and Andromeda." The scene of that story is placed in Syria, and it is connected with Persia. There is something in Sanscrit about Indra, a god who recovered the stolen cattle of the gods, but here the scent is very cold, and the hound at fault, though it seems that the Sanscrit hero was the sun personified, and that he had horses of many colours, including red and white, which were always feminine, as the horses in Gaelic stories are, and which had wings and flew through the air. These were " Svankas," with beautiful steps. " Rohitas," red or brown ; Gaelic horses are often described as " Seang," "Ruadh;" and here seems to be a clue which is worth the attention of Eastern scholars.

There is a mermaid in the story, and mermaids are mentioned in Irish, and in Arabic, and in Manks, and Italian : men even assert that they have seen mermaids in the sea within the last few years, amongst the Hebrides and off Plymouth.

There are creatures, Falcon, Wolf and Lion. Two of them were natives within historic times, one is still ; but the third is a foreigner. There is an Otter, and a Sea Monster, and in other tales, there are Bears and Doves, and other animals ; but every one of them, except the monster, is to be found on the road to the land where Sanscrit was spoken, and all these, and many more, play their part in popular tales elsewhere, while no real animal is ever mentioned which is peculiar to lands out of the road which leads overland to India.

Nearly all these have Gaelic names, and most of them are still living within a few days' journey of the Hebrides under other names. I saw a live wolf from a diligence one fine morning in Brittany, and I have seen bears in Scandinavia and in Germany. The only far-fetched animal is the Lion, and in another story a similar creature appears as " Cu Seang." Here is a fresh scent—for Sing is Lion in India —and *may* once have meant Lion in Gaelic; for though Leomhan is the word now used, Seang is applied to anything slender and active. Shune is a dog in Sanscrit, Siunnach a fox in Gaelic, and there are many other Gaelic words which point to the " eastern origin of Celtic nations." The story cannot have crossed the sea from the West. It is therefore probable that it came from the East, for it is not of home growth, and the question is, how did it get to Barra ?

It seems to have been known along a certain track for many ages. It is possible that it came from the far East with the people, and that it has survived ever since. It is hard to account for it otherwise. Those who have most studied the subject so account for popular tales elsewhere, and therefore, Donald Macphie's story of the Sea-Maiden acquires an interest not all its own.

Much has been written, and said, and discovered about the popular migrations which have poured from East to West, and which are moving on still. Philology has mapped out the course of the human stream, and here, in the mind of an old fisherman, unable to read, or to speak any language but his own, is the end of a clue which seems to join Iran and Eirinn ; as a rafter in his hut may link him with the Rocky Mountains.

Admit that this so-called fiction, and others like it, *may* be traditions, which have existed from the earliest of times, and every word and incident acquires an interest, for it may lead to something else.

The story certainly grew in the mind of man, as a tree grows from a seed, but when or where 1 It has certainly been told in many languages. It is worth inquiring how many races have told it.

The incidents, like drift trees, have been associated with people and events, as various as birds, fish, alligators, walrusses, and men ; mountain ranges, and ocean currents. They have passed through the minds of Ovid and Donald Macphie. They have been adorned by poets, painted by artists, consecrated by priests,—for St. George is the patron saint of England ; and now we find that which may have sprung from some quarrel about a cow, and which has passed through so many changes, dropping into forgetfulness in the mind of an old fisherman, and surrounded with the ideas which belong to his every-day life. Ideas differing from those of the people who first invented the story, as the snow of the Rocky Mountains differs from peat-reek.

Now, to look forwards, and follow in imagination the shoals of emigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, France, Ireland, and Scotland, who are settled in clumps, or scattered over America and Australia; to think of the stories which have been gathered in Europe from these people alone, and which they have most certainly carried with them, and will tell their children ; and then the route of popular tales hereafter, and their spread in former ages, can be traced and may be guessed.

