Folk-Lore of Marblehead, Mass

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NOTES AND QUERIES.

FOLK-LORE OF MARBLEHEAD, MASS. — The old town of Marblehead, so isolated through its position, long retained curious superstitions which had died out elsewhere. It was a delight to the old people to retail them to us children, and a greater delight to us to listen. A strong belief in ghosts, fairies, and pixies was maintained. The fairies were always described as good-natured little creatures, living in underground palaces built of gold and silver, ornamented with pearls and precious stones; they were uniformly sweet-natured, with a kind of tender pity for all children who needed not to fear them. They lived a happy life of their own, only coming up to the outer world for high revels on moonlight nights. Certain mosses and lichens that grew in round or irregular shapes on the hillside pastures were called fairies' rings, or carpets, and the red-lipped, wine-glass shaped lichens were supposed to be their drinking cups. At the first peep of dawn they scurried back to their jewel-lighted homes, or, if an unfortunate were belated, she hid among the flowers and slept during the day. We used to hunt for them, for whoever was fortunate enough to see one would have good luck through life, and the luck would follow the next generation.

The pixies, on the contrary, were malicious. They, too, were tiny, but of a brown color; they delighted to bewilder people; a person who was "pixilated," as they called it, would wander about for hours. The only remedy for such afflicted persons was to turn their garments. The belief in this was very strong. I knew a woman fairly well educated, as the education of women went sixty years ago, who told me in perfect good faith that she herself had been "pixilated" and had wandered an hour or more unable to find her home, until at last, recognizing that she was in the power of the little brown people, she turned her cloak, when the glamour vanished; in a moment she saw where she was, and was soon in her own house.

A curious animal was believed to roam over the marshes, making a roaring sound. I never knew one who claimed to have seen it, but a very clear idea of its appearance prevailed; a person who looked unkempt or fierce was compared to "a rumbling marsh lion," or one who talked boisterously was said to roar like "a rumbling marsh lion." The old people were sure that it was a real live thing wandering round, and not altogether canny. Could a sea-lion have strayed up some of the salt creeks in days long ago, and so given rise to the legend?

Another superstition was a belief in the foretelling of death by dreams, and in the capacity of animals to see the spirits of the departed. There were many others. We must be careful to burn any hair that should fall out of our heads, for if a bird should find it and weave it into her nest we should be sure to have a brain fever. A bird flying into a window betokened misfortune; a bee news, or an arrival.

When bumble bee
In room you see,
Some friend is nigh at hand.

To break a looking-glass was a sure sign of death. All looking-glasses must be turned to the wall until after a funeral, otherwise the living might be startled by the sight of the face of the dead in the glass.

A black cat was esteemed very unlucky; nevertheless it had its uses. The end of its tail cut off and applied to a disease called shingles was a sure cure. The ebb and flow of the tide were indicated by cats' eyes. Cats sat on the breasts of children and sucked their breath. When a cat was shooed out of a room it was done, curiously enough, by calling out "*Je vous aime*," pronounced as if it were one word; was that to propitiate the certain uncanny power every cat was supposed to possess? A singular expression, for which I cannot see any reason, was "cat's foot," applied to any nonsensical or improbable remark. Children sometimes knit cat's stockings — a most foolish and trivial bit of work. From this custom could the words cat's foot have come to be applied to anything which seemed unreasonable or improbable?

The Channel Islands are said to have furnished some of the first settlers of Marblehead. They may have had some of the Acadians allotted to them when the poor aliens were distributed among the towns of Massachusetts. This may account for "*Je vous aime*" and several quaint French words which are found there. — *Sarah Bridge Farmer.*

Tale of the Skunks. — (From an Indian woman at Petit Metis, Gaspé Peninsula, P. Q.): —

"They used to tell us stories of caribou and skunks about the fire at night. Old widow skunk with babies, 'Don't go out; winter not finished. Fraid get cold.' Skunk say, 'Look at my head.' Old woman (skunk) sleeping. Children look. Old woman skunk's mouth open. Little skunk looked. Indian potato in her mouth. Little skunk say, 'Well, mother say winter not finished; look at the potato in her mouth. We 'll leave it.' All skunks (little ones) go out, take road and run away. When old skunk wakes up, no children. 'Well, they see my mouth with potatoes; they think it summer.' She call, call, call; no children; all run away. Well, she so troubled, she go to the falls, jump in, finished, dead!"

The same Indian woman told of an "Indian who could do everything, make you dead or what not, without touching you. See everything from Quebec to Nova Scotia. Good Spirit used to come from Restigouche, Quebec, St. John, etc., and go under sea at Anticosti Island and stay side of the island."

Does not this seem a refraction of what was learned of the attributes of God from the lips of the Jesuits in years long past, and might not the "good spirit" be one or more such missionary?

In making medicine the Indian woman took care that it was not ready to skim until sunset, when she would throw the scum from the boiling liquid toward the setting sun. * * *

The Ballad of Sweet William and Gentle Jenny. — The following lines, two generations ago, were sung by a New England country fellow on shipboard; sometimes, when the vessel was becalmed, he would be called