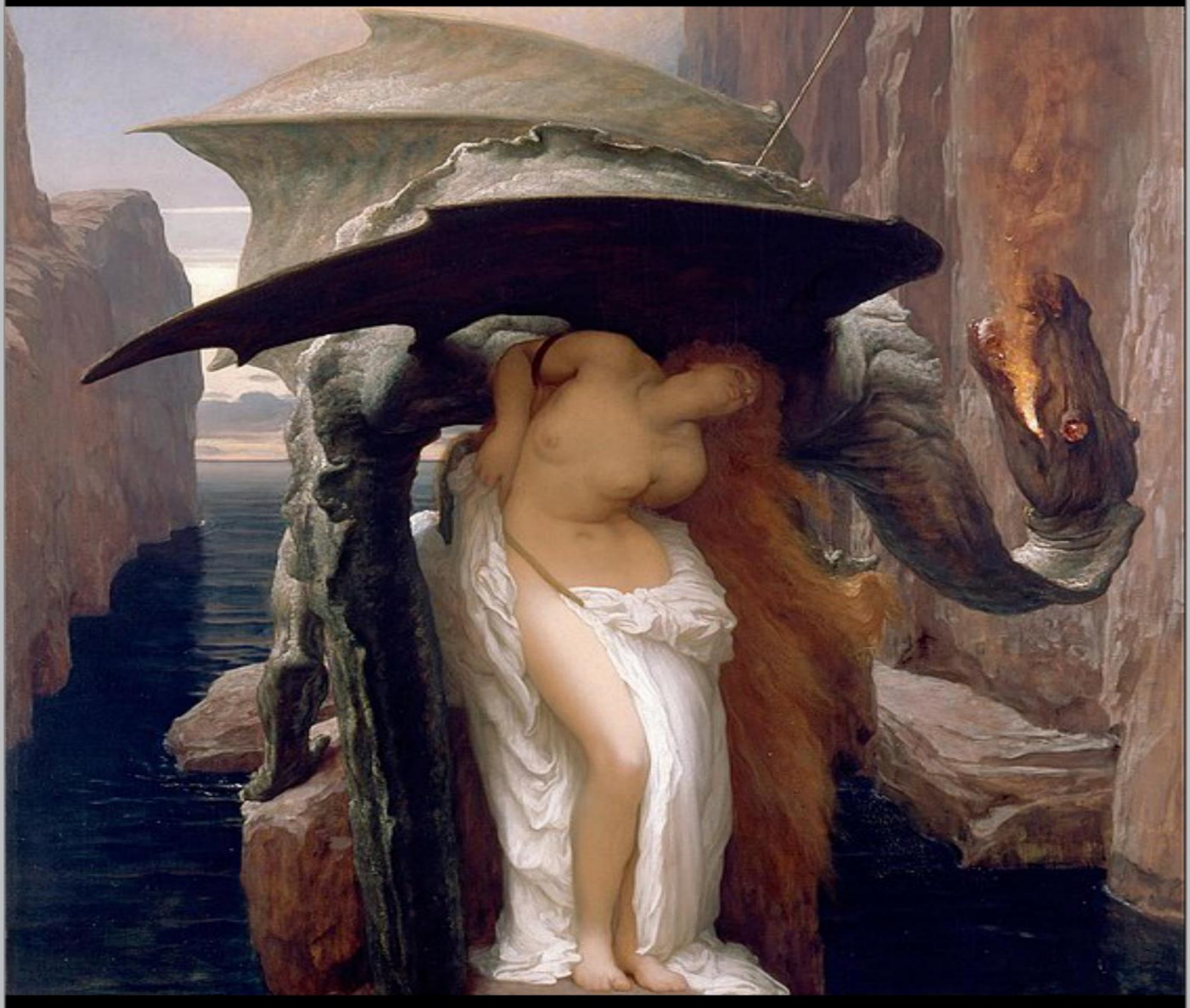
MYTHS AND MYTH-MAKERS

John Fiske



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Preface

IN publishing this somewhat rambling and unsystematic series of papers, in which I have endeavoured to touch briefly upon a great many of the most important points in the study of mythology, I think it right to observe that, in order to avoid confusing the reader with intricate discussions, I have sometimes cut the matter short, expressing myself with dogmatic definiteness where a sceptical vagueness might perhaps have seemed more becoming. In treating of popular legends and superstitions, the paths of inquiry are circuitous enough, and seldom can we reach a satisfactory conclusion until we have travelled all the way around Robin Hood’s barn and back again. I am sure that the reader would not have thanked me for obstructing these crooked lanes with the thorns and brambles of philological and antiquarian discussion, to such an extent as perhaps to make him despair of ever reaching the high road. I have not attempted to review, otherwise than incidentally, the works of Grimm, Muller, Kuhn, Breal, Dasent, and Tylor; nor can I pretend to have added anything of consequence, save now and then some bit of explanatory comment, to the results obtained by the labour of these scholars; but it has rather been my aim to present these results in such a way as to awaken general interest in them. And accordingly, in dealing with a subject which depends upon philology almost as much as astronomy depends upon mathematics, I have omitted philological