I have inquired, and find that several Islanders, who used to tell the stories in Gaelic, are now settled in Australia and Canada. One of my relatives was nearly overwhelmed with hospitality in an Australian village, by a colony of Argyllshire Celts, who had found out that he was a countryman.

I was lately told of a party of men who landed in South America, and addressed a woman whom they found in a hut, in seven different languages ; but in vain. At last, one of them spoke Gaelic, which he had not done for many years, and she answered, " Well, it is to thyself I would give the speech," for she was a native of Strathglas.

There is a Gaelic population in Upper Canada : there are Highland regiments in India : many of the Arctic explorers were Highlanders, and most of the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company still are : Dr. Livingstone is in South Africa; and what is true of Highlanders is equally true of Germans and Scandinavians, they are spread over the world. In short, the " migration of races," and " the diffusion of popular tales," is still going on, the whole human race is mingling together, and it is fair to argue from such facts, and to try to discover that which is unknown from that which is proved.

What is true of one Gaelic story is true of nearly all ; they contain within themselves evidence that they have been domesticated in the country for a long time, and that they came from the East, but they belong to the people now, wherever they came from; and they seem also to belong to the language.

Poems and compositions clearly do. In the prose tales, when animals speak, they talk in their natural key, so long as they speak Gaelic, and for that reason, among others, I believe them to be old traditions. The little birds speak in the key of all little birds (ee) ; they say, " beeg, beeg." The crow croaks his own music when he says, " gawrag, gawrag." When driven to say, " silly, silly," he no

longer speaks the language of nature. Grimm's German frog says, " warte, warte," he sings, " mach mir auf," and talks his own language. So does his Gaelic relative, in No. 33, when he says, —

" A chaomhag, a chaomhag,
An cuimhneach leat
An gealladh beag
A thug thu aig
An tobar dhomh,
A ghaoil, a ghaoil ?"

He then imitates the quarking and gurgling of real frogs in a pond in spring, in sounds which no Saxon letters can express ; but when he sings, —

" Open the door, my hinney, my heart,
Open the door, my ain wee thing,
And mind the words that you and I spak',
Down in the meadow, at the well spring,"

he is speaking in a foreign tongue, though the story has been domesticated in the Lowlands of Scot-land for many a long day, and is commonly told there still. The Scotch story has prob-ably been found and polished by some one long ago, but when the frog comes " loup, louping," he is at home in Low Country Scotch, and these words are probably as old as the story and the language.

If Motherwell's beautiful nursery songs were to be collected from oral recitation anywhere, they would prove themselves Scotch by this test : The watch-dog says, " wouff, wouff;" the hen is " chuckle;" the chickens, " wheetle, wheeties ;" the cock is "cockie-leerie-law;" the pigeon, "croodle-doo ;" the cow says, " moo." And so also the wood-pigeon who said, " Take two sheep, Taffy take two," spoke English ; but the blackcock, and cuckoo, and cock, in the Norse tales, who quarrelled about a cow, are easily known to be foreigners when they speak English, for the original Norse alone gives their true note. The Gaelic stories, tried by this test, certainly belong to the language as they do to the people ; and now let us see if they can teach us anything about the people, their origin, and their habits, past and present.

First, the manners are generally those of the day. The tales are like the feasts of the pauper maniac, Emperor of the world, who confided to his doctor that all his rich food tasted of oatmeal brose. Kings live in cottages, and sit on low stools. When they have coaches, they open the door themselves. The queen saddles the king's horse. The king goes to his own stable when he hears a noise there. Sports-men use guns. The fire is on the floor. Supernatural old women are found spinning " beyond" it, in the warm place of honour, in all primitive dwellings, even in a Lapland tent. The king's mother puts on the fire, and sleeps in the common room, as a peasant does. The cock sleeps on the rafters, the sheep on the floor, the bull behind the door. A ladder is a pole, with pegs stuck through it. Horses put their noses " into" bridles. When all Ireland passes in review before the princess, they go in at the front door and out at the back, as they would through a bothy ; and even that unexplained personage, the daughter of the king of the skies, has maids who chatter to her as freely as maids do to Highland mistresses. When the prince is at death's door for love of the beautiful lady in the swan's down robe, and the queen mother is in despair, she goes to the kitchen to talk over the matter.

