



Silky

Folk-Lore And Legends: English

English

Advanced
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About the commencement of the present century the inhabitants of the quiet village of Black Heddon, near Stamfordham, and of its vicinity, who lived, as most other villagers do, with all possible harmony amongst themselves, and relishing no more external disturbance than was consistent with their gentle and sequestered mode of existence, were dreadfully annoyed by the pranks of a preternatural being called Silky. This name it had obtained from its manifesting a marked predilection to make itself visible in the semblance of a female dressed in silk. Many a time, when one of the more timorous of the community had a night journey to perform, have they unawares and invisibly been dogged and watched by this spectral tormentor, who, at the dreariest part of the road—the most suitable for thrilling surprises—would suddenly break forth in dazzling splendour. If the person happened to be on horseback, a sort of exercise for which she evinced a strong partiality, she would unexpectedly seat herself behind, “rattling in her silks.” There, after enjoying a comfortable ride, with instantaneous abruptness she would, like a thing destitute of continuity, dissolve away and become incorporate with the nocturnal shades, leaving the bewildered horseman in blank amazement.

At Belsay, some two or three miles from Black Heddon, she had a favourite resort. This was a romantic crag finely studded with trees, under the gloomy umbrage of which, “like one forlorn,” she loved to wander all the live-long night. Here often has the belated peasant, with awe-stricken vision, beheld her dimly through the sombre twilight as if engaged in splitting great stones, or hewing with many a repeated stroke some stately

“monarch of the grove.” While he thus stood and gazed, and listened to intimations, impossible to be misapprehended, of the dread reality of that mysterious being, concerning whom so various conjectures were awake, all at once, excited by that wondrous agency, he would hear the howling of a resistless tempest rushing through the woodland—the branches creaking in violent concussion, or rent into pieces by the impetuous fury of the blast—while, to the eye, not a leaf was seen to quiver, or a pensile spray to bend. The bottom of this crag is washed by a picturesque lake or fish-pond, at whose outlet is a waterfall, over which a venerable tree, sweeping its leafy arms, adds impressiveness to the scene. Amid the complicated and contorted limbs of this tree, Silky possessed a rude chair, where she was wont, in her moody moments, to sit—wind-rocked—enjoying the rustling of the storm in the dark woods, or the gush of the cascade. The tree, so consecrated in the sympathies and terrors of the people of the vicinity, has been preserved. Though now (1842) no longer tenanted by its aerial visitant, it yet spreads majestically its time-hallowed canopy over the spot, awakening in the love-versed rustic, when the winter’s wind waves gusty and sonorous through its leafless boughs, the soul-harrowing recollection of the exploits of the ancient fay,—but in the springtime, beautiful with the full-flushed verdure of that exuberant season, recipient of the kindling emotions of reverence and affection. It still bears the name of “Silky’s seat,” in memory of its once wonderful occupant.

Silky exercised a marvellous influence over the brute creation. Horses, which indisputably possess a discernment of spirits superior to that of man, and are more sharp-sighted in the dark, were in an extraordinary degree sensitive of her presence and control. Having once perceived the effects of her power she seems to have had a perverse pleasure in meddling with and arresting those poor defenceless animals, while engaged in the most exemplary performance of their labours. When this misfortune occurred there was no remedy that brute-force could devise. Expostulation, soothing, whipping, and kicking, were all exerted in vain to make the restive^[195] beast resume the proper and intended direction. The ultimate resource, unless it might be the whim of Silky to revoke the spell, was the magic dispelling witchwood, which, it is satisfactory to learn, was of unfailing efficacy. One poor wight, a farm-servant, was once the selected victim of her mischievous frolics. He had to go to a colliery at some distance for coals, and it was late in the evening before he could return. Silky, with spirit-like prescience, having intimation of the circumstance, waylaid him at a bridge—a “ghastly, ghost-alluring edifice,” since called “Silky’s Brig,” lying a little to the south of Black Heddon, on the road between that place and Stamfordham. Just as he had arrived at “the height of that bad eminence,” the keystone, horses and cart became fixed and immovable as fate. In that melancholy plight might

both man and horses have continued—quaking, and sweating, and paralysed—till the morning light had thrown around them its mantle of protection—had not a neighbour's servant come to the rescue, who opportunely carried some of the potent witchwood (mountain-ash) about his person. On the arrival of this seasonable aid, the perplexed driver rallied his scattered senses, and the helpless animals, being duly seasoned after the fashion prescribed on such occasions, he had the heart-felt satisfaction of seeing them apply themselves, with the customary alacrity, to the draught. The charm was effectually overcome, and in a short time both the man and the coals reached home in safety. Ever afterwards, however, as long as he lived, he took the precaution of rendering himself spell-proof, by being furnished with a sufficient quantity of witchwood, being by no means disposed that Silky should a second time amuse herself at his expense and that of his team.

She was wayward and capricious. Sometimes she installed herself in the office of that old familiar Lar—Brownie, but, with characteristic misdirection, in a manner exactly the reverse of that useful species of hobgoblin. Here it may be remarked that, throughout her disembodied career, she can scarcely be said to have performed one benevolent action for the sake of its moral qualities. She had, from first to last, a perpetual latent hankering for mischief, and gloried in withering surprises and unforeseen movements. As is customary with that "sturdy fairy," as she is designated by the great English Lexicographer, her works were performed at night, or between the hours of sunset and day-dawn. If the good old dames had thoroughly cleaned their houses, which country people make a practice of doing, especially on Saturdays, so that they may have a comfortable and decent appearance on the Sabbath-day, after they had retired to rest, Silky would silently turn everything topsy-turvy, and the morning presented a scene of indescribable confusion. On the contrary, if the house had been left in a disorderly state, a plan which the folk generally found it best to adopt, everything would have been arranged with the greatest nicety.

At length a term had arrived to her erratic course, and both she and the peaceably disposed inhabitants whom she disquieted obtained the repose so long mutually desired. She abruptly disappeared. It had long been surmised, by those who paid attention to those dark matters, that she was the troubled phantom of some person, who had died very miserable, in consequence of having great treasure, which, before being taken by her mortal agony, had not been disclosed, and on that account Silky could not rest in her grave. About the period referred to a domestic female servant being alone in one of the rooms of a house in Black Heddon, was frightfully alarmed by the ceiling above suddenly giving way, and from it there dropped, with a prodigious

clash, something quite black, shapeless, and uncouth. The servant did not stop to scrutinise an object so hideous and startling, but fled to her mistress, screaming at the pitch of her voice—

“The deevil’s in the house! The deevil’s in the house! He’s come through the ceiling!”

With this terrible announcement the whole family were speedily convoked, and great was the consternation at the idea of the foe of mankind being amongst them in visible form. In this appalling extremity, a considerable time elapsed before any one could brace up courage to face the enemy, or be prevailed on to go and inspect the cause of their alarm. At last the mistress, who chanced to be the most stout-hearted, ventured into the room when, instead of the personage, on account of whom such awful apprehensions were entertained, a great dog or calf-skin lay on the floor, sufficiently black and uncomely, but filled with gold.

After this Silky was never more heard or seen. Her destiny was accomplished, her spirit laid, and she now sleeps with her ancestors.

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