

Guardian of the Wild and Fairy in the Sack: A traditional narrative viewed in its wider context

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The tradition we are concerned with here is best approached through an event said to have happened on Elsdon Moor near Newcastle on Tyne in 1641, and given by Katharine Briggs in her *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* the title “The Brown Man of the Muirs”. In it, one of two young men out hunting on the Moor comes across the strangest creature he has ever seen. It is the said Brown Man, “small, but square and strong, dressed in clothes like withered bracken, with red frizzled hair on his head, and great, rolling eyes, like an angry bull’s.” “How dare ye come here, ye callant?” he says, “killing the birds and beasts that are in my charge. Gin nits and blaeberrys dae for me that am their King, sud they nae be gude enough for ye?” Unmindful of this, the young man proceeds to shoot a pair of grouse, an act for which he is cursed and soon afterwards dies.

In her notes on the tradition, Katharine Briggs gives it motif numbers, in particular one unused elsewhere and marked with her own initials. It is F419.3.1* [K.M.B.]: “spirit as protector of wild animals”. Briggs continues with the remark that this taboo on hunting in certain places, though unusual in English folklore, is common elsewhere, as among the South African Bushmen (Briggs, 1991, 1, 187). Indeed, nearly all ancient communities for which hunting is a way of life share a belief in a “Master or Mistress of Animals” alias “Guardian of the Wild”, who is seen as a keeper and protector of game. The Guardian knows each of his or her animals, indicates to the hunter the animals he may or may not hunt, and punishes the hunters who flout his or her commands. He or she responds favourably to gifts and sacrifice. In his anthropomorphic manifestations, as we find them in European tradition, the Guardian is a supernatural being not unlike the Brown Man. Very often his functions are assumed by a wellknown spirit such as a pixy, dwarf, or giant. Frequently, each creature, such as chamois or certain types of fish, has its own Guardian, often theriomorphic, the largest and finest of its kind. The creatures under the Guardian’s dominion are sometimes regarded as his or her domestic animals, his or her pigs or cows, and sometimes they are the Guardian’s children, addressing him or her, as we are about to see, as “father” or “mother”. To these beliefs belongs for instance the idea that a slain animal can be brought back to life from its bones, but also that an animal falling into a poacher’s trap is rescued by the Master or Mistress, its captor often being punished, even killed.

In traditions of the type we are about to explore, a trapped animal also manifesting itself as a fairy or other supernatural being is rescued by what we must take, historically speaking, to be a master or mistress of animals. In his *The Land of Stream and Tor*, William Crossing has for instance a story in which, on his way home from the vicinity of the Island of Rocks on Dartmoor one evening, a poacher who has so far been unsuccessful espies a hare, which he manages to seize and put in his bag. As he reaches a particularly gloomy part of Okehampton Park he hears, at some distance, a shrill voice calling “Jack How! Jack How!” Instantly the hare begins to struggle, and crying out “Ho! Ho! There’s my daddy,” makes his

escape. All the poacher can make of this is that he had snatched up a pixy that had temporarily assumed the form of a hare (Crossing, p. 20).

In his *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, under F482.5.5(o), Ernest Baughman summarises our story as follows: “The fairy in the sack of the thief or the poacher. A fairy takes place of game in poacher’s bag, speaks, scares poacher.” Baughman lists three variants, all from England, one from Yorkshire, one from Lancashire, and one from Sussex. To this list we must add not only our Dartmoor version given above, but also no fewer than five Welsh ones, all from the north of the country. In one of these, presented by John Rhys and translated by him into English, two hunters capture and put into their bag what they take to be an otter. On their way home, this cries out from the bag: “My mother is calling me, oh, my mother is calling me!” Terrified, the two hunters fling down their bag, out of which leaps a little man wearing a red cap. Running towards the river, he disappears among the bushes there (Rhys, pp. 138-140). The four other variants from the north of the Principality differ from this in detail rather than substance, one of them for instance featuring what is taken to be a badger, and one a fox, while the other two do not identify the putative quarry. (What might be taken for a fifth variant, featuring an otter, turns out to be essentially the same as Rhys’s variant just mentioned) (Owen, pp. 104-108).

