

# Folklore



## Kelly's Fairy

*A Tale of Former Times in  
Prince Edward Island*

by **G.F. Owen** (reprinted from the *Examiner*, January 7, 1893)

**T**he early settlers of Prince Edward Island, especially those from the green isle of Erin, had many superstitious beliefs. Omens were closely watched, and charms were constantly used to ward off "the many ills that flesh is heir to."

Among these superstitions, none, perhaps, was more prevalent than the belief in fairies; and the following story of one of the pioneers will illustrate to some extent the habits and feelings of a former generation.

Among the pioneers of a settlement in Kings County was a man named Kelly, who occupied a small farm on which some slight clearance had been made. His house, built of logs, stood near the roadside, and its single room contained little furniture excepting the bed in the corner, a deal table and cupboard and a few benches.

His family consisted of his wife and one child about a year old; and up to the time when our tale begins, in all the settlement none were so happy and contented as they.

The child was a fine rosy-faced and chubby-limbed youngster that would laugh and crow — when taken in his father's arms — with all the joyousness that perfect health exhibits in children of his age.

One day in October, however, Kelly

and his wife left the child asleep in the bed while they went to the potato patch to gather in their crop of these useful tubers. Returning to the house about noon, they were surprised and alarmed to find their child looking very differently from what he had been in the morning, and evidently very sick. The anxious mother tenderly took him in her arms and did all that her affection could devise to bring back the bloom of health that so lately had glowed on the cheeks of her darling. But all her efforts were in vain. The child wasted away and soon became spindle-legged and armed with a pinched look on its face that appealed most pathetically to all who looked upon it.

The neighbours, with kindly feelings — as is their wont in country districts — dropped in by twos and threes to see the sick boy and say a word of comfort to its parents. But soon these visits ceased. The word was whispered around that there was something "uncanny" about the child at Kelly's; and ere long the belief was general that the fairies had changed Kelly's boy when he had been left by himself in the house.

Years passed on, and who can fathom the anguish of that poor mother's heart, as daily she watched

the child on whom her affections were wholly centered gradually growing in limb and muscle, but developing no indications of awakening intellect. For so it was. "Kelly's fairy" as the boy was usually called, when he grew to be about fifteen years of age was an imbecile, subject to violent fits of frenzy. During these attacks no person within his reach was safe from being injured, for he would seize the bench on which he usually sat, a billet of wood from alongside the hearth, or any other weapon within his reach, and with expressions of the most demonical rage, drive from the house all those within it.

When this fury had spent itself he would sit back again on the bench against the wall, where for days at a time he would sit with his face resting on his hands, apparently in a semi-comatose condition. His father, in the meantime, died, and the widow was left alone to struggle with her burdens. She had however, the sympathy of the neighbours, and the pity which her story excited, wherever it was told, caused many substantial gifts to be sent to her. Although she lived in a poor enough way, yet food sufficient was always provided. The neighbours took care that her bit of land was planted in the spring and harvested in

the autumn, and they also hauled firewood and saw that she was not in want of warmth when wintry blasts blew blustering round her door.

The neighbourly charity of country people is among the finest of virtues of this or any age, and does much to offset the isolation of the farmer's life. In cities neighbours may live adjoining for years and have no more intercourse than if a thousand miles apart; but in the country it is very different. There a neighbour is a friend in need as well as in a social way. Should the good wife run out of some necessary grocery or other article which cannot be procured nearer than the village store, nothing is more natural or more commonly practised than that she apply to her neighbour for help. And the request is seldom made in vain.

But to our tale. Shortly after the boy, whose story we are telling, arrived at the age of nineteen years, he sickened and died; and the news went far and near through all the country around, that "Kelly's fairy" was dead, and would be waked at his mother's house that night. This was in the early fall when the nights begin to lengthen and the heat of the harvest day is followed by the damp coolness of September dews. Amongst those who heard the news was a jovial farmer from an adjoining settlement, whom we shall call Terence. He was on his way to the county town when he heard about the death, and as he was in the habit of taking a glass (it was before the days of the Scott Act), he imbibed somewhat freely during the afternoon, while talking over the strange story of the "fairy."

