

The Crooked Back

*Ireland*¹⁵

Peggy Barrett was once tall, well-shaped, and comely. She was in her youth remarkable for two qualities, not often found together—of being the most thrifty housewife and the best dancer in her native village of Ballyhooley. But she is now upwards of sixty years old, and during the last ten years of her life she has never been able to stand upright. Her back is bent nearly to a level, yet she has the freest use of all her limbs that can be enjoyed in such a posture; her health is good, and her mind vigorous, and in the family of her eldest son, with whom she has lived since the death of her husband, she performs all the domestic services which her age and the infirmity just mentioned allow. She washes the potatoes, makes the fire, sweeps the house (labours in which she good-humouredly says “she finds her crooked back mighty convenient”), plays with the children, and tells stories to the family and their neighbouring friends, who often collect round her son’s fireside to hear them during the long winter evenings. Her powers of conversation are highly extolled, both for humour and in narration, and anecdotes of droll or awkward incidents connected with the posture in which she has been so long fixed, as well as the history of the occurrence to which she owes that misfortune, are favourite topics of her discourse. Among other matters, she is fond of relating how, on a certain day, at the close of a bad harvest, when several tenants of the estate on which she lived concerted in a field a petition for an abatement of rent, they placed the paper on which they wrote upon her back, which was found no very inconvenient substitute for a table.

Peggy, like all experienced story-tellers, suited her tales, both in length and subject, to the audience and the occasion. She knew that, in broad daylight, when the sun shines brightly, and the trees are budding, and the birds singing around us—when men and women, like ourselves, are moving and speaking, employed variously in business or amusement—she knew, in short (though certainly without knowing or much caring wherefore), that when we are engaged about the realities of life and Nature, we want that spirit of credulity, without which tales of the deepest interest will lose their power. At such times Peggy was brief, very particular as to facts, and never dealt in the marvellous. But round the blazing hearth of a Christmas evening, when infidelity is banished from all companies, at

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least, in low and simple life, as a quality, to say the least of it, out of season—when the winds of “dark December” whistled bleakly round the walls, and almost through the doors of the little mansion, reminding its inmates that as the world is vexed by elements superior to human power, so it may be visited by beings of a superior nature—at such times would Peggy Barrett give full scope to her memory, or her imagination, or both, and upon one of these occasions she gave the following circumstantial account of the “crookening of her back.”

“It was, of all days in the year, the day before May Day that I went out to the garden to weed the potatoes. I would not have gone out that day, but I was dull in myself and sorrowful, and wanted to be alone; all the boys and girls were laughing and joking in the house, making goaling-balls, and dressing out ribands for the mummers* next day. I couldn’t bear it. ’Twas only at the Easter that was then past (and that’s ten years last Easter; I won’t forget the time) that I buried my poor man, and I thought how gay and joyful I was, many a long year before that, at the May Eve before our wedding, when, with Robin by my side, I sat cutting and sewing the ribands for the goaling-ball I was to give the boys on the next day, proud to be preferred above all the other girls of the banks of the Blackwater by the handsomest boy and the best hurler^o in the village; so I left the house and went to the garden.

“I stayed there all the day, and didn’t come home to dinner. I don’t know how it was, but somehow I continued on, weeding, and thinking sorrowfully enough, and singing over some of the old songs that I sung many and many a time in the days that are gone, and for them that never will come back to me to hear them. The truth is, I hated to go and sit silent and mournful among the people in the house, that were merry and young, and had the best of their days before them. ’Twas late before I thought of returning home, and I did not leave the garden till some time after sunset. The moon was up; but though there wasn’t a cloud to be seen, and though a star was winking here and there in the sky, the day wasn’t long enough gone to have it clear moonlight. Still, it shone enough to make everything on one side of the heavens look pale and silvery-like, and the thin white mist was just beginning to creep along the fields. On the other side, near where the sun was set, there was more of daylight, and the sky looked angry, red, and fiery through the trees, like as if it was lighted up by a great town burning below.

“Everything was as silent as a churchyard; only now and then one

* *Mummers*, those who go merrymaking in disguise, especially during festivals.

^o *Hurler*, one that takes part in a game of hurling, an Irish game resembling field hockey.

could hear far off a dog barking, or a cow lowing after being milked. There wasn't a creature to be seen on the road or in the fields. I wondered at this first, but then I remembered it was May Eve, and that many a thing, both good and bad, would be wandering about that night, and that I ought to shun danger well as others. So I walked on as quick as I could, and soon came to the end of the demesne* wall, where the trees rise high and thick at each side of the road, and almost meet at the top. My heart misgave me when I got under the shade. There was so much light let down from the opening above that I could see about a stone-throw before me. All of a sudden I heard a rustling among the branches on the right side of the road, and saw something like a small black goat, only with long wide horns turned out instead of being bent backwards, standing upon its hind-legs upon the top of the wall, and looking down on me.