Compare now the Lancashire variant listed by Baughman. It is located on Barley Brow, a hill near Pendle. In this variant, first recorded in 1853, and wordily retold by James Bowker, who locates it on a height called Hoghton Brow (Bowker, pp. 73-76), two poachers place the mouths of their sacks over what they think are rabbit holes but are in fact fairies’ houses. A fairy enters and remains trapped in one of the sacks, which its owner hoists on his back, not realising what is within, and makes for home. Another fairy, missing its captured companion, calls out: “Dick, where art thou?” To which Dick replies: “In a sack/On a back,/Riding up Barley Brow.” (Westwood and Simpson, p. 389)

The variant from Beeding in Sussex has two men who have stolen a pig carrying it in a sack over the Downs on their way home. Halfway up Beeding Hill they stop to rest, and put their bag on top of what is in fact a fairy’s hole. After a while, they set off again, and before long the man who is now carrying the sack sees a little figure running beside him and crying: “Dick, where be you?” At this, another voice answers from within the sack: “In a sack,/Pick-a-back,/Going up Beeding Hill.” Terrified, the man throws his sack down, and he and his companion make off. The two fairies run back to their hole, and the pig scurries back to his home in the sty (Westwood and Simpson, p. 723).

We now come to our ninth and last British variant, recorded in 1894 and, it seems, originally told of one Robert Lawson of Thirlby, a small village to the east of Thirsk and at the foot of the Hambleton Hills in North Yorkshire. Trying to bolt a badger into his bag at some point near the Fairies’ Cave in the Hills, Lawson drew the string of the bag tight and threw it over his shoulder without further examining it. He had gone only a few yards from the hole, when he heard a small voice saying: “Have you seen out of my little pee pee,/Pee pee with an e’e (eye)? Have you seen out of my little pee pee,/Pee pee with an e’e?” And the thing in the sack answered: “A’s upon Lob Lawson’s back gaaing ti Thirlbee,/A’s upon Lob Lawson’s back gaaing ti Thirlbee.” Whereupon Lawson alias Lawson flung down the sack,

and ran home as fast as he could. – “He’d gotten a fairy i’ t’ sack.” (Powell, 341). The rather enigmatic words uttered by the “small voice” will occupy us later.

Not only is our tradition to be found outside of England, in Wales, as we have just seen. It is also well represented in German-speaking countries and elsewhere on the continent of Europe. Looking at German-language variants in particular, of which well over thirty are to hand (cf. Agricola, pp. 274-275 and 461), we find that not a few have much in common with their British counterparts. Take an example from Baden, in which we are told that in a little valley between Wehr and Hasel there was a hole in the ground that a man thought might belong to a badger. He sent his dog in, and covered the entrance with the open mouth of his sack. Before very long, something jumped into the sack, which the man immediately tied and, hoisting it on to his back, went his way. Suddenly, nearby, a fairy (*Erdmännlein*, literally “earth manikin”) called out: “Crack-ear (*Krachöhrle*), where are you?” “On a back in a sack!” (“Auf dem Buckel, im Sack!”) replied a voice from within the sack, whereupon it dawned on the man that he had captured a fairy, which he immediately set free (Baader, pp. 11-12).

In a variant from Luxemburg, a man from Manternach, for a long time on the track of a hare, finally catches it and puts it in his bag. At that point he sees another hare, which calls out: “Peterkin, where are you?” “Jack has me in his sack,” comes the reply from the imprisoned animal. The hunter very quickly gets rid of the uncanny beast and loses no time in taking leave of the forest (Gredt, p. 290). Compare one of many variants from the Swiss Canton of Uri. In the forest above Seedorf, a hunter shoots a fox, which he puts in his rucksack. Pleased with his success, he makes for home. Setting foot on the narrow bridge over the Palanggä stream, he becomes aware of a voice lamenting in the nearby forest: “Oh you poor little fox, where are you?” The man can hardly believe his ears when from his rucksack there comes the reply: “Oh Jesus and Mary, I’m in Heiri Hansi’s rucksack on his back!” The fright Heiri Hansi gets makes him throw to the ground both rucksack and fox. Later, having collected himself somewhat, he retraces his steps, hoping at least to retrieve his rucksack. But what does he find instead? An old dried-out cow-pie lying on the ground. Another variant has him, once back at home, retiring to his bed with a swollen head (Müller, 1, pp. 154-156).

