

# The Origin of the Fairies

By the Ettrick Shepherd

I have heard a wondrous old relation,  
How the Fairies first came to our nation;  
A tale of glamour, and yet of glee,  
Of fervour, of love, and of mystery.  
I do not vouch for its certain truth,  
But I know I believed it in my youth;  
And envied much the enchanted Knight,  
Who enjoy'd such beauty and pure delight.  
I will tell it now, and interlard it  
With thoughts with which I still regard it,  
And feelings with which first I heard it.

The Knight of Dumblane is a hunting gone,  
With his *hey!* and his *ho!* and *hallo!*  
And he met a merry maid alone,  
In the light green and the yellow.  
That maiden's eyes were the pearls of dew,  
And her cheek the moss-rose opening new;  
Her smile was the sun-blink on the brae,  
When the shower is past, and the cloud away.  
And then her form was so light and fair,  
That it seem'd to lean on the ambient air;  
So very blithesome and so boon,  
That the Knight was afraid it would fade too soon;  
Mount on the ether from human ken,  
Or melt away in the breeze of the glen.

His frame thrill'd to the very core  
When he saw that beauty stand him before,  
With the gleam of joy on her brow so meek,  
And the dimple on her damask cheek.  
And then so ripe was her honey lip,  
That the wild-bee, lingering, long'd to sip;  
And the merl came by with an eye of guile,  
For he hover'd and lighted down a while  
On the snowy veil in which she was dress'd,  
To pick the strawberries from her breast.  
O was there aught below the heaven  
I would not have done, or would not have given,  
To have been the Knight of Dumblane that day!  
But 'twas better for me that I was away.

The Knight came nigh, and essay'd to speak,

But the glamour of love was on his cheek;  
And a single word he could not say,  
For his tongue in thirsty silence lay.  
But he doff'd his cap from his manly brow,  
And he bow'd as low as a knight could bow,  
Then stood with his velvet cap in hand,  
As waiting for the maiden's command.

Sure this was witless as could have been,  
I cannot conceive what the Knight could mean;  
For had I been there, in right or wrong,  
As sure as I sing you this song,  
I would, as the most due respect,  
Have twined my arms around her neck;  
And sure as man e'er woo'd a maid,  
Have row'd her in my shepherd plaid,  
And in token of my high regard,  
Have set her down on the flowery sward;  
And if some discourse had not begun,  
Either in quarrel or in fun,  
Take never a shepherd's word again,  
And count my skill in wooing vain;  
All this I would have done with speed  
But for ever would have rued the deed.

Oh, never was knight so far o'ercome  
As he who now stood blushing and dumb  
Before this maid of the moorland brake,  
With the cherub eye and the angel make.  
At first no higher his glance was thrown  
Than the flowery heath that her foot stood on  
When by degrees it embraced her toe,  
But over the ankle durst not go;  
Till at length he stammer'd out modestly,  
"Pray—madam—have you—any commands for me?"

Shame fa' the Knight! I do declare  
I have no patience with him to bear;  
For I would have look'd, as a man should do,  
From the shoe-tie to the glancing brow;  
Nay, from the toe's bewitching station  
Even to the organ of veneration.  
For what avails the loveliest face,  
Or form of the most bewitching grace,  
Which on earth are made for man alone,  
If they are not to be look'd upon?  
Yes, I would have look'd till my sight had rack'd.  
And the very organs of vision crack'd,  
And I would have sworn, as a man should swear,

That I never saw virgin half so fair:  
This I had done, despite all pain,  
But, ah! I never had done it again!

But the maid was delighted beyond expression  
To mark the young Knight's prepossession,  
And with a smile that might have given  
Some pangs even to a thing of heaven,  
She took so moving a position  
That set his soul in full ignition:  
One limb alone scarce press'd the ground,  
The other twined her ankle round;  
Her lovely face was upward cast;  
Her sunny locks waved in the blast;  
And really she appear'd to be  
A being divine—about to flee  
Away from this world of self and sin,  
A lovelier, holier clime to win.  
No posture with that can ever compare  
What a mercy that I was not there!

But he raised his eyes as hers withdrew,  
And of her form got one full view:  
The taper limb, and the slender waist,  
The modest mould of her virgin breast,  
The lips just opening with a smile,  
And that eye upraised to heaven the while;  
The purple tides were seen to entwine  
In a thousand veins all crystalline!  
Enough! The sequence is too true:  
For though the Knight got but one view,  
One full intoxicating look,  
It was more than his fond heart could brook;  
For on the ground he fell as dead  
As he had been shot out through the head.