"My breath was stopped, and I couldn't move for near a minute. I couldn't help, somehow, keeping my eyes fixed on it; and it never stirred, but kept looking in the same fixed way down at me. At last I made a rush, and went on; but I didn't go ten steps when I saw the very same sight, on the wall to the left of me standing in exactly the same manner, but three or four times as high, and almost as tall as the tallest man. The horns looked frightful; it gazed upon me as before; my legs shook, and my teeth chattered, and I thought I would drop down dead every moment. At last I felt as if I was obliged to go on; and on I went; but it was without feeling how I moved, or whether my legs carried me. Just as I passed the spot where this frightful thing was standing, I heard a noise as if something sprung from the wall, and felt like as if a heavy animal plumped down upon me, and held with the fore-feet clinging to my shoulder, and the hind ones fixed in my gown, that was folded and pinned up behind me.

"'Tis the wonder of my life ever since how I bore the shock; but so it was, I neither fell, nor even staggered with the weight, but walked on as if I had the strength of ten men, though I felt as if I couldn't help moving, and couldn't stand still if I wished it. Though I gasped with fear, I knew as well as I do now what I was doing. I tried to cry out, but couldn't; I tried to run, but wasn't able; I tried to look back, but my head and neck were as if they were screwed in a vice. I could barely roll my eyes on each side, and then I could see, as clearly and plainly as if it was in the broad light of the blessed sun, a black and cloven foot planted upon each of my shoulders. I heard a low breathing in my ear; I felt, at every step I

* *Demesne*, domain, estate, landed property, and/or the land attached to a mansion or country house.

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took, my leg strike back against the feet of the creature that was on my back. Still I could do nothing but walk straight on. At last I came within sight of the house, and a welcome sight it was to me, for I thought I would be released when I reached it.

"I soon came close to the door, but it was shut; I looked at the little window, but it was shut too, for they were more cautious about May Eve than I was; I saw the light inside, through the chinks of the door; I heard 'em talking and laughing within; I felt myself at three yards' distance from them that would die to save me—and may the Lord save me from ever again feeling what I did that night, when I found myself held by what couldn't be good nor friendly, but without the power to help myself, or to call my friends, or to put out my hand to knock, or even to lift my leg to strike the door, and let them know that I was outside it! 'Twas as if my hands grew to my sides, and my feet were glued to the ground, or had the weight of a rock fixed to them. At last I thought of blessing myself; and my right hand, that would do nothing else, did that for me. Still the weight remained on my back, and all was as before. I blessed myself again: 'twas still all the same. I then gave myself up for lost: but I blessed myself a third time, and my hand no sooner finished the sign than all at once I felt the burthen spring off my back; the door flew open as if a clap of thunder burst it, and I was pitched forward on my forehead, in upon the middle of the floor. When I got up my back was crooked, and I never stood straight from that night to this blessed hour."

There was a pause when Peggy Barrett finished. Those who had heard the story before had listened with a look of half satisfied interest, blended, however, with an expression of that serious and solemn feeling which always attends a tale of supernatural wonders, how often soever told. They moved upon their seats out of the posture in which they had remained fixed during the narrative, and sat in an attitude which denoted that their curiosity as to the cause of this strange occurrence had been long since allayed. Those to whom it was before unknown still retained their look and posture of strained attention, and anxious but solemn expectation. A grandson of Peggy's, about nine years old (not the child of the son with whom she lived), had never before heard the story. As it grew in interest, he was observed to cling closer and closer to the old woman's side; and at the close he was gazing steadfastly at her, with his body bent back across her knees, and his face turned up to hers, with a look through which a disposition to weep seemed contending with curiosity. After a moment's pause, he could no longer restrain his impatience; and catching her grey locks in one hand, while the tear of dread and wonder was just dropping from his eyelash, he cried: "Granny, what was it?"

The old woman smiled, first at the elder part of her audience, and then at her grandson, and patting him on the forehead, she said: "It was the Phooka."*

This is a story about a storyteller telling a story. In a cozy room, protected from the winds of dark December, grandmother Peggy Barrett creates Irish folklore's wonder, fear, and mystery through her personality and talent. The reader is privileged to experience a great storyteller in the warm and personal surrounding of family and friends. This intimate environment is a milieu that women cherish and nurture. It is the environment in which many women tell their tales.

Women are storytellers, whether mothers recounting their own childhood to their children, librarians telling folktales at story hour, grandmothers passing on the lore of the olden days, or neighbors socializing. Before traditional South African society became overpowered by modern industrial society, tales were told in the homestead predominantly by older women. Yet when tales came to be put into books, women disappeared from the literary scene.¹⁶ This seems to be a pattern. The classic volumes of folktales carry the names of men: Grimm (Germany), Eberhard (China), Asbjornson and Moe (Scandinavia), although in many cases women provided the tales. Collectors chose tales told by men over the same ones told by women. Men's tales became "legitimate" folklore while women's tales were degraded and classified as exaggeration or gossip.¹⁷

* Phooka, a mischievous hobgoblin or malignant goblin, can also mean the Devil.

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