considerations wherever it has been possible to do so. Nevertheless, I believe that nothing has been advanced as established which is not now generally admitted by scholars, and that nothing has been advanced as probable for which due evidence cannot be produced. Yet among many points which are proved, and many others which are probable, there must always remain many other facts of which we cannot feel sure that our own explanation is the true one; and the student who endeavours to fathom the primitive thoughts of mankind, as enshrined in mythology, will do well to bear in mind the modest words of Jacob Grimm — himself the greatest scholar and thinker who has ever dealt with this class of subjects — “I shall indeed interpret all that I can, but I cannot interpret all that I should like.”

Chapter 1. The Origins of Folk-Lore

FEW mediaeval heroes are so widely known as William Tell. His exploits have been celebrated by one of the greatest poets and one of the most popular musicians of modern times. They are doubtless familiar to many who have never heard of Stauffacher or Winkelried, who are quite ignorant of the prowess of Roland, and to whom Arthur and Lancelot, nay, even Charlemagne, are but empty names.

Nevertheless, in spite of his vast reputation, it is very likely that no such person as William Tell ever existed, and it is certain that the story of his shooting the apple from his son’s head has no historical value whatever. In spite of the wrath of unlearned but patriotic Swiss, especially of those of the cicerone class, this conclusion is forced upon us as soon as we begin to study the legend in accordance with the canons of modern historical criticism. It is useless to point to Tell’s lime-tree, standing to-day in the centre of the market-place at Altdorf, or to quote for our confusion his crossbow preserved in the arsenal at Zurich, as unimpeachable witnesses to the truth of the story. It is in vain that we are told, “The bricks are alive to this day to testify to it; therefore, deny it not.” These proofs are not more valid than the handkerchief of St. Veronica, or the fragments of the true cross. For if relics are to be received as evidence, we must needs admit the truth of every miracle narrated by the Bollandists.

The earliest work which makes any allusion to the adventures of William Tell is the chronicle of the younger Melchior Russ, written in 1482. As the shooting of the apple was supposed to have taken place in 1296, this leaves an interval of one hundred and eighty-six years, during which neither a Tell, nor a William, nor the apple, nor the cruelty of Gessler, received any mention. It may also be observed, parenthetically, that the charters of Kussenach, when examined, show that no man by the name of Gessler ever ruled there. The chroniclers of the fifteenth century, Faber and Hammerlin, who minutely describe the tyrannical acts by which the Duke of Austria goaded the Swiss to rebellion, do not once mention Tell's name, or betray the slightest acquaintance with his exploits or with his existence. In the Zurich chronicle of 1479 he is not alluded to. But we have still better negative evidence. John of Winterthur, one of the best chroniclers of the Middle Ages, was living at the time of the battle of Morgarten (1315), at which his father was present. He tells us how, on the evening of that dreadful day, he saw Duke Leopold himself in his flight from the fatal field, half dead with fear. He describes, with the loving minuteness of a contemporary, all the incidents of the Swiss revolution, but nowhere does he say a word about William Tell. This is sufficiently conclusive. These mediaeval chroniclers, who never failed to go out of their way after a bit of the epigrammatic and marvellous, who thought far more of a pointed story than of historical credibility, would never have kept silent about the adventures of Tell, if they had known anything about them.

After this, it is not surprising to find that no two authors who describe the deeds of William Tell agree in the details of topography and chronology. Such discrepancies never fail to confront us when we leave the solid ground of history and begin to deal with floating legends. Yet, if the story be not historical, what could have been its origin? To

answer this question we must considerably expand the discussion.

