

The knotted black silk handkerchief

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“A WOMAN from Rahoy (*Rath Thuait*) on Loch Sunart-side was taken with her babe to *Beinn Iadain* (Ben Iadain), a lofty hill in the parish of Morvern, rising to a height of above 2,000 feet, and at one time of great note as an abode of the Fairies. Her husband had laid himself down for a few minutes’ rest in the front of the bed and fallen asleep. When he awoke his wife and child were gone.

“They were taken, the woman afterwards told, to a’ *Chòmhlà Dhubh* (“the Black Door”), as the spot forming the Fairy entrance into the interior of the mountain is called. On entering, they found a large company of men, women, and children. A fair-haired boy among them came and warned the woman not to eat any food the Fairies might offer, but to hide it in her clothes. He said they had got his own mother to eat this food, and in consequence he could not now get her away.

“Finding the food offered her was slighted, the head Fairy sent off a party to bring a certain man’s cow. They came back saying they could not touch the cow as its right knee was resting on the plant *bruchorcan* (dirk grass). They were sent for another cow, but they came back saying they could not touch it either, as the dairymaid, after milking it, had struck it with the shackle or cow-spancel (*buarach*).

“That same night the woman appeared to her husband in his dreams, telling him where she was, and that by going for her and taking the black silk handkerchief she wore on her marriage day, with three knots tied upon it, he might recover her. He tied the knots, took the handkerchief and a friend with him, entered the hill at the Black Door, and recovered his wife and child. The white-headed boy accompanied them for some distance from the Black Door, but returned to the hill, and is there still in all probability.”

That’s one of the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell’s stories in his book “Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands” (1900). It’s full of talismans, but the one I want to concentrate on here is the knotted handkerchief. Why knots? Why a handkerchief? Do you “wear” a handkerchief?

Whatever its precise nature, we can safely say that as marriage is a sacrament, it was already a consecrated item, and that the three knots would be tied in it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Let’s concentrate on the knots now, and return to the handkerchief later.

In “Taboo and the Perils of the Soul” (1911), part two of “The Golden Bough”, Sir James Frazer devotes a substantial section to traditional beliefs about knots from all over the world. Knots were tied to hinder the consummation of marriage, untied to encourage it, untied to assist childbirth, tied or untied to bring or banish disease, injury and death, tied for protection, and untied after death to ease the journey to the hereafter. Let’s look at each category in turn.

All over Europe down to the eighteenth century it was believed that if you wanted to prevent a marriage being consummated all you had to do was wait until the priest said “Whom God hath joined together let no man separate”, then lock a lock or tie a knot in a cord, muttering, “Whom God hath joined together let the Devil separate.” Afterwards you threw the lock or cord away into water.

Frazer tells us that in 1718 the parliament of Bordeaux sentenced some one to be burned alive for spreading desolation through a whole family by means of knotted cords. Then he comes to some Scottish evidence. In 1705 two persons were condemned to death for stealing some charmed knots which a woman had made with the aim of ruining the wedded bliss of Spalding of Ashintilly. Elsewhere in Highland Perthshire, even at the end of that century it was still normal for the bride and groom to take the precaution of untying every knot in their clothing before the wedding. “When the ceremony was over, and the bridal party had left the church, the bridegroom immediately retired one way with some young men to tie the knots that had been loosed a little before; and the bride in like manner withdrew somewhere else to adjust the disorder of her dress.”

Frazer proceeds to range over the world, finding that in Syria the bridegroom should have no knot knotted or button buttoned. By contrast, in the Greek island of Lesbos he wears in his girdle (underpants to you and me) a piece of net or an old mantilla belonging to the bride

in which knots have been tied. These, presumably, are the knots which bind the happy couple together.

We're coming close here to the knotted black silk handkerchief; in fact in North Africa, when the groom goes off on horseback to fetch his bride, the ill-wisher quietly puts an actual handkerchief on some part of his body, then fetches it back and puts a knot on it. That will make him impotent for sure. Another method is to stand behind the horse with an open clasp-knife or scissors, call out the groom's name, and if he answers, shut the knife or scissors with a snap. The antidote is for his mother to buy a penknife and open it that night at the moment her son is about to enter the bedroom.

Comparing these various examples, it's obvious that there's a potential contrast between societies such as in Lesbos and the Highlands where pre-marital sex was often practised (here it was called "bundling" or *caithris na h-oidhche*) and those such as in Syria and North Africa where the bride must be a virgin. In the former, knots might symbolise a connection already made; in the latter, they could only mean impotence.