Another Swiss variant in which the captured animal is a fox comes from St Gallen.

“Something odd happened to Peter Geel of Vild one night late, when he was going from Mels, crossing the fields to by-pass the town. When he got to the cross, a fox came up to him that was unusually tame in its behaviour. Without wasting any time, Peter put the fox in a sack he happened to have with him, and hoisted it on to his back. As he got close to the little stone bridge, he began to hear a woman’s voice ringing out from the Pasatti cliff-face: ‘Sister, come on now!’ There came the answer: ‘I can’t, I’m in Peter Geel’s sack!’ Terrified at this, Peter tears the sack from his back, flings it down, and lets the fox go. With its tail between its legs it takes off like a mad thing in the direction of the Pasatti.” (Kuoni, p. 87, no. 185).

Versions of the story featuring a fisherman or fishermen are widely distributed. A variant from the Rhineland has a lad called Peterchen (“Peterkin”) fishing for a long time without catching anything. Suddenly a huge carp takes the bait. Peterchen hauls it in and gets it into his bag. Full of fresh hope he starts fishing again, when a voice sounds from the deep: “One-Eye, where are you?” “In Peterchen’s bag!” replies the captured carp. At this, Peterchen flings down his rod, hurls his bag together with the fish into the water, and makes for home as fast as he can run (Franke, p. 91). The carp’s name obviously points to its having only one eye, something that will be touched on later.

In a variant from Oppeln, now Opole, a city on the Oder in southern Poland, the fisherman, who here has the reputation of being a miser, goes fishing during divine service on a Sunday, and catches a huge fish. As he makes for home, shouldering the fish in his bag, he hears a voice from the stream in which he has been fishing: “Where are you, Knittel?” “In a sack on a back!” comes the reply. What then happens to the fish we are not told. What we are told is that the voice belongs to the water spirit (*Wassermann*), and that, when next day the man goes back for his net, he finds it torn to shreds, while in response to his lamentations there is the sound of laughter from the stream (Anon., *Oppolner Heimatblatt*, vol. 2, no. 24). Compare a Czech version from Studena, where, we are told, the Water Spirit is a little man in a green coat, from the left-hand tail of which water constantly drips. One day, a man holding a sack under his arm is walking past a pond not far from the town, when on the embankment of the pond he sees a big fish tossing and turning. He puts it in his bag, which he hoists on to his shoulders, and then continues on his way. Suddenly a little man calls out from the pond: “Nikli!”, whereupon the fish answers from the bag: “Já isem v pitli!” (“I am in the bag!”). Terrified, the man flings his sack on to the ground, and runs off. When he goes back to collect the bag next day, it is still lying there, but the fish has gone (Grohmann, 1, p. 150).

In such stories, the Guardian of the Wild is either represented by a spirit of some kind, often diminutive, as in the tales just summarised, or it is a disembodied voice. As for the captive rescued by the Guardian of the Wild, in its animal manifestation it tends to be somehow unusual, having only one eye, for instance, or no tail (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, 9, col. 134). Perhaps it is because of its abnormality that it falls into the hunter’s or fisherman’s hands. In any case, the Guardian’s keenness to restore it to its place among its fellows emphasises his role as a protector of his charges.

Here, now, is an account from northern Germany that presents us with Frau Harke, a Mistress of Animals who is far from diminutive, and whose tasks are more fully described than have been those of her counterparts in other accounts so far. In two ranges of mountains, we are told, there lived a giantess called Frau Harke, just one of whose strides would take her from one range to the other, in which she had a cave that has now fallen in. In this cave she kept wild pigs, stags, deer, hares, and other creatures that she drove in at night and then out again in the morning, so that they could then graze, and to keep them together she would uproot huge trees, and strike them against her apron. She was often heard calling her animals: “Pickel, pickel”, and when hunters came she and her animals glided past them like a Wild Hunt. No one could ever shoot her animals at night, as she always kept them in her cave, so that any hunting had to be done by day.