The first author of any celebrity who doubted the story of William Tell was Guillimann, in his work on Swiss Antiquities, published in 1598. He calls the story a pure fable, but, nevertheless, eating his words, concludes by proclaiming his belief in it, because the tale is so popular! Undoubtedly he acted a wise part; for, in 1760, as we are told, Uriel Freudenberger was condemned by the canton of Uri to be burnt alive, for publishing his opinion that the legend of Tell had a Danish origin. [1]

The bold heretic was substantially right, however, like so many other heretics, earlier and later. The Danish account of Tell is given as follows, by Saxo Grammaticus:—

“A certain Palnatoki, for some time among King Harold’s body-guard, had made his bravery odious to very many of his fellow-soldiers by the zeal with which he surpassed them in the discharge of his duty. This man once, when talking tipsily over his cups, had boasted that he was so skilled an archer that he could hit the smallest apple placed a long way off on a wand at the first shot; which talk, caught up at first by the ears of backbiters, soon came to the hearing of the king. Now, mark how the wickedness of the king turned the confidence of the sire to the peril of the son, by commanding that this dearest pledge of his life should be placed instead of the wand, with a threat that, unless the author of this promise could strike off the apple at the first flight of the arrow, he should pay the penalty of his empty boasting by the loss of his head. The king’s command forced the soldier to perform more than he had promised, and what he had said, reported, by the tongues of slanderers, bound him to accomplish what he had NOT said. Yet did not his sterling courage, though caught in the snare of slander, suffer him to lay aside his firmness of heart; nay, he accepted the trial the more readily because it

was hard. So Palnatoki warned the boy urgently when he took his stand to await the coming of the hurtling arrow with calm ears and unbent head, lest, by a slight turn of his body, he should defeat the practised skill of the bowman; and, taking further counsel to prevent his fear, he turned away his face, lest he should be scared at the sight of the weapon. Then, taking three arrows from the quiver, he struck the mark given him with the first he fitted to the string. . . . . But Palnatoki, when asked by the king why he had taken more arrows from the quiver, when it had been settled that he should only try the fortune of the bow ONCE, made answer, 'That I might avenge on thee the swerving of the first by the points of the rest, lest perchance my innocence might have been punished, while your violence escaped scot-free.' " [2]

This ruthless king is none other than the famous Harold Blue-tooth, and the occurrence is placed by Saxo in the year 950. But the story appears not only in Denmark, but in Fingland, in Norway, in Finland and Russia, and in Persia, and there is some reason for supposing that it was known in India. In Norway we have the adventures of Pansa the Splay-footed, and of Hemingr, a vassal of Harold Hardrada, who invaded England in 1066. In Iceland there is the kindred legend of Egil brother of Wayland Smith, the Norse Vulcan. In England there is the ballad of William of Cloudeslee, which supplied Scott with many details of the archery scene in "Ivanhoe." Here, says the dauntless bowman,

"I have a sonne seven years old;
Hee is to me full deere;
I will tye him to a stake —
All shall see him that bee here —
And lay an apple upon his head,
And goe six paces him froe,
And I myself with a broad arrowe

Shall cleave the apple in towe.”
In the Malleus Maleficarum a similar story is told Puncher, a famous magician on the Upper Rhine. The great ethnologist Castren dug up the same legend in Finland. It is common, as Dr. Dasent observes, to the Turks and Mongolians; “and a legend of the wild Samoyeds, who never heard of Tell or saw a book in their lives relates it, chapter and verse, of one of their marksmen.” Finally, in the Persian poem of Farid-Uddin Attar, born in 1119, we read a story of a prince who shoots an apple from the head of a beloved page. In all these stories, names and motives of course differ; but all contain the same essential incidents. It is always an unerring archer who, at the capricious command of a tyrant, shoots from the head of some one dear to him a small object, be it an apple, a nut, or a piece of coin. The archer always provides himself with a second arrow, and, when questioned as to the use he intended to make of his extra weapon, the invariable reply is, “To kill thee, tyrant, had I slain my son.” Now, when a marvellous occurrence is said to have happened everywhere, we may feel sure that it never happened anywhere. Popular fancies propagate themselves indefinitely, but historical events, especially the striking and dramatic ones, are rarely repeated. The facts here collected lead inevitably to the conclusion that the Tell myth was known, in its general features, to our Aryan ancestors, before ever they left their primitive dwelling-place in Central Asia.
It may, indeed, be urged that some one of these wonderful marksmen may really have existed and have performed the feat recorded in the legend; and that his true story, carried about by hearsay tradition from one country to another and from age to age, may have formed the theme for all the variations above mentioned, just as the fables of La Fontaine were patterned after those of AEsop and Phaedrus, and just as many of Chaucer’s tales were

consciously adopted from Boccaccio. No doubt there has been a good deal of borrowing and lending among the legends of different peoples, as well as among the words of different languages; and possibly even some picturesque fragment of early history may have now and then been carried about the world in this manner. But as the philologist can with almost unerring certainty distinguish between the native and the imported words in any Aryan language, by examining their phonetic peculiarities, so the student of popular traditions, though working with far less perfect instruments, can safely assert, with reference to a vast number of legends, that they cannot have been obtained by any process of conscious borrowing. The difficulties inseparable from any such hypothesis will become more and more apparent as we proceed to examine a few other stories current in different portions of the Aryan domain.