The tales represent the actual, every-day life of those who tell them, with great fidelity. They have done the same, in all likelihood, time out of mind, and that which is not true of the present is, in all probability, true of the past ; and therefore something may be learned of forgotten ways of life.

If much is of home growth, if the fight with the dragon takes place at the end of a dark, quiet High-land loch, where real whales actually blow and splash, there are landscapes which are not painted from nature, as she is seen in the Isles, and these may be real pictures seen long ago by our ancestors. Men ride for days through forests, though the men who tell of them live in small islands, where there are only drift trees and bog pine. There are traces of foreign or forgotten laws or customs.

A man buys a wife as he would a cow, and acquires a right to shoot her, which is acknowledged as good law.

Cæsar tells of the Gauls, that " men have the power of life and death over their wives, as well as their children." It appears that an Icelandic betrothal was little more than the purchase of a wife ; and in this the story may be a true picture of the past.

Men are bound with the binding of the three smalls—waist, ankles, and wrists—tightened and tortured. The conqueror almost invariably asks the conquered what is his " eirig," an old law term for the price of men's blood, which varied with the rank of the injured man ; and when the vanquished has revealed his riches, the victor takes his life, and the spoil ; his arms, combs, basins, dresses, horses, gold and silver ; and such deeds may have been done. The tales which treat of the wars of Eirinn and Lochlann, and are full of metrical prose, describe arms and boats, helmets, spears, shields, and other gear ; ships that are drawn on shore, as Icelandic ships really were ; boats and arms similar to those which are figured on old stones in Iona and elsewhere, and are sometimes dug out of old graves and peat mosses. I believe them to be descriptions of real arms, and dresses, manners, and events.

For example, the warriors always abuse each other before they fight. So do the heroes of Ossian ; so do the heroes of Homer ; so do soldiers now. In the Times of the 29th of December 1859, in a letter from the camp at Ceuta in this passage : —

> " While fighting, even when only exchanging long shots, the Moors keep up a most hideous howling and shrieking, vituperating their enemies in bad Spanish, and making the mountains resound with the often-repeated epithet of ' *perros*' (dogs.) To this the Spaniards condescend not to reply, except with bullets, although in the civil war it was no unusual thing to hear Carlist and Christina skirmishers abusing each other, and especially indulging in unhandsome reflections upon each others' Sovereign."

Again, the fights are single combats, in which individuals attack masses and conquer. So were the Homeric combats. What will be the story told in Africa by the grandson of the Moor here described, when he sits on his flat roof or in his central court in Tetuan, as I have done with one of the Jews now ruined ; he will surely tell of his ancestor's deeds, repeat the words in which Achmed abused the unbeliever, and tell how he shot some mystical number of them with a single ball.

> " Upon the whole they stood their ground very stoutly, and some of them gave proof of great courage, advancing singly along the ridge until they caught sight of the first Spaniards posted below it, when they discharged their *espingardas* and retreated."

" Stories" had begun in Morocco by the 9th of January 1860, when the next letter appeared : —

> " The Moors have been giving out fantastical histories of their victories over the Spaniards, of their having taken redoubts, which they might have held had they thought it worth while, and in which they would have captured guns if the Christians had not been so prudent as to remove them beforehand. These are mere fables."