Before leaving his home Terence had his jar filled with Jamaica rum, it being the practice at that time for every man to keep a supply of liquor in his house.

Notwithstanding the fact that Terence had a fine Irishwoman for his wife, it was whispered that sometimes he allowed his affections to wander from her; and it was even said that he often used to call to see the tailor's wife, a bonny Scotch lass, whose charms of face and person had captivated his fancy.

It was the custom in those days that a country tailor worked at the farmer's house, instead of having the cloth sent to be made up at his own shop; and it was said by the gossips that Terence's visits to the tailor's wife were most frequent, and of greatest length, when

the tailor was away from home. Any-way, the evening of the wake the tailor happened to be away, and when our friend Terence called in on his way home, taking his jar along with him, he generously treated the tailor's wife, whom he found alone.

Time sped merrily along with the two, helped as it was with good cheer and good company, until some time after dark, when Terence proposed that the tailor's wife should go with him to the wake of "Kelly's fairy."

After some becoming hesitation she agreed to accompany him; and any one going along the road that night might have seen the two jogging along in one of those old fashioned gigs, with high dashboard and low wheels, that formerly were so generally used in this Island.

When they arrived at Kelly's, Terence tied his horse to the fence, and his companion slipped quietly into the house while he was doing so.

When Terence entered the one room of the widow's house, he found it crowded with "young and middle-aged and grey." The corpse had been laid out in one corner, in a kind of alcove that had been formed by hanging up a few cotton sheets. The "cold bed" was formed of some rough boards laid upon empty flour barrels, and over the body a sheet was spread as a pall. As our friend Terence entered he reverently took off his hat and carefully smoothed his hair with his hands. He then began to make his way towards the corner where the corpse was laid.

Although the liquor he drank apparently had taken little effect on him while he remained in the open air, yet after he entered the hot, steaming room, the whirling of his head at once showed him that it would not be safe to remain there long.

But being a good Catholic, he had first to go up to where the corpse was laid — with candles burning at the head and feet, and pipes and tobacco deposited within easy reach — and say a prayer for the rest of the departed soul.

He accordingly elbowed his way among the crowd until his object was nearly attained. At that time a pernicious pastime of sticking pins in each other existed in many country places amongst the young people when they met together. Whether this practice was a relic of a superstition entertained in former times of those who were

accused of witchcraft, or whether it came from mere devilry for want of something else to do, certain is the fact that hardly any gathering of young people could take place without some senseless hoodlum practicing this trick.

As Terence was approaching the corpse, preparing to sink upon his knees as he duly made the sign of the cross, a pin was stuck in him from behind. The suddenness of the probe, the quick pain that a pin's point invariably causes, the tottering condition of his limbs, owing to the unsteadiness of his head; all combined to hasten and intensify the catastrophe. Poor Terence, throwing out his hands to save himself lurched forward and fell on the corpse.

Owing the length of time that the "fairy" sat on the bench in his mother's house with hardly any movement, the back sinews of his legs had contracted, whilst the front muscles had become elongated. In consequence, when he died it was found impossible to straighten out his legs; his knees persisted in sticking up at a considerable angle. When Terence fell forward his hands came on the elevated knees of the corpse, and the weight of our Irish friend being considerable, his pressure flattened out the legs. But to the horror of all who were looking on when this occurred, up rose the head and body; and the gas that gathers in the chest of a dead body escaping through the mouth made a noise that sounded very like an imprecation.

The company assembled were horror-stricken and terrified. Poor Terence, quickly recovering himself, cried in anguish, "Mother of God, I've brought Kelly's fairy alive again." A howl of fear arose among the old women, and in a few seconds the house cleared of all excepting the nearest friends of the poor widow.

The corpse, as soon as it was relieved of Terence's weight, settled back to its former position, and was again as dead as ever. Nevertheless, after an anxious consultation was held, it was decided to run no further risks, and they resolved that the "fairy" should be buried at once.

A rough coffin was hastily put together, and at early dawn the corpse was conveyed in it to the burying ground, where, without "priest, book or candle," it was safely deposited in its last earthly habitation.