

The external soul

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I began the story of “Rìgh Òg Easaidh Ruagh” from J. F. Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands”. It tells how the hero’s wife and two horses are captured by a *famhair*, that is, a kind of semi-human brigand who infested the wild places between settlements.

Setting off through the greenwood to find them, our hero encounters a dog, a hawk and an otter. They look after him and promise further assistance if he needs it.

In due course he finds a great chasm inside a rock where the woman and the horses are being held. The damsel in distress bursts into tears and he complains: *Ud, ud, is olc seo, mi fhìn a dh’fhaotainn na h-uibhir de dhragh a’ tighinn mu d’ thuiream, mas ann a’ caoineadh a tha thu nis.* “Dear me, it’s a poor show that I should have taken so much trouble to find you if all you can do now is cry.”

This isn’t very heroic, but the horses save the situation – as I showed last time, animals in such stories seem to have the power of speech because they are really humans who have been bewitched. (If this is code, the horses are clever servants, like the Admirable Crichton.) They say: *Cuir thus’ air ur beulaibh-ne e, ’s chan eagal dha gus am fàg sinne seo.* “Put him in front of us, and there will be no fear for him till we leave here.”

She prepares food, they all eat, then she puts him in front of the horses. When the *famhair* comes he says: *Tha boladh an fharbhalaich a-staigh.* “I smell a stranger inside.”

This is the same as Jack’s giant who says: “I smell the blood of an Englishman.” *Farbhalach* is literally a “super-peasant”, from *far* and *balach*. The woman has clearly recovered for she replies sweetly: *M’ ulaidh is m’ aighear is m’ fheudail, chan eil ann ach boladh a’ bhalaidh bhreuna de na h-eachaibh.* “My treasure and my joy and my darling, it’s only the stink of smelly s**t off the horses.”

Probably we’re to think of the horses as being in an unlit stall with their heads to the wall, the hero crouching at their heads and the *famhair* standing at their tails. Anyway, after a while the *famhair* comes to feed the horses, who give him such a kicking that he’s scarcely able to crawl away – *cha d’rinn e ach snàgan air éiginn uatha.*

Ghràidh, says the woman helpfully, *tha iad a’ brath do mharbhadh.* “Darling, they mean to kill you.”

Nam b’ann agam fhìn a bhiodh m’ anam ga ghléidheadh, he retorts, *is fhad on a mharbh iad mi.* “If I were keeping my soul myself, they’d have killed me a long time ago.”

Càit, a ghràidh, a bheil d’ anam? she asks. *A leabhra, gabhaidh mise cùram dheth.* “Where, darling, is your soul? By the book, I’ll take care of it.”

Tha e ann an clach nam bonnach. “It’s in the bannock stone.”

This was the griddle on which oatcakes and barleycakes were baked. When the *famhair* went out next day she cleaned and tidied it up terrifically (*chuir ise an òrdugh clach nam bonnach gu fuathasach*). When the *famhair* came home in the evening (*an àm an athaidh ’s an anmoch*, “in the time of fear and lateness”), she put her husband in front of the horses, the *famhair* went to feed them, and they mangled him even more (*leadair iad e na bu mhotha ’s na bu mhotha*). “Why did you tidy up the bannock stone like that?” he said.

“Because your soul is in it.”

“I can see that if you knew where my soul was, you’d take good care of it.”

“I would.”

“That’s not where my soul is. It’s in the threshold (*san starsaich*).”

So they go through the same procedure next day. She tidies up the threshold, but the *famhair* gets another kicking from the horses, and reveals where his soul really is: *Tha leac mhòr fon starsaich, tha molt fon leac, tha lach am broinn a’ mhuilt, agus tha ubh am broinn na lacha, agus sann anns an ubh a tha m’ anam.* “There’s a big slab under the threshold, there’s a wedder lamb under the slab, there’s a duck in the wedder’s belly, there’s an egg in the duck’s belly, and my soul is in the egg.”

When the *famhair* went away next day, they lifted the slab, and the wedder escaped (*a-mach a thug am molt*). The hero said: *Nam biodh agamsa cù seang na coill’ uaine cha b’ fhada bhithheadh e toirt a’ mhuilt am’ ionnsaigh.* “If I had the slender dog of the greenwood he’d soon bring me the wedder.” And the dog appeared with the wedder in his mouth.

They open up the wedder, and out flies the duck (*a-mach a bha ’n lach air iteagach*), so the hero summons the hawk, who brings back the duck in her beak. When they split the duck, out jumps the egg into the depths of the ocean (*mach a ghabh an t-ubh ann an doimhneachd a’ chuain*). The hero summons the otter, who brings the egg in her mouth. The woman seizes the egg and crushes it between her two hands – *phronn i eadar a dà làimh e*. At that moment the *famhair*, who’s on his way home in the gloaming (*anns an athamanachd*), falls down dead.

Bringing lots of gold and silver from the cave, they spend a night each with the otter, the hawk, and the dog. When they get home, they hold a great feast, and live happily ever after.