It may be so, but Moors seem to have fought as wild, brave, undisciplined troops have always fought—as Homer's Greeks fought, as Highlanders fought, and as Fionn and his heroes fought, according to tradition. Omit the magic of Maghach Colgar, forget that Moors are dark men, and this might be an account of Diarmaid and Conan in the story, or of their descendants as they were described in 1745 by those who were opposed to them : —

> " The Moors are generally tall powerful men, of ferocious aspect and great agility, and their mode of coming on, like so many howling savages, is not calculated to encourage and give confidence to lads who for the first time find themselves in action. It seems nearly impossible to make them prisoners. In one encounter (most of these little actions are made up of a number of small fights be-

tween a few companies of Spaniards and detached bodies of the Moors, who seem to have no idea of attacking in battalion or otherwise than irregularly), in which a number of Moors were killed, one of them was surrounded by four Cazadores, who came down upon him with fixed bayonets, shouting and signing to him not to fire, and that they would give him quarter. The Moor took no heed of their overtures, levelled his long gun, and shot one of them, whereupon he was, of course, put to death by the others."

So, looking to facts now occurring, and to history, " traditional fictions" look very true, for battles are still a succession of single combats, in which both sides abuse each other, and after which they boast. War is japine and cruel bloodshed, as described by old fishermen in Barra, and by the *Times'* correspondent at Tetuan ; and it is not altogether the chivalrous pastime which poets have sung.

In another class of tales, told generally as plain narrative, and which seem to belong to savage times, a period appears to be shadowed out when iron weapons were scarce, and therefore magical ; perhaps before the wars of Eirinn and Lochlann began ; when combs were inventions sufficiently new and wonderful to be magical also ; when horses were sacred, birds sooth-sayers ; apples, oak trees, wells, and swine, sacred or magical. In these the touch of the cold steel breaks all spells ; to relieve an enchanted prince it was but necessary to cut off his head ; the touch of the cold sword froze the marrow when the giant's heads leaped on again. So Hercules finished the Hydra with iron, though it was hot. The white sword of light which shone so that the giant's red-haired servant used it as a torch when he went to draw water by night, was surely once a rare bright steel sword, when most swords were of bronze, as they were in early times, unless it is still older, and a mythological flash of lightning.

This CLAIDHEAMH GEAL SOLUIS is almost always mentioned as the property of giants, or of other supernatural beings, and is one of the magic gifts for which men contend with them, and fight with each other ; and in this the Gaelic tradition agrees with other popular lore.

Fionn had a magic sword forged by a fairy smith, according to a story sent me from Islay, by Mr. Carmichael. King Arthur had a magic sword. The Manks hero, " Olave" of Norway, had a sword with a Celtic name, " Macabuin," made by a smith who was surely a Celt,—"Loan Maclibhuin," though he was " The dark Smith of Drontheim" in the story. [2] King Arthur and his sword belong to the Bretons and to many other languages, besides Welsh ; and the Bretons have a wild war song, " The wine of the Gauls, and the dance of the sword," which is given in Barzaz Breiz (1846). [3]

There is a magic sword in the Volsung tale, called " Gram," which was the gift of Odin ; [4] and a famous sword in the Niebelungen lied ; and there are famous swords in many popular tales ; but an iron sword was a god long ago amongst the Scythians.[5] " An antique iron sword" was placed on a vast pile of brushwood as a temple in every district, at the seat of government, and served as the image of Mars. Sacrifices of cattle and of horses were made to it, and " more victims were offered thus than to all the rest of their gods." Even men were sacrificed ; and it is said that the weapons found in Scythian tombs are usually of bronze, " but the sword at the great tomb at Kertch was of iron." It seems, then, that an iron sword really was once worshipped by a people with whom iron was rare. Iron is rare, while stone and bronze weapons are common in British tombs, and the sword of these stories is a personage. It shines, it cries out—the lives of men are bound up in it. In one story a fox changes himself into the sword of light, and the edge of the real Sword being turned towards a wicked " muime," turned all her spells back upon herself, and she fell a withered fagot.

And so this mystic sword may, perhaps, have been a god amongst the Celts, or the god of the people with whom Celts contended somewhere on their long journey to the west. It is a fiction now, but it may be founded on fact, and that fact probably was the first use of iron.

