

FAIRIES

IN THE WORLD OF ENCHANTMENT

Belief in fairies forms a phase of early folk-thought, and it has partly a realistic basis, as in ancient India, for example, where popular superstition transforms a lower race of inhabitants like the Nagas into serpent men and serpent women dwelling in enchanted regions beneath the earth.

Of all the minor creations of mythology, the fairies are the most beautiful, the most numerous and most memorable in literature. They are not the immediate product of any one country or of any one period, but mixture and connection of races have in this, as in many other cases, so changed the original folk product that it is difficult to disengage and separate the different strains that have gone to the making or molding of the result as we have it.

Fairy-lore contains certain elements of ancestor worship, of mythology and of older religious beliefs which advancing knowledge look upon as antiquated and relegated to the supernatural. The tendency of people to perpetuate the lore of the unseen world is very strong, and it is interesting to notice the changes in its attitude as culture progresses. A study of fairy stories is especially instructive in this regard. Extensive collections of these tales among many different people have been made through the influence of folk-lorists, and scholars have secured valuable results in this interesting field of research.

The fairies or fays, whichever you may wish to call them, are supposed to preside at the birth and influence the destiny of men, and are often described as of delicate, unearthly, ravishing beauty. The enjoyment of their charm is, however, generally qualified by some restriction or compact, the breaking of which is a cause of calamity to the lover and all his race, as in the notable tale of Melusine.

Melusine, by enchantment, built the castle of Lusignan for her husband. It was her nature to take, every week, the form of a serpent from the waist below. The transformation being once, contrary to compact, witnessed by her husband, she left him with much wailing, and was said to return and give warning by her appearance and great shrieks whenever one of the race of Lusignan was about to die.

There seems little in the characteristics of the fairies of romance to distinguish them from human beings, except their supernatural knowledge and power. They seem to be subject to such human passions as love, jealousy, envy and revenge. To this class belongs the fairies of Boiardo, Ariosto, Spenser.

To the elves and duergar of the northern mythology we must go for