KATHARINE BRIGGS: COLLECTED WORKS

THE VANISHING PEOPLE

A Study of Traditional Fairy Beliefs

Katharine Briggs

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original book may be apparent.

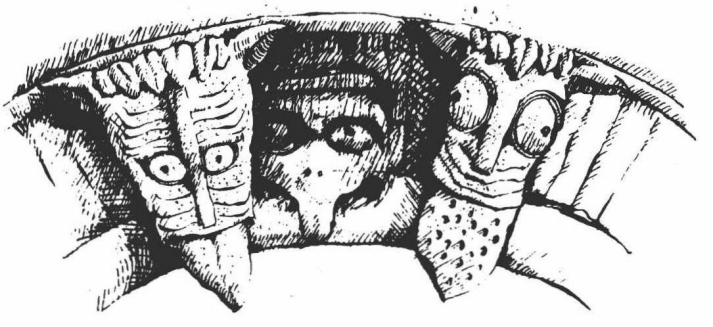
THE VANISHING PEOPLE

TO KATHARINE LAW AND CAROL DUFF

This is the first book written entirely at Southolme, so it is fitting that it should be dedicated to them, whose kindness and enthusiasm made it possible.

The Vanishing People

A Study of Traditional Fairy Beliefs



Katharine M. Briggs
Illustrations by Mary I. French

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PREFACE

THE VANISHING PEOPLE would seem to be an appropriate descriptive name for the fairies of tradition for two reasons. The first is that they are generally supposed to be visible, to those people who are able to see them, between one eye-blink and the next. Seventy years ago, in my childhood, one was often told not to fix one's eyes, presumably because this was interpreted as an effort to watch the fairies. An Irishman who had captured a Lepracaun could keep hold of him only so long as he did not glance aside for an instant. The fairies, if they wished, could made themselves visible to all but the most insensitive mortals and they also became visible to those who stepped into fairy territory or were in possession of a four-leafed clover. As we shall see, those who had anointed their eyes with fairy ointment could see them constantly, whether they had made themselves visible or not, but, as a rule, the fairies were supposed to have the power of appearing or vanishing at will. The other reason is that from the fourteenth century the fairies were supposed to have left the country, either recently or some time ago. Chaucer's Wife of Bath puts their departure 'manye hundred yeres ago', in King Arthur's time; 'But now can no man see none elves mo.'

In the seventeenth century Bishop Corbet puts them back into pre-Reformation England:

But since of late Elizabeth
  And later James came in,
They never danced on any heath
  As when the time have been.

Yet they still lingered on.

In the nineteenth century Hugh Miller recorded the final departure of the fairies from Scotland, a miserable and rather squalid cavalcade, the last of whom said, 'The People of Peace shall never more be seen in Scotland'. In Oxfordshire A. J. Evans, writing in *The Folk-Lore Journal*, told how an old man called Will Hughes had seen them dancing near the Rollright Stones and disappearing into a hole close to the King Stone. This was supposed to be their final disappearance from England, but even in the Midlands, now, in the twentieth century, with all its commitment to modern science and its own supersitions of extrasensory perceptions, of flying saucers and Loch Ness monsters, people still claim, rather diffidently, that they have encountered the fairies. As for Ireland and the

Highlands of Scotland they do not even pretend to think that they have gone, though it is often said that fewer people now believe in them. Truly it seems that they are always vanishing and always popping back again.

In this short study of fairy beliefs, I have dealt almost entirely with the traditions of Great Britain and Ireland, but we are an admixture of races here and it would be parochial and even misleading to confine ourselves to these islands alone, without a glance at the 'creatures of a middle nature between man and angels' who have exercised the imagination of our neighbours. In the first chapter which deals with a theme deeply rooted in Man's psychological experience, I have touched on the legends and beliefs about the supernatural passage of time which are to be found in other cultures. These have been only superficially touched on, however, and in other chapters I have contracted my scope to those supernatural creatures which may be thought to have blood relationship to the British fairies.