Amongst the stories described in the index to the Gaelic MSS. in Edinburgh is one in which the hero goes to Scythia and to Greece, and ends his adventures in Ireland. And in the " Chronicles of the Eri," 1822, by O'Connor, chief of the prostrated people of his nation, Irish is usually called " the Phœnician dialect of the Scythian language." On such questions I will not venture. Celts may or may

not be Scythians, but as a collector of curiosities, I may fairly compare my museum with other curious things ; and the worship of the Scimitar, 2200 years ago, by a people who are classed with the Indo-European races, appears to have some bearing on all magic swords from the time of Herodotus down to the White Sword of Light of the West Highlands.

If iron weapons, to which supernatural virtues are ascribed, acquired their virtue when iron was rare, and when its qualities were sufficiently new to excite wonder—then other things made of iron should have like virtues ascribed to them, and the magic should be transferred from the sword to other new inventions ; and such is the case.

In all popular tales of which I know anything, some mysterious virtue is attributed to iron ; and in many of them a gun is the weapon which breaks the spells. In the West it is the same.

A keeper told me that he was once called into a house by an old woman to cure her cow, which was " bewitched," and which was really sick. The ceremony was performed, according to the directions of the old woman, with becoming gravity. The cow was led out, and the gun loaded, and then it was solemnly fired off over the cow's back, and the cure was supposed to be complete.

In the story of the hunter, when the widow's son aims at the enchanted deer, he sees through the spell, only when he looks over the sight, and while the gun is cocked, but when he has aimed three times, the spell is broken and the lady is free.

So in a story (I think Irish) which I have read somewhere, a man shoots from his hip at a deer, which seems to be an old man whenever he looks over the sight. He aims well, and when he comes up finds only the body of a very old man, which crumbles into dust, and is carried away by the wind, bit by bit, as he looks at it. An iron weapon is one of the guards which the man takes into the fairy hill in the story of the Smith, No. 28. A sharpshooter fires off his gun to frighten the troll in " the Old Dame and her Hen ;" the boy throws the steel from his tinder box over the magic horse, and tames him at once in the Princess on the Glass Hill.[6] And so on throughout, iron is invested with magic power in popular tales and mythology ; the last iron weapon invented, and the first, the gun and the sword, are alike magical ; a " bit of a rusty reaping hook" does equally good service, and an old horse shoe is as potent a spell against the powers of evil as any known ; for one will be found on most stable doors in England.

Now comes the question, Who were these powers of evil who cannot resist iron ? These fairies who shoot stone arrows, and are of the foes to the human race ? Is all this but a dim, hazy recollection of war between a people who had iron weapons and a race who had not? the race whose remains are found all over Europe?

If these were wandering tribes they had leaders, if they were warlike they had weapons. There is a smith in the pantheon of many nations. Vulcan was a smith ; Thor wielded a hammer ; even Fionn had a hammer, which was heard in Lochlann when struck in Eirinn, according to the story found midway in Barra. Fionn may have borrowed his hammer from Thor long ago, or both may have got theirs from Vulcan, or all three may have brought hammers with them from the land where some primeval smith wielded the first sledge hammer, but may not all these smith gods be the smiths who made iron weapons for those who fought with the skin-clad warriors who shot flint arrows, and who are now bogles, fairies, and demons?

In any case, tales about smiths seem to belong to mythology, and to be common property. Thus the Norse smith, who cheated the evil one, [7] has an Irish equivalent in the Three Wishes, [8] and a Gaelic story, " The Soldier," is of the same class, and has a Norse equivalent in the Lad and the Deil. There are many of the same class in Grimm ; and the same ideas pervade them all. There is war between the smiths and soldiers, and the devil ; iron, and horses' hoofs, hammers, swords, and guns come into play ; the fiend is a fool, and he has got the worst of the fight ; according to the people, at all events, ever since St. Dunstan took him by the nose with a pair of tongs. In all probability the fiend of

popular tales is own brother to the Gruagach and Glashan, and was once a skin-clad savage, or the god of a savage race.