But why is the soul of the *famhair* outside his body? Well, consider this story given by Hugh Miller in “My Schools and Schoolmasters”. His cousin George had told it to him one warm summer’s day on the shores of Loch Shin, for it was about two young men in a similar location. “There was an ancient ruin beside them, separated, however, from the mossy bank on which they sat, by a slender runnel, across which there lay, immediately over a miniature cascade, a few withered grass stalks.

“Overcome by the heat of the day, one of the young men fell asleep; his companion watched drowsily beside him; when all at once the watcher was aroused to attention by seeing a little indistinct form, scarce larger than a humble-bee, issue from the mouth of the sleeping man, and, leaping upon the moss, move downwards to the runnel, which it crossed along the withered grass stalks, and then disappeared amid the interstices of the ruin.

“Alarmed by what he saw, the watcher hastily shook his companion by the shoulder and awoke him; though, with all his haste, the little cloud-like creature, still more rapid in its movements, issued from the interstice into which it had gone, and, flying across the runnel instead of creeping along the grass stalks and over the sward, as before, it re-entered the mouth of the sleeper, just as he was in the act of awakening. ‘What is the matter with you?’ said the watcher, greatly alarmed. ‘What ails you?’

“‘Nothing ails me,’ replied the other; ‘but you have robbed me of a most delightful dream. I dreamed I was walking through a fine rich country, and came at length to the shores of a noble river; and, just where the clear water went thundering down a precipice, there was a bridge all of silver, which I crossed; and then, entering a noble palace on the opposite side, I saw great heaps of gold and jewels, and I was just going to load myself with treasure, when you rudely awoke me, and I lost all.’”

In “The Golden Bough” Sir James Frazer heaped up evidence from all over the world of a belief that the soul is separable from the body. Like breath, it could be expelled through the orifices, such as the mouth or nose, or in childbirth. In Celebes the openings of a house were closed up, even the keyhole, in case it escaped during a birth, and the animals’ mouths were tied up in case they swallowed it.

In Germany it was believed that the soul escaped from a sleeper’s mouth as a white mouse or a bird, and that to prevent its return would be fatal to the sleeper. In the Congo it was believed that illness was caused by the soul going a-wandering. Practical jokers in Bombay were treated like murderers if they painted a man’s face – or put moustaches on a woman – when sleeping, because the soul wouldn’t recognise its owner when it came back, and the person would die.

Shadows, reflections, photographs and portraits have all been variously regarded as migrant souls – stab it, swallow it, snap it or take it away, and you deprive the possessor of health or of life itself. James Napier wrote in 1879 of people in the west of Scotland “who refuse to have their likenesses taken lest it prove unlucky; and give as instances the cases of several of their friends who never had a day’s health after being photographed”.

A Hindu story tells of a sorcerer who kidnaps a queen. Her son finds his way to his hideout. She wheedles out of the sorcerer where his soul is kept. It’s far away, he says, in a circle of palm-trees in the jungle. In this clearing are six chattees of water, one on top of another. Under the sixth is a cage containing a little green parrot. “On the life of the parrot depends my life. If the parrot is killed I must die.”

The queen’s son overcomes all the obstacles, captures the parrot and brings it to the hideout. He tears off a wing, and the sorcerer’s arm falls off. He pulls off a leg, and the sorcerer’s leg falls off. And so on, till there’s nothing left but the trunk and the head. “Give me my parrot!” cries the sorcerer.

“Take it then,” the boy replies, wringing the bird’s neck and throwing it at him, upon which the sorcerer’s head twists round and he drops dead.

Now consider the Russian story of Koschei the Deathless. He kidnaps a woman and tells her his life is in a broom under the threshold. She burns the broom but Koschei remains alive. Then he tells her it’s in a worm under a certain oak-tree. Her lover digs up the worm and crushes it but Koschei is still alive. Finally he reveals to her that his life is in an egg in a duck in a hare in a basket in an iron chest under a green oak on an island in the sea. Her lover finds the egg, squeezes it, and Koschei dies.

In a variant of this, she gilds the broom, and Koschei sees it shining under the threshold. “What’s that?” he says.

“Oh,” she replies. “See how I honour you.”

Next he says his life is fastened to an oak fence. She gilds the whole fence until it glitters. Koschei is so pleased that he tells her about the egg, which the lover obtains with the help of some friendly animals. He throws it from one hand to the other, and Koschei staggers from one corner of the room to the other. Then he crushes it, and Koschei dies.

If you think that’s close to “Rìgh Òg Easaidh Ruagh”, consider this Hausa story from northern Nigeria. A man and his wife have four daughters and a son. The daughters disappear mysteriously. The son consults a seer who reveals that his sisters are married to a bull, a ram, a dog and a hawk. He visits them in spirit and receives hair or feathers as tokens of their friendship. Then he goes to a far city where he makes love to the queen and persuades her to find the secret of the king’s life. It’s in a box in a dove in a gazelle in a rock in a lake in a thicket behind the city. He summons the four animals by throwing their tokens of friendship into a fire. “The bull drank up the lake; the ram broke up the rock; the dog caught the gazelle; the hawk captured the dove. So the youth extracted the precious box.”

The king dies. “So,” says Frazer, “the hero became King and married the false Queen; and his sisters’ husbands were changed from animals into men and received subordinate posts in the government.”

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