When we are disentangling oral traditions we are bound to find great variations in the names given and in the beliefs held about them. These occur not only individually and regionally but even sometimes in the same individual. Many people find no intellectual discomfort in holding two different, and even contrary beliefs, at the same time. They have possibly received information from different sources in their childhood and it has never occurred to them to try to reconcile them. Many of the differences are regional. For instance, the words *Pixies, Piskies* and *Pigsies* are used for almost indistinguishable creatures. The first is most commonly used in Somerset, the second in Cornwall and the last in Devon, but even this is not invariable. Theological differences sometimes entered into fairylore. For instance, the word *Hobgoblin* may puzzle many people. *Goblins* are generally taken to be evil and malicious spirits, hostile to mankind. *Hobs* and *lobs* are on the whole friendly towards men and ready to be kind to those who treat them civilly. The prefix *Hob* suggests a helpful spirit. Thus *Hobthrust* is a North Country Brownie and *Hobgoblins* are the great class of spirits who perform helpful labours for the country people. To most of the Puritans, however, all fairies were evil creatures, servants of the Devil, and Bunyan's 'Hobgoblin nor foul Fiend' has made a deep impression on our vocabulary. The early Christian missionaries, with whole tribes and nations to convert, extended a good deal of toleration to the more harmless pagan practices and beliefs. Some they Christianized successfully, but a good deal of undigested matter remained in the faith of the common people into late medieval times, which to the reformers appeared pure heathendom. We find this duality surviving in the fairy beliefs. Those who are bewildered by the profusion of fairy names will find

a glossary of them in the appendix, which will help them to disentangle regional variations in the names from differences of character and function.

Readers who are interested in the international aspect of the fairy may find the lists of Type and Index Numbers at the end of the book useful and suggestive. If they consult the two books cited they will gain a very fair notion of the scope and range of the beliefs. They will find plenty to go upon.

K. M. Briggs

CHAPTER 1 – THE SUPERNATURAL PASSAGE OF TIME IN FAIRYLAND

LL THROUGH the world, wherever the idea of Fairyland or of a supernatural country was evolved, it was accompanied by a strong feeling of the relativity of time. This may well have been founded on the experiences of a dream or of a state of trance. It is common in a dream to pass through long and varied experiences in the mortal time occupied between, let us say, beginning to fall out of bed and landing with a bump on the floor. In a state of trance, on the other hand, the mental processes can be so retarded that one train of thought is slowly pursued for several hours. Both these psychological experiences are reproduced in legends of visits to fairyland or to the Other World. The latter is the most frequent, but the first is also found.

Hartland, who devotes two chapters of his book, *The Science of Fairy Tales* to 'The Supernatural Lapse of Time in Fairyland', gives several examples of this *multum in parvo* effect.[1] Many of them are illustrations of religious or philosophic concepts rather than tales of fairyland. We have, for instance, Mohammed's journey into Paradise on the back of the beast Alborac, in which he passed through all the Seven Heavens and had a long conversation with Allah Himself deep in the Seventh, and yet the whole experience took only the tenth part of a night. There is also the experience of a Brahmin who fell into a meditation on the state of the departed, in the course of which his spirit left him and entered into the body of a new-born child. This child grew up as a cobbler, travelled into another country, where he was chosen as king and reigned prosperously until his former low caste became known, when his subjects fell into despair and many of them fled the country while he himself committed suicide. His spirit then re-entered his former body which it had only left for a few minutes of mortal time, though the actuality of his experiences as a cobbler was demonstrated by the arrival of some fugitives from the country which he had formerly ruled. On the same basic theme Hartland also gives a legend of a real fairyland which he draws from Sikes' *British Goblins*. A young lad from Pembrokeshire joined a fairy ring, and when the dance was over he was led into a most beautiful country in which there was a glittering palace set in the midst of an exquisite garden, where he was told he might live as long as he liked if he observed one prohibition. In the centre of the garden there was a well where many gold and silver fish swam, and he was strictly forbidden to drink from the water of that well. The longing to do so grew

on him, until one day he dipped his cupped hands into the water. As he touched it a shriek rang through the garden, and he found himself among his father's sheep on the cold hillside. All the days and weeks as the temptation grew on him had taken barely an hour of earthly time.