Next, childbirth. To assist delivery, you had to untie and unlock everything. Frazer's examples are so universal that they boil down to a catalogue of worldly goods and an exercise of the imagination. At one extreme are the Australian Aborigines, who had next to nothing – the father of the child simply took off his "girdle" and armbands and went out naked into the scrub for three days. At the other are the good people of Chittagong in Bangladesh. When a woman there was having difficulty the midwife would order doors and windows to be thrown open, bottles uncorked, casks unbunged, cows unloosed in the stall, horses untethered in the stable, dogs untied in the kennel, and sheep, hens and ducks set free.

In other places boxes and chests might be opened, the lids of pots and pans taken off, swords unsheathed, shoelaces untied, boats unmoored, axes removed from the log they were stuck in, women politely asked to unbraid their hair, men to uncross their legs and unclasp their hands. Somewhere in the middle of all this are ourselves: as Campbell says, at childbirth superstitious people in Tíre used to open every lock in the house.

The tying and untying of knots to bring or banish disease, injury and misfortune would include their use by witches to raise a wind, a common motif in Scottish stories; equally, an example cited by Frazer from Gujarat in India is not untypical. "If a man takes seven cotton threads, goes to a place where an owl is hooting, strips naked, ties a knot at each hoot, and fastens the knotted thread round the right arm of a man sick of the fever, the malady will leave him."

In Argyll, to cure internal ailments a *cailleach* would rub the part with a thread that had three knots in it – just as in our handkerchief – then burn two of them in the fire, saying, "I put the disease on the fire." Then she tied the rest of the thread, with the single knot, round the neck of the person or the tail of the cow, in such a way that it couldn't be seen.

Campbell himself describes a way to cure warts with knots. It was done, he says, by putting in a bag as many knots or joints of straw or grass (*glùinean shop*) as there were warts to be banished, and leaving them on the public road. The warts would be transferred to whoever picked up the bag!

It's a short step from this to the use of knots for protection. In Russia nets were a popular amulet, being full of knots – when a bride put on her wedding-dress a fishing-net might be flung over her, and similarly the groom and his companions often wore pieces of net or "tight-drawn girdles", for, as Frazer says, "before a wizard can begin to injure them he must undo all the knots in the net, or take off the girdles". Clearly we're talking impotence again.

Often a Russian amulet was nothing but a knotted thread, while elsewhere in eastern Europe locks and keys might serve the purpose – in Transylvania the sower tried to keep birds from his corn by carrying a lock in his seed-bag. It reminds me of a rhyme about a man in Craignish:

*Badan de nì 'chaorrainn
Thig o aodann Ealasaid,
Cuir snàithn' dearg is sreang ás,
Cuir siud an ceann a' chrathadair,
'S ged thigeadh buidseach Eanndor,
Gun ceannsaicheadh Ailein i!*

“A tuft of rowan twigs / From the face of Ailsa Craig, / Put a red thread and a knot on it, / Place that in the bottom of the seed-bag, / And should the witch of Endor herself come, / Allan could manage her!”

A sad instance of the protective use of knots, showing according to Frazer that they “may serve to avert not only devils but death itself”, forms the sole entry under the heading “Knots protect against evil” in Opie and Tatem’s “Dictionary of Superstitions”. It dates from 1572; I’ll anglicise it slightly. “The 28 of Apryle thair was ane witche brunt in St Androis . . . Efter hir handis were bound, the provest causeth lift vp hir claithis and thair was a white claith like a collar with stringis in betuene hir leggis, whairon was mony knottis vpon the stringis of the said collar, which was tacken from hir sore against hir will; for belyke scho thought that scho suld not have died that being vpon hir, for scho said, when it was taken from hir, ‘Now I have no hoip of my self.’”

Knots, finally, were untied after death to smooth the path to heaven. Campbell tells us in two of his books that in coffining a corpse the Highlanders untied or cut every string in the shroud “else the spirit could not rest”; Frazer adds that in a Swiss superstition “if, in sewing a corpse into its shroud, you make a knot on the thread, it will hinder the soul of the deceased on its passage to eternity”.

The Germans of Transylvania had a similar tradition, but some of their Carpathian neighbours put a neat twist in it. When a newly widowed woman wanted to wed again soon, she untied the knots on her dead husband’s grave-clothes before the coffin-lid was finally nailed down. That removed all impediments to her next marriage!

We may return now to our knotted black silk handkerchief. We have learned enough from our journey around the world to guess that it may have been a mantilla, as in the custom from Lesbos where the groom put in his “girdle” a knotted mantilla belonging to his bride. On the other hand, we know that what the Highland bride wore on her wedding day was a *bréid* or “kerch”, not of black silk but of starched linen.

The possibility remains, then, that what our hero brought to the fairy hill with knots in it to embody the sacred strength of the marriage tie was his wife’s lingerie from their wedding night – in Gaelic her *criosan* – but that Campbell was too embarrassed to say so.

As I pointed out here a few months ago, the Fairy Flag at Dunvegan is a similar item. It is a talisman of the MacLeods because it represents fertility.

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