If this theory be correct, if these are dim recollections of savage times and savage people, then other magic gear, the property of giants, fairies, and bogles, should resemble things which are precious now amongst savage or half civilized tribes, or which really have been prized amongst the old inhabitants of these islands, or of other parts of the world ; and such is often the case.

The work of art which is most sought after in Gaelic tales, next to the white glave of light, is a pair of combs.

CIR MHIN OIR AGUS CIR GHARBH AIRGIOD, a fine golden comb and a coarse comb of silver, are worth a deadly fight with the giants in many a story.

The enchanted prince, when he ceases to be a raven, is found as a yellow ringletted beautiful man, with a golden comb in the one hand and a silver comb in the other. Maol a' Chliobain invades the giant's house to steal the same things for the king. When the coarse comb is forgotten the king's coach falls as a withered faggot. In another story which I have, it is said of a herd who had killed a giant and taken his castle, " He went in and he opened the first room and there was not a thing in it. He opened another, and it was full of gold and silver and the treasures of the world. Then he opened a drawer, and he took a comb out of it, and when he would give a sweep with it on the one side of his head, a shower of gold would fall out of that side ; and when he would give a sweep on the other side, a shower of silver would fall from that side. Then he opened another room, and it was full of every sort of food that a man might think there had ever been."

And so in many other instances the comb is a treasure for which men contend with giants. It is associated with gold, silver, dresses, arms, meat, and drink ; and it is magical.

It is not so precious in other collections of popular tales, but the same idea is to be traced in them all. There is a water-spirit in Grimm which catches two children, and when they escape they throw behind them a brush, a comb, and a mirror, which replace the stone, the twig, and the bladder of water, which the Gaelic prince finds in the ear of the filly, and throws behind him to arrest the giant who is in pursuit. In the nix of the mill pond an old woman gives a golden comb to a lady, and she combs her black hair by the light of the moon at the edge of a pond, and the water-spirit shews the husband's head. So also in Snow White the wicked queen combs the hair of the beautiful princess with a poisoned comb, and throws her into a deadly magic sleep. That princess is black, white, and red, like the giant in No. 2, and like the lady in Conal ; and like a lady in a Breton story ; and generally foreign stories in which combs are mentioned as magical, have equivalents in Gaelic. For example, the incidents in the French story of Prince Cherie, in which gifted children comb jewels from their hair, bear a general resemblance to many Gaelic and German stories. Now there is a reason for everything, though it is not always easy to find it out ; and the importance of the comb in these stories may have a reason also.

In the first place, though every civilized man and woman now owns a comb, it is a work of art which necessarily implies the use of tools, and considerable mechanical skill. A man who had nothing but a knife could hardly make a comb ; and a savage with flint weapons would have to do without. A man with a comb, then, implies a man who has made some progress in civilization ; and a man without a comb, a savage, who, if he had learned its use, might well covet such a possession. If a black-haired savage, living in the cold north, were to comb his hair on a frosty night, it is to be presumed that the same thing would happen which now takes place when fair ladies or civilized men comb their hair. Crackling sparks of electricity were surely produced when men first combed their hair with a bone comb ; and it seems to need but a little fancy and a long time to change the bright sparks into brilliant jewels, or glittering gold and silver and bright stars, and to invest the rare and costly thing which produced such marvels with magic power.

There is evidence throughout all popular tales that combs were needed. Translations are vague, because translators are bashful ; but those who have travelled amongst half civilized people, understand what is meant when the knight lays his head on the lady's knee, and she " dresses his hair." In German, Norse, Breton, and Gaelic, it is the same.

From the mention of the magic comb, then, it appears that these legends date from an early, rude period, for the time when combs were so highly prized, and so little used, is remote.

In Wilson's " Prehistoric Annals of Scotland," page 424, is a drawing of an old bone comb of very rude workmanship, found in a burgh in Orkney, together with part of a deer's horn and a human skeleton ; another was found in a burgh in Caithness ; a third is mentioned ; and I believe that such combs are commonly found in old British graves.