Now this was rather a sad o'erthrow;  
I don't think I would have fallen so;  
For though a lovely virgin face  
Has sometimes put me in piteous case,  
Has made me shed salt tears outright,  
And sob like the wind on a winter night,  
Nay, thrown me into a burning fever,  
Yet I never just went off altogether;  
But I have reason, without a flam,  
Thankful to be—and so I am—  
That I was spared the illusive sight  
That was seen by that enchanted Knight.  
Now it seems that the maiden to fear began

For the life of that young and comely man;  
And every art essay'd to try  
To make him uplift his amorous eye.  
But in reality, or in mime,  
The swoon continued a weary time.  
And better had it been if he had never  
Re-open'd his eyes, but slept for ever;  
For when next they awoke on the light of day,  
His cheek on the maiden's bosom lay.  
He felt its warmth new life impart,  
And the gentle throbs of her beating heart;  
He felt, beneath his aching head,  
The enchanting mould that had laid him dead;  
He felt her hand his temples chafing,  
And every tenderness vouchsafing;  
He lifted his head he hid his face  
And stole his cheek from that witching place;  
Yet still he cast, though disinclined,  
A longing, lingering glance behind,  
Where he saw but I dare not describe the view,  
For if you are a man it will kill you too;  
If you are a woman, and lovely beside,  
You will turn up your nose in disdain and pride.  
If you are not, without a frown,  
You will laugh at the Knight till you fall down;  
For true it is, when the Knight had seen  
The beauteous bed where his cheek had been,  
The blush, and the smile, and the lucid vein,  
He gave one shriek, with might and main,  
Then shiver'd a space and died again!

From that time forth, if I durst tell,  
Unto that Knight such hap befell,  
As never was own'd by mortal man,  
And never was told since tales began.  
He got his wish—It proved a dear one,  
It is an old story, and a queer one;  
But free of fear, and free of fetter,  
I'll tell it out even to the letter  
The wilder 'tis I love it the better.

We all have heard the maxim old,  
That a tale of truth should aye be told;  
For nothing in nature happen can,  
That may not a lesson prove to man:  
Now this is true: Yet things, we ken,  
Oft happen between the women and men,  
So wild, romantic, and precarious,

So complicated, and contrarious;  
So full of passion and of pain,  
They scarcely can bear to be told again.  
Then think of love 'twixt a mortal creature,  
And a being of another nature!

The Knight was lost—that very morn  
Rung the last peal of his hunting horn;  
His comrades range the mountain reign,  
And call his name, but call in vain;  
From his hawks and his hounds he is borne away,  
And lost for a twelvemonth and a day;  
And all that time, he lived but to prove  
The new delights and the joys of love—  
His mistress, a pattern of sweetness and duty,  
And her home a palace of splendour and beauty.  
But whether it was in the sinful clime  
That bounds mortality and time,  
In a land below, or a land above,  
In a bower of the moon, or the star of love,  
He never could fathom or invent,  
Or the way that he came, or the way that he went;  
But he ween'd, from his love's aerial nature,  
That she barely could be a mortal creature.

And every night in his ears there rung  
The accents sweet of the female tongue;  
Light sounds of joy through the dome were ringing—  
There was laughing, dancing, harping, singing;  
But foot of man in the halls was none,  
Nor sound of voice but his own alone:  
While every night his beloved dame  
In new array to his chamber came—  
And, save herself, by day or night,  
No other form ever met his sight.  
So ween'd the Knight; but his mind was shaken,  
And, alas! how far he was mistaken!  
For love's full overwhelming tide  
O'er the mind of man is hard to bide.  
Yet this full fraught of delirious joy,  
Without reverse and without alloy,  
I would once have liked to have essay'd,  
But at last—how I had been dismay'd!

The times soon changed, for by slow decay,  
The sounds of joy were melted away  
To a tremulous strain of tender wailing  
Of sufferings for a former failing;  
While something was sung, in a plaintive key,

Of a most mysterious tendency,  
Of beings, who were not of the earth,  
To human creatures giving birth;  
Of seven pure beings of purity shorn,  
Of seven babies that might be born  
The nurslings of another clime,  
By creatures of immortal prime,  
Of the mother's thrilling fears, and more  
Of the dark uncertainty before!

The Knight then dreaded, as well might he,  
That things were not as things should be,  
And a hearty wish rose in his mind,  
That he were at the home he left behind.  
To wish, and to have, in the charmed ring  
Of that sweet dome, was the self-same thing;  
For the Knight awaken'd, as from a dream,  
And he stood by the wild and mossy stream,  
Where first he felt the bewitching power  
Of the beauteous maid at the morning hour,  
Where he fell a victim to beauty's charms,  
And died of love in a virgin's arms!