As the Swiss must give up his Tell, so must the Welshman be deprived of his brave dog Gellert, over whose cruel fate I confess to having shed more tears than I should regard as well bestowed upon the misfortunes of many a human hero of romance. Every one knows how the dear old brute killed the wolf which had come to devour Llewellyn's child, and how the prince, returning home and finding the cradle upset and the dog's mouth dripping blood, hastily slew his benefactor, before the cry of the child from behind the cradle and the sight of the wolf's body had rectified his error. To this day the visitor to Snowdon is told the touching story, and shown the place, called Beth-Gellert, [3] where the dog's grave is still to be seen. Nevertheless, the story occurs in the fireside lore of nearly every Aryan people. Under the Gellert-form it started in the Panchatantra, a collection of Sanskrit fables; and it has even been discovered in a Chinese work which dates from A. D. 668. Usually the hero is a dog, but sometimes a

falcon, an ichneumon, an insect, or even a man. In Egypt it takes the following comical shape: “A Wali once smashed a pot full of herbs which a cook had prepared. The exasperated cook thrashed the well-intentioned but unfortunate Wali within an inch of his life, and when he returned, exhausted with his efforts at belabouring the man, to examine the broken pot, he discovered amongst the herbs a poisonous snake.” [4] Now this story of the Wali is as manifestly identical with the legend of Gellert as the English word FATHER is with the Latin pater; but as no one would maintain that the word father is in any sense derived from pater, so it would be impossible to represent either the Welsh or the Egyptian legend as a copy of the other. Obviously the conclusion is forced upon us that the stories, like the words, are related collaterally, having descended from a common ancestral legend, or having been suggested by one and the same primeval idea.

Closely connected with the Gellert myth are the stories of Faithful John and of Rama and Luxman. In the German story, Faithful John accompanies the prince, his master, on a journey in quest of a beautiful maiden, whom he wishes to make his bride. As they are carrying her home across the seas, Faithful John hears some crows, whose language he understands, foretelling three dangers impending over the prince, from which his friend can save him only by sacrificing his own life. As soon as they land, a horse will spring toward the king, which, if he mounts it, will bear him away from his bride forever; but whoever shoots the horse, and tells the king the reason, will be turned into stone from toe to knee. Then, before the wedding a bridal garment will lie before the king, which, if he puts it on, will burn him like the Nessos-shirt of Herakles; but whoever throws the shirt into the fire and tells the king the reason, will be turned into stone from knee to heart. Finally, during the wedding-festivities, the queen will suddenly fall in a

swoon, and “unless some one takes three drops of blood from her right breast she will die”; but whoever does so, and tells the king the reason, will be turned into stone from head to foot. Thus forewarned, Faithful John saves his master from all these dangers; but the king misinterprets his motive in bleeding his wife, and orders him to be hanged. On the scaffold he tells his story, and while the king humbles himself in an agony of remorse, his noble friend is turned into stone.

In the South Indian tale Luxman accompanies Rama, who is carrying home his bride. Luxman overhears two owls talking about the perils that await his master and mistress. First he saves them from being crushed by the falling limb of a banyan-tree, and then he drags them away from an arch which immediately after gives way. By and by, as they rest under a tree, the king falls asleep. A cobra creeps up to the queen, and Luxman kills it with his sword; but, as the owls had foretold, a drop of the cobra’s blood falls on the queen’s forehead. As Luxman licks off the blood, the king starts up, and, thinking that his vizier is kissing his wife, upbraids him with his ingratitude, whereupon Luxman, through grief at this unkind interpretation of his conduct, is turned into stone. [5]