In the associated accounts we come across motifs that will be recognized as variations on or supplementary to those already encountered, such as that Frau Harke had a hare with a club-foot that someone shot. That evening, as she was driving her animals home, to spend the night in the safety of her cave, she was heard calling: “They are not all here, they are not all here; Club-Foot is missing!” (Kuhn and Schwartz, pp. 113-114, no. 126, 7). This is followed by an account of how some shepherds are out hunting badgers on the Frau Harkenbergr. One badger has already been caught and put in a bag, when from within the mountain a voice is heard calling as one might to a straying pig. Another voice, presumably belonging to a helper of Frau Harke, asks who or what is missing. “The big one-eyed sow!” is the reply. All this makes the shepherds uneasy, and they hurry home with the badger they have caught. On getting there and opening the bag, they find that the badger has only one eye. The voice they heard was that of Frau Harke, whose pigs are the badgers (Kuhn and Schwartz, pp. 110-111, no. 126, 4).

Frau Harke’s concern for the animals under her tutelage puts us in mind of that shown by the Brown Man of the Muirs whose acquaintance we made at the outset. Compare also the gigantic Cailleach of the Scottish Highlands, widely respected as a guardian of wild animals, who milks the deer and is not beyond allowing them to be culled (Westwood and Kingshill, pp. 352-353 and 419). To the same family of traditions belongs that recorded by the medieval German poet Hartmann von Aue, who in his courtly romance *Iwein* tells us how the knight Kâlogrêant encounters in the forest of Brêziljân a Wild Man terrible of aspect and swarthy as a Moor, grazing a herd of bison and aurochs in a clearing, his hair black and matted, his ell-wide face furrowed, his ears hirsute and covered in moss, his beard and eyebrows long and grey. His nose is as large as that of an ox, his eyes are angry and red. Long broad sharp teeth protrude from his mouth like a wild boar’s tusks. His garments are a couple of animal skins, and he carries a great club. In reply to the questions of an understandably cautious knight he explains that he is the lord and master of his animals. Powerful and ferocious though these are, they obey him unfailingly, where any other person left among them would instantly perish – a fate that the Wild Man promises will not overtake the knight, who seems not to have forfeited his goodwill (Hartmann d’Aue, lines 403-523).

As we have seen, the young man who encounters the Brown Man of the Muirs is not so fortunate, and this is probably more typical of what happens to those who flout the authority of the Lord of Animals. Here, now, is a summary of a Swiss example, “The Chamois Hunter”, from the *Legends* of the Brothers Grimm. Climbing higher than ever in his life before, a chamois hunter finds himself confronted by an ugly dwarf, who reproaches him bitterly for slaying his, the dwarf’s, animals. For this he is to pay with his life. Pleading ignorance of the dwarf’s ownership, and promising to desist forthwith, the hunter begs his pardon. This is granted. Moreover, every seventh day he is to receive a slaughtered beast. This does indeed happen, but, after a few weeks, time begins to hang heavy, and the hunter again longs for the chase. Climbing on high, he espies a fine buck, which he aims at and is about to shoot, when the dwarf emerges as if from nowhere, seizes him by the ankle, and casts him into the abyss (Grimms, vol. 1, pp. 262-263, no. 301; cf. Röhrich, 1976, p. 153).

The Grimms' authority for this account was the Bernese city librarian Rudolf Wyss (1781-1830), but very similar accounts had come from the pen of the Lucerne notary Renward Cysat (1545-1614) a couple of centuries earlier. Cysat tells how the dwarves (*Hermännlein*, for which we read *Erdmännlein*, literally "earth manikins") who frequented the high Alpine peaks and pastures kept herds of chamois as their domestic animals, and protected them against indiscriminate hunting, especially as carried out by young and arrogant poachers, who as well as flouting the dwarves' authority, would mock them for their small stature. Not only were the dwarves guardians of the chamois, but also of the fish in the mountain torrents: witness the story of Hans Buocher, a dignitary of Lucerne who in 1592 was fishing for trout in a torrent called Rimulo or Rimligk, when a dwarf suddenly leapt on to his neck from behind, and, flinging him into the torrent with such force that he nearly perished, uttered the following bitter words: "You are one of those fellows who have often plagued and helped to destroy my creatures. For this I now punish you – and mark my words! You shall henceforth no longer molest my creatures here." At this he disappeared. When Buocher got home, he was in a sorry state, and turned out to be paralysed on one side of his body, so that he was from now on housebound, his days of hunting and fishing gone (Röhrich, 1976, pp. 154-155).