He sought his halls and his stately bower,  
But a solemn stillness seem'd to lour  
Around his towers and turrets high:  
His favourite hound would not come nigh,  
But kept aloof with a murmuring growl,  
And a terror his heart could not control;  
For he prick'd up his ears, and snuff'd the wind,  
Though he heard his master's voice behind,  
Then fled with his bristles of dread unfurl'd,  
As from a thing of another world.  
And every maiden, and every man,  
Away from their master in terror ran;  
While his aged mother, in weeds of wo,  
Conjured him solemnly to go  
Back to his grave, and his place of rest!  
For her mind with terror was sore oppress'd.  
But there he remain'd, and once again  
Was hail'd as the true Knight of Dumblane.

But, oh! how changed in every feature,  
And all the vehemencies of his nature,  
As if an eagle from cliffs above  
Had been changed into a plaintive dove;  
From a knight of courage and of glee,  
He was grown a thing of perplexity,  
Absent and moping, puling, panting,

A vacant gaze, and the heart awanting:  
Earth had no pleasures for his eye,  
lvA<sub>4</sub>Then he thought of the joys that were gone by.  
This to some natures may be genial,  
Or, as a failing, counted venial;  
For me, I judge the prudent way,  
Let past time have been what it may,  
Is to make the most, with thankful mind,  
Of that which still remains behind.

The Knight lived on as scarce aware,  
How long I neither know nor care,  
Till at the last, one lovely morn,  
The fairest lady that ever was born  
Came into his bower with courtesy bland,  
And a lovely boy was in either hand;  
Two tiny elves alike, not less  
Than twin flowers of the wilderness.

“Thou art my lord, my own true knight,  
Whose love was once my sole delight.  
Oh, I recall—how can I not?—  
That morning never to be forgot,  
When I met thee first with horn and hound  
Upon the moor to the hunting bound,  
When thy steed like lightning fled away,  
And thy staghound howl’d and would not stay;  
Thou stolest the heart that never had birth,  
The heart of a being not of this earth:  
And what is more, that heart to wring,  
The virtue of an immortal thing.  
Dost thou own these babes in the gold and green,  
The loveliest twins that the world has seen;  
Wilt thou here acknowledge us as thine own,  
Or bear the brunt of our malison?”

Then the Knight shed tears of joy apace  
At seeing again that lovely face;  
And his heart with love was sore oppress’d  
As he folded the fair dame to his breast:  
“Thou art my lady love,” said he,  
“And I never loved another but thee!”

“Alas, how blind are earthly eyes  
To those that are lighted by other skies,  
By other breezes, untainted by sin,  
And by other spirits that dwell within!  
Well might thy raptures of pleasures be  
Sublimed by creatures such as we:”  
The lady said with an eye of shame,

When enter'd another most comely dame,  
As like to the first as she could be,  
As like as cherries on the same tree;  
While hanging on either hand were seen  
Two lovely babies in gold and green.  
"Thou art my own true lord and love,"  
The second said, "and thou wilt approve  
This dear love-token, I changed with thee,  
When sitting in the bower upon thy knee."  
The Knight acknowledged the token rare,  
And flew to embrace his lady fair;  
But remembrance came with a thrilling pain,  
That instead of a lady he now had twain,  
And instead of two babies of beauty and grace,  
There were four all looking him in the face.  
He stood like a statue, of sense bereft,—  
He look'd to the right and then to the left,  
But one from the other he could not know,  
They were both the same, and yet there were two.  
While thus he stood prepared for shrift,  
In came a third—a fourth—a fifth—  
A sixth—a seventh! All round they stand,  
And each had a baby in either hand,—  
And each had her love-tokens to display,  
Which the Knight acknowledged without delay.  
But how that maid he met on the hill,  
And loved so dearly, and loved her still,  
Had thus the powers of nature outdone,  
And multiplied into twenty and one—  
Why, that was more than he could believe,  
Than his head could frame, or his heart conceive;  
And still he cast his eye to the door,  
Distrustful that there were not more.

His lady mother at length attended,  
And her courtesies were with wonder blended,  
To see such beauty in such array,  
Seven dames all lovely as moms of May,  
With fourteen babies in a ring,  
And all like the children of a king;  
And she laid on her son her quick behests,  
To tell her the quality of their guests.

"Why, mother, 'tis strange as strange can be,  
And yet it is truth I tell to thee,  
That all these dames of beauty so bright,  
Claim me for their own true lord and knight;  
Nay, and I may not deny it neither,

And all these children call me father.  
But I swear by my vows of morn and even,  
And I swear before the throne of Heaven,  
That I never knew of daughter nor son,  
Nor of a love save only one;  
There is glamour abroad in moor and glen,  
And enchantment in all the walks of men.”

“Why, son, it has often been told to me,  
That you never could learn to multiply.  
Your bold advancement now I greet;  
It is practice that makes the man complete.”