For further illustration we may refer to the Norse tale of the “Giant who had no Heart in his Body,” as related by Dr. Dasent. This burly magician having turned six brothers with their wives into stone, the seventh brother — the crafty Boots or many-witted Odysseus of European folk-lore — sets out to obtain vengeance if not reparation for the evil done to his kith and kin. On the way he shows the kindness of his nature by rescuing from destruction a raven, a salmon, and a wolf. The grateful wolf carries him on his back to the giant’s castle, where the lovely princess whom the monster keeps in irksome bondage promises to act, in behalf of Boots, the part of Delilah, and to find out, if

possible, where her lord keeps his heart. The giant, like the Jewish hero, finally succumbs to feminine blandishments. “Far, far away in a lake lies an island; on that island stands a church; in that church is a well; in that well swims a duck; in that duck there is an egg; and in that egg there lies my heart, you darling.” Boots, thus instructed, rides on the wolf’s back to the island; the raven flies to the top of the steeple and gets the church-keys; the salmon dives to the bottom of the well, and brings up the egg from the place where the duck had dropped it; and so Boots becomes master of the situation. As he squeezes the egg, the giant, in mortal terror, begs and prays for his life, which Boots promises to spare on condition that his brothers and their brides should be released from their enchantment. But when all has been duly effected, the treacherous youth squeezes the egg in two, and the giant instantly bursts.

The same story has lately been found in Southern India, and is published in Miss Frere’s remarkable collection of tales entitled “Old Deccan Days.” In the Hindu version the seven daughters of a rajah, with their husbands, are transformed into stone by the great magician Punchkin — all save the youngest daughter, whom Punchkin keeps shut up in a tower until by threats or coaxing he may prevail upon her to marry him. But the captive princess leaves a son at home in the cradle, who grows up to manhood unmolested, and finally undertakes the rescue of his family. After long and weary wanderings he finds his mother shut up in Punchkin’s tower, and persuades her to play the part of the princess in the Norse legend. The trick is equally successful. “Hundreds of thousands of miles away there lies a desolate country covered with thick jungle. In the midst of the jungle grows a circle of palm-trees, and in the centre of the circle stand six jars full of water, piled one above another; below the sixth jar is a small cage which contains a little green parrot; on the life of the parrot depends my

life, and if the parrot is killed I must die." [6] The young prince finds the place guarded by a host of dragons, but some eaglets whom he has saved from a devouring serpent in the course of his journey take him on their crossed wings and carry him to the place where the jars are standing. He instantly overturns the jars, and seizing the parrot, obtains from the terrified magician full reparation. As soon as his own friends and a stately procession of other royal or noble victims have been set at liberty, he proceeds to pull the parrot to pieces. As the wings and legs come away, so tumble off the arms and legs of the magician; and finally as the prince wrings the bird's neck, Punchkin twists his own head round and dies.

The story is also told in the highlands of Scotland, and some portions of it will be recognized by the reader as incidents in the Arabian tale of the Princess Parizade. The union of close correspondence in conception with manifest independence in the management of the details of these stories is striking enough, but it is a phenomenon with which we become quite familiar as we proceed in the study of Aryan popular literature. The legend of the Master Thief is no less remarkable than that of Punchkin. In the Scandinavian tale the Thief, wishing to get possession of a farmer's ox, carefully hangs himself to a tree by the roadside. The farmer, passing by with his ox, is indeed struck by the sight of the dangling body, but thinks it none of his business, and does not stop to interfere. No sooner has he passed than the Thief lets himself down, and running swiftly along a by-path, hangs himself with equal precaution to a second tree. This time the farmer is astonished and puzzled; but when for the third time he meets the same unwonted spectacle, thinking that three suicides in one morning are too much for easy credence, he leaves his ox and runs back to see whether the other two bodies are really where he thought he saw them. While he

is framing hypotheses of witchcraft by which to explain the phenomenon, the Thief gets away with the ox. In the Hitopadesa the story receives a finer point. “A Brahman, who had vowed a sacrifice, went to the market to buy a goat. Three thieves saw him, and wanted to get hold of the goat. They stationed themselves at intervals on the high road. When the Brahman, who carried the goat on his back, approached the first thief, the thief said, ‘Brahman, why do you carry a dog on your back?’ The Brahman replied, ‘It is not a dog, it is a goat.’ A little while after he was accosted by the second thief, who said, ‘Brahman, why do you carry a dog on your back?’ The Brahman felt perplexed, put the goat down, examined it, took it up again, and walked on. Soon after he was stopped by the third thief, who said, ‘Brahman, why do you carry a dog on your back?’ Then the Brahman was frightened, threw down the goat, and walked home to perform his ablutions for having touched an unclean animal. The thieves took the goat and ate it.” The adroitness of the Norse King in “The Three Princesses of Whiteland” shows but poorly in comparison with the keen psychological insight and cynical sarcasm of these Hindu sharpers. In the course of his travels this prince met three brothers fighting on a lonely moor. They had been fighting for a hundred years about the possession of a hat, a cloak, and a pair of boots, which would make the wearer invisible, and convey him instantly whithersoever he might wish to go. The King consents to act as umpire, provided he may once try the virtue of the magic garments; but once clothed in them, of course he disappears, leaving the combatants to sit down and suck their thumbs. Now in the “Sea of Streams of Story,” written in the twelfth century by Somadeva of Cashmere, the Indian King Putraka, wandering in the Vindhya Mountains, similarly discomfits two brothers who are quarrelling over a pair of shoes, which are like the sandals of Hermes, and a bowl which has the same virtue as Aladdin’s lamp. “Why don’t you run a

race for them?" suggests Putraka; and, as the two blockheads start furiously off, he quietly picks up the bowl, ties on the shoes, and flies away! [7]