At page 554, another drawing is given of one of a pair of combs found in a grave in Orkney. The teeth of the comb were fastened between plates of bone, rivetted together with copper nails, and the comb was decorated with ornamental carvings. With these, brooches of a peculiar form were discovered. Similar brooches are commonly found in Denmark. I have seen many of them in museums at Bergen and Copenhagen ; and I own a pair which were found in an old grave in Islay, together with an amber bead and some fragments of rusted iron.

A bronze comb is also mentioned at page 300, as having been found in Queen Mary's Mount, a great cairn near the battlefield of Langside, which was pulled to pieces to build stone dykes, and which was found to contain rude arms, bones, rings of bituminous shale, and other things which are referred to very early pre-historic ages.

At page 500 Mr. Wilson mentions a great number of monuments in Scotland on which combs are represented, together with two-handed mirrors and symbols, for which deep explanations and hidden meanings have been sought and found. Combs, mirrors, and shears are also represented on early Roman tombs, and hidden meanings have been assigned to them; but Mr. Wilson holds that these are but indications of the sex of the buried person. Joining all this together, and placing it besides the *magic* attributed to combs in these Highland stories, this view appears to be the most reasonable. The sword of the warrior is very commonly sculptured on the old gravestones in the Western Isles. It is often twisted into a cross, and woven with those endless knots which resemble certain eastern designs. Strange nondescript animals are often figured about the sword, with tails which curl, and twist, and sprout into leaves, and weave themselves into patterns. Those again resemble illuminations in old Irish and Gaelic manuscripts, and when the most prized of the warrior's possessions is thus figured on his tomb, and is buried with him, it is but reasonable to suppose that the comb, which was so valued as to be buried with its owner, was figured on the monument for the same reason ; and that sword and comb were, in fact, very highly prized at some period by those who are buried in the tombs, as the stories now represent that they were by men and giants.

So here again the popular fictions seem to have a foundation of fact.

Another magical possession is the apple. It is mentioned more frequently in Gaelic tales than in any collection which I know, but the apple plays its part in Italian, German, and Norse also. When the hero wishes to pass from Islay to Ireland he pulls sixteen apples and throws them into the sea, one by one, and he steps from one to the other. When the giant's daughter runs away with the king's son, she cuts an apple into a mystical number of small bits, and each bit talks. When she kills the giant she puts an apple under the hoof of the magic filly and he dies, for his life is in the apple, and it is crushed. When the byre is cleansed, it is so clean that a golden apple would run from end to end and never raise a stain. There is a gruagach who has a golden apple, which is thrown at all comers, and unless they are able to catch it they die ; when it is caught and thrown back by the hero, Gruagach an Ubhail dies. There is a game called cluich an ubhail, the apple play, which seems to have been a deadly game whatever it was. When the king's daughter transports the soldier to the green island on the magic tablecloth, he finds magic apples which transform him, and others which cure him, and by which he

transforms the cruel princess and recovers his magic treasures. In German a cabbage does the same thing.

When the two eldest idle king's sons go out to herd the giant's cattle, they find an apple tree whose fruit moves up and down as they vainly strive to pluck it.

And so on throughout, whenever an apple is mentioned in Gaelic stories it has something marvellous about it.

So in German, in the Man of Iron, a princess throws a golden apple as a prize, which the hero catches three times and carries off and wins.

In Snow White, where the poisoned comb occurs, there is a poisoned magic apple also.

In the Old Griffin, the sick princess is cured by rosy-cheeked apples.

In the Giant with the Three Golden Hairs, one of the questions to be solved is, why a tree which used to bear golden apples does not now bear leaves ? and the next question is about a well.

So in the White Snake, a servant who acquires the knowledge of the speech of birds by tasting a white snake, helps creatures in distress, gets their aid, and procures a golden apple from three ravens, which " flew over the sea even to the end of the world, where stands the tree of life." When he had got the apple he and the princess ate it, and married and lived happily ever after.