In all of these stories there is to a greater or lesser extent a sense of primeval dread, a feeling that if nature is tampered with all will not be well. This is particularly so where our tradition is fused with legends about the Wild Hunt, as in this example recorded in 1855, in which there is some confusion of roles:

"Near Voitmannsdorf in Upper Franconia there's a copse called Ungetreuehäse. Once when the Bamberg messenger comes to the Ungetreuehäse, he hears the Wild Hunt. As he goes along a hare comes running up to him. The man thinks to himself, 'You'll make me a good dinner,' and he grabs it and carries it off under his arm. When he then comes to the crossroads, he hears someone calling, 'Where is the one-eyed hare?' The man then looks at the (female) hare, sees that it has only one eye, and that not a pretty one either, and he throws it from him. At that point there reaches his ear a voice from Ungetreuehäse: 'If you had carried me beyond the crossroads I would have broken your neck.' That was the God-be-with-us." (Petzoldt, p. 148, no. 242)

Compare a Swiss version from the Aargau:

"It's on the edge of Muri that the Wild Hunt starts. With a noise like a herd of pigs it passes over the Klosterfeld, past the edge of the village, and up the mountain to Buttwil. At the back of Geltwil it follows a hedge as far as the Schlattholz, and continues over the upper Lindenberg. Here some young lads from the village of Geltwil once saw it coming up the mountain, and one of them let himself be persuaded to grab a piglet that was trailing the others. His comrades brought him a sack, and he tied the piglet in it, and hoisted it on his back, intending to carry it home. It was then that a loud voice sounded from on high, above where the herd was surging forward: 'Little Crooked-Ear (*Hagöhrli*), where are you?' And to the lads' horror the piglet in the bag immediately replied: 'In Heiniguggeli's sack!' Heiniguggeli collapsed in a heap, and dropped the sack,

then made off with the others. Later, passers-by found the bag, but it was empty. From that time on, we are told, the Wild Hunt ceased to appear.” (Rochholz, p. 92, no. 81)

Here now is a literary version of the story as presented by the Austrian author Adalbert Stifter in his novella *Der Hochwald*, where three men go fishing in the virgin waters of a lake called the Plöckenstein Lake (“Plöckensteiner See”) that presents them with more fish than they know what to do with. At twilight they light a fire, on which they place fish in a pan of water. As the water gets hotter the fish, contrary to all expectations, get ever livelier. Suddenly there is a rushing noise in the trees, and the waters of the lake get ever more troubled, although there is not a breath of wind and not a cloud in the sky. Then there comes from the lake a sound like murmuring voices: “Not all of them are yet at home, at home...” The men are terrified, and throw their fish back into the lake, which at once becomes calm again. They remain sitting on a stone all night, without speaking a word, and at daybreak they leave. The lake is subjected to a curse, and remains desolate for all time (Stifter, chap. 4).

Compare this with a local tradition that is obviously close to Stifter’s source. Some fishermen put to the test the belief that the lake is without life. After many hours of fishing in vain they are beginning to think this is true, when one of their number makes an impressive catch that can, however, be in no way improved upon. At twilight they are preparing to cook the one large fish they have caught. Water is already bubbling in the pot, when from the lake they hear a strange murmuring that gets louder and louder. It takes the form of a question and answer: “Are they all there?” “All are here. Only the one-eyed bull [sic] is missing!” Terrified, the men see not only that the fish is still thrashing about in the pot, but also that it does indeed have only one eye. Still much perturbed, they throw it back into the lake, which immediately becomes calm. They make for home (Ruzersdorfer, 13). In an earlier, fragmentary, version of the same tradition, woodcutters working by Lake Plöckenstein hear a voice saying (in rhyme): “All are here, all are here! Only the dock-tailed bull is missing.” (Panzer, vol. 2, pp. 138-139). We have seen that the badgers are Frau Harke’s pigs. Similarly, here the large fish is the Guardian’s bull. Its deficiency (short tail, one eye) will be mentioned later.