It is unnecessary to cite further illustrations. The tales here quoted are fair samples of the remarkable correspondence which holds good through all the various sections of Aryan folk-lore. The hypothesis of lateral diffusion, as we may call it, manifestly fails to explain coincidences which are maintained on such an immense scale. It is quite credible that one nation may have borrowed from another a solitary legend of an archer who performs the feats of Tell and Palnatoki; but it is utterly incredible that ten thousand stories, constituting the entire mass of household mythology throughout a dozen separate nations, should have been handed from one to another in this way. No one would venture to suggest that the old grannies of Iceland and Norway, to whom we owe such stories as the Master Thief and the Princesses of Whiteland, had ever read Somadeva or heard of the treasures of Rhampsinitos. A large proportion of the tales with which we are dealing were utterly unknown to literature until they were taken down by Grimm and Frere and Castren and Campbell, from the lips of ignorant peasants, nurses, or house-servants, in Germany and Hindustan, in Siberia and Scotland. Yet, as Mr. Cox observes, these old men and women, sitting by the chimney-corner and somewhat timidly recounting to the literary explorer the stories which they had learned in childhood from their own nurses and grandmas, "reproduce the most subtle turns of thought and expression, and an endless series of complicated narratives, in which the order of incidents and the words of the speakers are preserved with a fidelity nowhere paralleled in the oral tradition of historical events. It may safely be said that no series of stories introduced in the form of translations from other languages could ever thus have filtered down into the

lowest strata of society, and thence have sprung up again, like Antaios, with greater energy and heightened beauty." There is indeed no alternative for us but to admit that these fireside tales have been handed down from parent to child for more than a hundred generations; that the primitive Aryan cottager, as he took his evening meal of yava and sipped his fermented mead, listened with his children to the stories of Boots and Cinderella and the Master Thief, in the days when the squat Laplander was master of Europe and the dark-skinned Sudra was as yet unmolested in the Punjab. Only such community of origin can explain the community in character between the stories told by the Aryan's descendants, from the jungles of Ceylon to the highlands of Scotland.

This conclusion essentially modifies our view of the origin and growth of a legend like that of William Tell. The case of the Tell legend is radically different from the case of the blindness of Belisarius or the burning of the Alexandrian library by order of Omar. The latter are isolated stories or beliefs; the former is one of a family of stories or beliefs. The latter are untrustworthy traditions of doubtful events; but in dealing with the former, we are face to face with a MYTH.

What, then, is a myth? The theory of Euhemeros, which was so fashionable a century ago, in the days of the Abbe Banier, has long since been so utterly abandoned that to refute it now is but to slay the slain. The peculiarity of this theory was that it cut away all the extraordinary features of a given myth, wherein dwelt its inmost significance, and to the dull and useless residuum accorded the dignity of primeval history. In this way the myth was lost without compensation, and the student, in seeking good digestible bread, found but the hardest of pebbles. Considered merely as a pretty story, the legend of the golden fruit watched by the dragon in the garden of the Hesperides is not without its value. But what merit can there be in the gratuitous

statement which, degrading the grand Doric hero to a level with any vulgar fruit-stealer, makes Herakles break a close with force and arms, and carry off a crop of oranges which had been guarded by mastiffs? It is still worse when we come to the more homely folk-lore with which the student of mythology now has to deal. The theories of Banier, which limped and stumbled awkwardly enough when it was only a question of Hermes and Minos and Odin, have fallen never to rise again since the problems of Punchkin and Cinderella and the Blue Belt have begun to demand solution. The conclusion has been gradually forced upon the student, that the marvellous portion of these old stories is no illegitimate extres-cence, but was rather the pith and centre of the whole, [8] in days when there was no supernatural, because it had not yet been discovered that there was such a thing as nature. The religious myths of antiquity and the fireside legends of ancient and modern times have their common root in the mental habits of primeval humanity. They are the earliest recorded utterances of men concerning the visible phenomena of the world into which they were born.

