

MORTAL HELP

One hears in the old poems of men taken away to help the gods in a battle, and Cuchullan won the goddess Fand for a while, by helping her married sister and her sister's husband to overthrow another nation of the Land of Promise. I have been told, too, that the people of faery cannot even play at hurley unless they have on either side some mortal, whose body, or whatever has been put in its place, as the story-teller would say, is asleep at home. Without mortal help they are shadowy and cannot even strike the balls. One day I was walking over some marshy land in Galway with a friend when we found an old, hard-featured man digging a ditch. My friend had heard that this man had seen a wonderful sight of some kind, and at last we got the story out of him. When he was a boy he was working one day with about thirty men and women and boys. They were beyond Tuam and not far from Knock-na-gur. Presently they saw, all thirty of them, and at a distance of about half-a-mile, some hundred and fifty of the people of faery. There were two of them, he said, in dark clothes like people of our own time, who stood about a hundred yards from one another, but the others wore clothes of all colours, "bracket" or chequered, and some with red waistcoats.

He could not see what they were doing, but all might have been playing hurley, for "they looked as if it was that." Sometimes they would vanish, and then he would almost swear they came back out of the bodies of the two men in dark clothes. These two men were of the size of living men, but the others were small. He saw them for about half-an-hour, and then the old man he and those about him were working for took up a whip and said, "Get on, get on, or we will have no work done!" I asked if he saw the faeries too, "Oh, yes, but he did not want work he was paying wages for to be neglected." He made every body work so hard that nobody saw what happened to the faeries.

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