All our “folk” variants of “Fairy in the Sack” were collected in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and the tale is unlikely still to be encountered in living tradition. A fascinating exception was, however, recorded by the Austrian folklorist Karl Haiding in his “Burgenland Legend about the Lord of Fishes”. This was published in 1982, and in it he reports on a storytelling session engaged in by a group of women taking part in a feather-splitting bee in the late 1960s. The participant who claims our attention here is a Frau Anna Franz, born in 1907, whose parents when she was young let out rooms, one of them to an old gentleman who would come and tell the children stories.

“Well, one day he came and told us about Racha’l, you see. And this is supposed to be true, you see. There used to be witches, you see. And he went fishing, his granddad did, round by the marl pits, you see. And he lived up in the mountains. He had to come through the forests, you see. And he grabs his sack and goes fishing. And when he’s on his way home, all of a sudden he hears a voice:

‘Racha’l, what have you got in your sack?’ ‘Well,’ he thinks to himself, ‘I don’t know. My sack is on my back. Where can it be coming from, this voice?’ Well, he keeps walking, keeps walking. Then again: ‘Racha’l, what have you got in your sack?’ Now things begin to seem a bit odd, and when the question comes a third time: ‘Racha’l, what have you got in your sack?’ he grabs his sack and flings it away, and takes to his heels. And then someone was laughing. And he got home and was bathed in sweat... Well, next day he thinks to himself: ‘Today you must go and take a look.’ (He’d sealed his sack with a piece of string.) And when he arrives, there’s no sack and no fish, and nothing, you see! And now nobody knows whether it’s the truth or only a fairy-tale. Nobody knows. But his father swore it was gospel truth.” (Haiding, 202-204)

Here, as elsewhere in orally transmitted material, there are obscurities and inconsistencies. An example is the enigmatic, thrice-repeated “Racha’l, what have you got in your sack?” This does not strictly speaking fit in with the story line as we have experienced it so far. Moreover, the name *Racha’l* does not match anything that has gone before, nor does it correspond to any wellknown appellation. In such instances, a comparative approach is the best way forward. The narrative that is geographically and textually closest to ours is a fairly recent one from the Waldviertel, which matches “Racha’l”, that is “Racherl”, with “Zacherl” in “Zacherl, wo bist du?” (“Zacherl, where are you?”), which is followed by a terrifying “Da bin ich!” (“Here I am!”) uttered by a giant crayfish (Haiding, 206). Not only does this give us the “right” question and answer in the circumstances, it also supplies a name that makes sense as a diminutive of *Zacharias*.

A striking feature of many variants is the deficiency under which the animal labours. The fish or other creature that speaks has only half a tail or less, as has the bull in the fragmentary Austrian text mentioned above, though in the later variant it is one-eyed. Frau Harke’s hare has a club foot. In the Swiss Aargau variant cited above we have a piglet called *Hagöhrli*, a name that turns out to mean “Crooked-Ear”. Perhaps most often, the creature has only one eye, a deficiency we have seen to be shared by the demonic hare in our version from Upper Franconia cited above. As a narrative device, these deficiencies not only help identify the missing animal, they also help explain why, afflicted as it is, it arouses the special concern of the Guardian of the Wild, who is anxious to protect every one of his or her charges.

Returning to the British variants we set out with, we begin now to grasp the meaning of the words uttered by the Guardian in the Yorkshire narrative referred to above (Powell, 341): “Have you seen out of my little pee pee/Pee pee with an e’e?” Here as in many items of oral tradition there appears to have been a fault of transmission. Of course we have to accept and respect the text as it stands. Nevertheless, comparing it with Continental counterparts, we can now tentatively suggest an “amended” version with the words “out of” in the first line replaced by the homophonous dialectal “owt of” that is, “ought of”, alias “anything of”. At the same time the words “pee pee” become a proper noun, while the dialectal “an e’e” turns out to mean “one eye”. We thus arrive at a text that translates as: “Have you seen anything of my little Pee Pee./Pee Pee with one eye?” *Pee Pee* is a suitable name for a one-eyed creature, of which we have encountered quite a few in our Continental analogues, since in northern

dialects *to pee* means “to look closely as with closely contracted eyelids, to squint”. Moreover, we note in passing that the past participle *peed* means “one-eyed”.

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