That prosaic and coldly rational temper with which modern men are wont to regard natural phenomena was in early times unknown. We have come to regard all events as taking place regularly, in strict conformity to law: whatever our official theories may be, we instinctively take this view of things. But our primitive ancestors knew nothing about laws of nature, nothing about physical forces, nothing about the relations of cause and effect, nothing about the necessary regularity of things. There was a time in the history of mankind when these things had never been inquired into, and when no generalizations about them had been framed, tested, or established. There was no conception of an order of nature, and therefore no distinct conception of a supernatural order of things. There was no

belief in miracles as infractions of natural laws, but there was a belief in the occurrence of wonderful events too mighty to have been brought about by ordinary means. There was an unlimited capacity for believing and fancying, because fancy and belief had not yet been checked and headed off in various directions by established rules of experience. Physical science is a very late acquisition of the human mind, but we are already sufficiently imbued with it to be almost completely disabled from comprehending the thoughts of our ancestors. “How Finn cosmogonists could have believed the earth and heaven to be made out of a severed egg, the upper concave shell representing heaven, the yolk being earth, and the crystal surrounding fluid the circumambient ocean, is to us incomprehensible; and yet it remains a fact that they did so regard them. How the Scandinavians could have supposed the mountains to be the mouldering bones of a mighty Jotun, and the earth to be his festering flesh, we cannot conceive; yet such a theory was solemnly taught and accepted. How the ancient Indians could regard the rain-clouds as cows with full udders milked by the winds of heaven is beyond our comprehension, and yet their Veda contains indisputable testimony to the fact that they were so regarded.” We have only to read Mr. Baring-Gould’s book of “Curious Myths,” from which I have just quoted, or to dip into Mr. Thorpe’s treatise on “Northern Mythology,” to realize how vast is the difference between our stand-point and that from which, in the later Middle Ages, our immediate forefathers regarded things. The frightful superstition of werewolves is a good instance. In those days it was firmly believed that men could be, and were in the habit of being, transformed into wolves. It was believed that women might bring forth snakes or poodle-dogs. It was believed that if a man had his side pierced in battle, you could cure him by nursing the sword which inflicted the wound. “As late as 1600 a German writer would illustrate a thunder-storm destroying

a crop of corn by a picture of a dragon devouring the produce of the field with his flaming tongue and iron teeth.”

Now if such was the condition of the human intellect only three or four centuries ago, what must it have been in that dark antiquity when not even the crudest generalizations of Greek or of Oriental science had been reached? The same mighty power of imagination which now, restrained and guided by scientific principles, leads us to discoveries and inventions, must then have wildly run riot in mythologic fictions whereby to explain the phenomena of nature. Knowing nothing whatever of physical forces, of the blind steadiness with which a given effect invariably follows its cause, the men of primeval antiquity could interpret the actions of nature only after the analogy of their own actions. The only force they knew was the force of which they were directly conscious — the force of will. Accordingly, they imagined all the outward world to be endowed with volition, and to be directed by it. They personified everything — sky, clouds, thunder, sun, moon, ocean, earthquake, whirlwind. [9] The comparatively enlightened Athenians of the age of Perikles addressed the sky as a person, and prayed to it to rain upon their gardens. [10] And for calling the moon a mass of dead matter, Anaxagoras came near losing his life. To the ancients the moon was not a lifeless ball of stones and clods: it was the horned huntress, Artemis, coursing through the upper ether, or bathing herself in the clear lake; or it was Aphrodite, protectress of lovers, born of the sea-foam in the East near Cyprus. The clouds were no bodies of vaporized water: they were cows with swelling udders, driven to the milking by Hermes, the summer wind; or great sheep with moist fleeces, slain by the unerring arrows of Bellerophon, the sun; or swan-maidens, flitting across the firmament, Valkyries hovering over the battle-field to receive the souls

of falling heroes; or, again, they were mighty mountains piled one above another, in whose cavernous recesses the divining-wand of the storm-god Thor revealed hidden treasures. The yellow-haired sun, Phoibos, drove westerly all day in his flaming chariot; or perhaps, as Meleagros, retired for a while in disgust from the sight of men; wedded at eventide the violet light (Oinone, Iole), which he had forsaken in the morning; sank, as Herakles, upon a blazing funeral-pyre, or, like Agamemnon, perished in a blood-stained bath; or, as the fish-god, Dagon, swam nightly through the subterranean waters, to appear eastward again at daybreak. Sometimes Phaethon, his rash, inexperienced son, would take the reins and drive the solar chariot too near the earth, causing the fruits to perish, and the grass to wither, and the wells to dry up. Sometimes, too, the great all-seeing divinity, in his wrath at the impiety of men, would shoot down his scorching arrows, causing pestilence to spread over the land. Still other conceptions clustered around the sun. Now it was the wonderful treasure-house, into which no one could look and live; and again it was Ixion himself, bound on the fiery wheel in punishment for violence offered to Here, the queen of the blue air.