These stories are much rarer, however, than those in which a year and a day has appeared to be no more than a half-hour's dance, or two months of happiness have taken two hundred years of mortal time. These tales have a worldwide distribution and are told of various supernatural states other than Fairyland. A medieval Christian legend is that in which a monk is entranced listening to the singing of a snow-white bird, and stands there, rapt into heavenly places and invisible to the inhabitants of the passing world until he returns to it, sometimes after three hundred years of listening. The best-known version of the story is that told by Longfellow in *The Golden Legend*,[2] but there are versions of it scattered all over Europe. An early one from Germany is told by Hartland of the Abbey of Afflinghem. In the time of Fulgentius, who was Abbot at the end of the eleventh century, a strange monk knocked at the gate and said that he had left it that morning after matins to walk in the forest. His story was that during matins they sang the ninetieth psalm, and when they came to the verse, 'A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday', he fell into a deep meditation, and sat until all the brethren had left the chapel. As he was still sitting in the choir a little bird flew in, and sang such heavenly strains that his soul was rapt, and he followed the bird into the forest that surrounded the monastery. He stood listening to the bird until it flew away, and then returned to the monastery, but found everything strangely different. Fulgentius asked him who had been king and abbot when he left the chapel that morning, and found that both had died more than three hundred years before. Hartland does not tell us whether the monk crumbled into dust as soon as he tasted the first mouthful of human food, as happens in many of these stories, in one, for instance, told in Transylvania. Both these legends are quoted by Hartland from Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*.[3] Not all these legends, however, are from Christian sources. In the second branch of *The Mabinogion*,[4] 'Branwen Daughter of Llyr', when the poor remnant of the great host which Bran the Blessed had led over to Ireland to avenge the cruel indignities inflicted on Branwen were carrying his head back to London to be buried under the White Mount, they paused to feast in Harlech. They were detained there for seven years by the singing of the three magical birds of Rhiannon, which made them forget all their sorrows and losses. Bran was credited with having introduced Christianity into Wales, but it is generally accepted that Rhiannon, Pryderi and the other heroes and heroines of the

Four Branches of the Mabinogi belonged to the primitive deities of Wales as the Dananns did of Ireland.

In the stories which I have just mentioned it was singing, visions, dreams which stretched time into another dimension, but journeys into another world or realm are still more likely to do so. Urashima Taro, one of the most widespread and best-known of the Japanese folktales, dating from as early as the eighth century, might well be a tale of a mermaiden from Ireland or Brittany. The emphasis on filial piety, however, makes it seem specially oriental. Perhaps the variant of the tale best known in England is that published during the First World War in *Edmund Dulac's Fairy Book*[5]. In this version Urashima Taro, the devout son of an aging mother, who has avoided matrimony because he did not earn enough to keep three, was summoned by a turtle who came three times to his hook, to the Kingdom under the Water to meet a beautiful sea-maiden with whom he spent several days in great happiness. He began, however, to be anxious about his mother, and begged to return to get food for her. His bride was loth to part with him, but sent him to shore with a casket, which she told him not to open. He recognised the beach, but beyond it everything was changed. The hut in which he and his mother had lived was gone, and he saw no one that he knew. At length in despair he opened the casket. A mist came out of it, his face changed, his back bent, his limbs failed him, and in a few moments he crumbled into dust. Two hundred years had passed since he left the land, and they had been released out of the casket. The version recorded in *Folktales of Japan*[6] has a happier though a rather indeterminate ending. According to this the sea-princess gave Urashima a three-tiered jewel box and told him that he might open it in case of necessity. He found himself in a changed land, as in the older version, and went into a house where an old man was weaving straw. He asked him if he had ever heard of Urashima Taro. 'My grandfather used to tell me a story of a fisherman of that name', the old man replied, 'who was carried into the depths of the sea by the Dragon King. But he never came back again'.

'And what happened to his Mother?' asked Urashima Taro.

'Oh, she died long ago,' said the old man, and Urashima left him, and found the ruins of his former home, with nothing remaining except the stone wash-basin and the garden steps. He sat down in reverie, and at last he opened the three-tiered box. In the first tray there was a crane's feather, from the second only a puff of smoke came out, in the third there was a mirror, and looking into it Urashima saw old age coming over his face, but as he looked the crane's feather curled round his neck and he changed into a crane. He flew up and circled round his mother's grave. As