So in Wolf's collection, in the story of the Wonderful Hares, a golden apple is the gift for which the finder is to gain a princess ; and that apple grew on a sort of tree of which there was but one in the whole world.

In Norse it is the same ; the princess on the Glass Hill held three golden apples in her lap, and he who could ride up the hill and carry off the apples was to win the prize ; and the princess rolled them down to the hero, and they rolled into his shoe.

The good girl plucked the apples from the tree which spoke to her when she went down the well to the underground world ; but the ill-tempered step-sister thrashed down the fruit ; and when the time of trial came, the apple tree played its part and protected the good girl.

So in French, a singing apple is one of the marvels which the Princess Belle Etoile, and her brothers and her cousin, bring from the end of the world, after all manner of adventures ; and in that story the comb, the stars and jewels in the hair, the talking sooth-saying bird, the magic water, the horse, the wicked step-mother, and the dragon, all appear ; and there is a Gaelic version of that story. In short, that French story agrees with Gaelic stories, and with a certain class of German tales ; and contains within itself much of the machinery and incident which is scattered else- where, in collections of tales gathered in modern times amongst the people of various countries.

So again in books of tales of older date, and in other languages, apples and marvels are associated.

In Straparola is an Italian story remarkably like the Gaelic Sea Maiden, and clearly the same in ground-work as Princess Belle Etoile. A lady, when she has lost her husband, goes off to the Atlantic Ocean with three golden apples ; and the mermaid who had swallowed the husband, shews first his head, then his body to the waist, and then to the knees ; each time for a golden apple ; and the incidents of that story are all to be found elsewhere, and most of them are in Gaelic.

So again, in the Arabian Nights, there is a long story. The Three Apples, which turns upon the stealing of one, which was a thing of great price, though it was not magical in the story.

So in classical times, an apple of discord was the prize of the fairest ; and the small beginning from which so much of all that is most famous in ancient lore takes its rise ; three golden apples were the prize of one of the labours of Hercules, and these grew in a garden which fable has placed far to the westwards, and learned commentators have placed in the Cape Verde Islands.

So then it appears that apples have been mysterious and magical from the earliest of times ; that they were sought for in the west, and valued in the east ; and now when the popular tales of the far west are examined, apples are the most important of natural productions, and invested with the magic which belongs to that which is old and rare, and which may once have been sacred.

It is curious that the forbidden fruit is almost always mentioned in English as an apple ; and this notion prevails in France to such a degree, that when that mad play. La Propriete c'est le Vol, was acted in Paris in 1846, the first scene represented the Garden of Eden with a tree, and a board on which was written " il est défendu de manger de ces pommes."

And it is stated in grave histories that the Celtic priests held apples sacred ; so here again popular tales hold their own.

[1] Lyell's Principles of Geology, p. 267.
[2] Train's History of the Isle of Man, vol. 2, p. 177.
[3] The Gaelic word for a sword proves that English, French, Breton, and Gaelic have much in common—(Eng.) glave, (Fr.) glaive, (Breton) korol ar c' hleze — dance of the sword, (Gaelic) claidheamh—pronounced, glaive, the first letter being a soft " c," or hard " g," the word usually spelt, *clay*more. Languages said to be derived from Latin do not follow their model so closely as these words do one another—(Lat.) gladius, (Spanish) espada, (Italian) spada ; and the northern tongues seem to have preferred some original which resembles the English word, sword. If " spada" belongs to the language from which all these are supposed to have started, these seem to have used it for a more peaceful iron weapon, a spade.
[4] Norse Tales, Introduction, 62.
[5] At page 54 of Rawlinson's Herodotus, vol. 3, is the translation of the passage in which this worship is described.
[6] Norse Tales, Nos. 3 and 13.
[7] Norse Tales, 16, 53.
[8] Carleton. Dublin, 1846. P. 330.

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