This theory of ancient mythology is not only beautiful and plausible, it is, in its essential points, demonstrated. It stands on as firm a foundation as Grimm’s law in philology, or the undulatory theory in molecular physics. It is philology which has here enabled us to read the primitive thoughts of mankind. A large number of the names of Greek gods and heroes have no meaning in the Greek language; but these names occur also in Sanskrit, with plain physical meanings. In the Veda we find Zeus or Jupiter (Dyaus-pitar) meaning the sky, and Sarameias or Hermes, meaning the breeze of a summer morning. We find Athene (Ahana), meaning the light of daybreak; and we are thus enabled to understand why the Greek described her as sprung from the forehead of Zeus. There too we find

Helena (Sarama), the fickle twilight, whom the Panis, or night-demons, who serve as the prototypes of the Hellenic Paris, strive to seduce from her allegiance to the solar monarch. Even Achilleus (Aharyu) again confronts us, with his captive Briseis (Brisaya's offspring); and the fierce Kerberos (Carvara) barks on Vedic ground in strict conformity to the laws of phonetics. [11] Now, when the Hindu talked about Father Dyaus, or the sleek kine of Siva, he thought of the personified sky and clouds; he had not outgrown the primitive mental habits of the race. But the Greek, in whose language these physical meanings were lost, had long before the Homeric epoch come to regard Zeus and Hermes, Athene, Helena, Paris, and Achilleus, as mere persons, and in most cases the originals of his myths were completely forgotten. In the Vedas the Trojan War is carried on in the sky, between the bright deities and the demons of night; but the Greek poet, influenced perhaps by some dim historical tradition, has located the contest on the shore of the Hellespont, and in his mind the actors, though superhuman, are still completely anthropomorphic. Of the true origin of his epic story he knew as little as Euhemeros, or Lord Bacon, or the Abbe Banier.

After these illustrations, we shall run no risk of being misunderstood when we define a myth as, in its origin, an explanation, by the uncivilized mind, of some natural phenomenon; not an allegory, not an esoteric symbol — for the ingenuity is wasted which strives to detect in myths the remnants of a refined primeval science — but an explanation. Primitive men had no profound science to perpetuate by means of allegory, nor were they such sorry pedants as to talk in riddles when plain language would serve their purpose. Their minds, we may be sure, worked like our own, and when they spoke of the far-darting sun-god, they meant just what they said, save that where we propound a scientific theorem, they constructed a myth. [12]

A thing is said to be explained when it is classified with other things with which we are already acquainted. That is the only kind of explanation of which the highest science is capable. We explain the origin, progress, and ending of a thunder-storm, when we classify the phenomena presented by it along with other more familiar phenomena of vaporization and condensation. But the primitive man explained the same thing to his own satisfaction when he had classified it along with the well-known phenomena of human volition, by constructing a theory of a great black dragon pierced by the unerring arrows of a heavenly archer. We consider the nature of the stars to a certain extent explained when they are classified as suns; but the Mohammedan compiler of the “Mishkat-ul-Ma’sabih” was content to explain them as missiles useful for stoning the Devil! Now, as soon as the old Greek, forgetting the source of his conception, began to talk of a human Oidipous slaying a leonine Sphinx, and as soon as the Mussulman began, if he ever did, to tell his children how the Devil once got a good pelting with golden bullets, then both the one and the other were talking pure mythology.

We are justified, accordingly, in distinguishing between a myth and a legend. Though the words are etymologically parallel, and though in ordinary discourse we may use them interchangeably, yet when strict accuracy is required, it is well to keep them separate. And it is perhaps needless, save for the sake of completeness, to say that both are to be distinguished from stories which have been designedly fabricated. The distinction may occasionally be subtle, but is usually broad enough. Thus, the story that Philip II. murdered his wife Elizabeth, is a misrepresentation; but the story that the same Elizabeth was culpably enamoured of her step-son Don Carlos, is a legend. The story that Queen Eleanor saved the life of her husband, Edward I., by sucking a wound made in his arm by a poisoned arrow, is a legend; but the story that Hercules killed a great robber,