This said the dame with a sullen smile,  
And a gloom upon her brow the while;  
For she soon perceived by dint of lore,  
That the seven weird sisters stood her before,  
Who had dwelt in enchanted bower sublime,  
From the ages of an early time,  
Condemn’d for an unhallow’d love  
Endless virginity to prove,  
And endless longings for bliss to be,  
In their palace of painful luxury,  
Unless a mortal knight should fall  
In their love-snares, and wed them all.  
And for all this numerous comely birth,  
She knew that her son was lost to earth,  
And perchance would be caught in enchantment’s thrall,  
And lost to heaven—the worst of all.

“My son,” she said, “since so it be  
That all this comely progeny  
Are here acknowledged to be thine,  
Before they can be received as mine,  
I have lock’d the doors, the gates, and all,  
And here within this stately hall  
They shall kneel before a sacred sign,  
And be christen’d by a name divine.”

Then a shriek arose from the lovely train,  
Was never heard such a yell of pain,  
Till the gorgeous cieling that glow’d o’erhead  
Was shiver’d like an autumn reed,  
And the images all prostrate lay,  
And the casements of the tower gave way,  
And the lovely train, all three by three,  
Walk’d forth in beauty and in glee;  
While many a glance they cast behind,  
As they trode the billows of the wind;  
For they danced as lightly through the air

As if heaved on the gilded gossamer,  
That play'd, with a soft and silent motion,  
Like the gentlest swell that woos the ocean;  
The Origin of the Fairies  
And many an eye beheld them fly,  
And heard this plaintive melody:

“Now we are free, now we are free,  
We seven sisters now are free,  
To fly where we long have wish'd to be;  
And here we leave these babies of ours,  
To dwell within our shady bowers,  
And play their pranks in the moonlight deli,  
With the human beings they love so well;  
For O, they are babies of marvellous birth,  
They are neither of heaven nor yet of earth;  
And whether they will live till time be done,  
Or fade away in a beam of the sun,  
Or mount on the polar heights sublime,  
And to worlds of unknown splendour climb,  
Is a mystery which no eye can pierce  
But His, the Lord of the universe:  
But this we know, that above or below,  
By the doors of death they shall never go.

“Adieu, our sweet little babies, for ever!  
Blithe be your lives, and sinful never;  
You may play your pranks on the wicked and wild,  
But wrong not virtue's sacred child,  
So shall your frolics be lightsome and boon  
On the bridge of the rainbow or beam of the moon;  
And so shall your loves in the bridal bowers  
Be sweeter still than your father's and ours,  
And the breezes shall rock you to soft repose  
In the lap of the lily or breast of the rose,  
And your beauty every eve renew  
As you bathe your forms in the fragrant dew,  
That stands a heavenly crystal bell  
In the little dew-cup's lovely well;  
Your drink be the haze on the moonlight mill,  
And your food the odour which flowers distil,  
And never let robes your forms adorn  
That are not from the web of the rainbow shorn,  
Or the purple and green that shines afar  
In the breast of the eastern harvest star;  
And then shall you ride o'er land and o'er tide,  
O'er cloud, and o'er foam of the firmament wide,

O'er tree and o'er torrent, o'er flood and o'er flame,  
And THE FAIRIES shall be your earthly name:  
In joy and in glee your revels shall be,  
Till a day shall arrive that we darkly foresee;  
But note you well when these times commence,  
And prepare for your departure hence.

“When the psalms and the prayers are nightly heard  
From the mossy cave or the lonely sward;  
When the hunters of men rise with the sun,  
And pursue their game till the day be done;  
And the mountain burns have a purple stain  
With the blood of men in the moorland slain;  
And the raven croaks in the darksome cloud,  
And the eagle yells in the heavens aloud,  
We you command, with heart and hand,  
To leave the links of fair Scotland.  
Away! dismiss! and seek for bliss  
In a happier, holier sphere than this!

“Sweet babies, adieu! and may you never rue  
The mingled existence we leave to you.  
There is part of virtue and part of blame,  
Part of spirit and part of flame,  
Part of body and passion fell,  
Part of heaven and part of hell.  
You are babies of beauty and babies of wonder,  
But fly from the cloud of the lightning and thunder,  
And keep by the moonbeam or twilight grey,  
For you never were made for the light of day.  
Long may you amid your offspring dwell,--  
Babies of beauty, kiss and farewell !“

The Knight of Dumblane from that day forth  
Never utter'd word upon the earth;  
But moved about like a spirit in pain  
For certain days, then vanish'd again,  
And was chosen, as my old legend says,  
The patriarch King of the Scottish Fays,  
With full command o'er these beings strange;  
But his human nature never would change,  
Till, at the end of a thousand moons,  
All deck'd with garlands and gay festoons,  
He was borne away with lament and yell,  
And paid as kane to the Prince of Hell!

From such unhaliow'd love as this,  
With all its splendour and all its bliss,

Its end of terror and its bane,  
The Lord preserve us all!—Amen.