IRISH FAIRY TALES

IRISH FAIRY TALES. *By James Stephens. Illustrated by Arthur Rackham. 8vo. 318 pages. The Macmillan Company. $4.*

READER, have you ever perused Standish Hayes O'Grady's Silva Gadelica? Or have you ever read the stories that are given as illustrations of the Celtic doctrine of the Other World in Kuno Meyer's and Alfred Nutt's Voyage of Bran? If you have not done such reading you are not in a position to appreciate the achievement that is in James Stephens' Irish Fairy Tales.

But one has to begin by insisting that the title is the least adequate thing about the book. It suggests the nursery and the book is for the nursery and for every other place as well. There are people of Faerie in the book—there are as many of them as there are men and women of this world—but these are not the accepted fairies, the fairies of the tradition that has been fixed by the Grimms and by Hans Christian Andersen. These are the people of the Shi, the Irish Fairies who are gods divested of all creative and overruling functions. They belong to a self-determining world that interpenetrates with our self-determining world. As the old poem says of them:

> "Good are they at man-slaying feats,
> Melodious over meats and ale;
> Of woven verse they have the spell,
> At chess-play they excel the Gael."

No, these are not Fairy Tales in the accepted meaning of the term; they are re-creations—re-creations of the court romances of mediaeval Ireland.

It is only when we think of them as such that we appreciate James Stephens' imaginative and technical achievement. I want to refer again to the stories given in Silva Gadelica and to the marginal stories of the Voyage of Bran. Could such stories ever be made readable for any except those who had a craze for Celtic lit-

erature, one might wonder as one read them. Other stories are complicated. Other stories are inconsequential. But these stories have a complicated inconsequence and an inconsequential complicatedness.

There is another thing about this literature in the original that makes it difficult for us. We do not get its tone. Mediaeval Irish literature has humour, but how much of it is humorous? Then there is its curious elaboration. We know from Standish Hayes O'Grady's translations that these stories have an extravagant pedantry of style. He makes us see a warrior "carrying on his dorsal dimension a huge irrefrangible shield." But is this pedantry the exuberance of language or is it the decay of language? The tradition that would enable us to judge would seem to have been lost, and moving through this literature we feel ourselves like the two dimensional creatures of Tertium Organum moving in a three-dimensional world.

Then James Stephens comes along and he starts to re-tell these very stories. He does not make them two-dimensional as a less imaginative and courageous story-teller would be sure to make them; he leaves them three-dimensional. But somehow or another he makes his readers three-dimensional too, and he lets us move through this world without the consciousness that we are on a plane that is outrageously alien.

He does this by creating a norm. He creates a norm of friendliness. Everyone in the stories is friendly. "But," says he at the end of The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran:

"But that did not prevent Goll from killing Fionn's brother Cairell later on, nor did it prevent Fionn from killing Goll later on again, and the last did not prevent Goll from rescuing Fionn out of hell when the Fianna-Finn were sent there under the new God. Nor is there any reason to complain or to be astonished at these things, for it is a mutual world we live in, a give-and-take world, and there is no great harm in it."

The stories are made human by this friendliness and affection; a norm is thus established, and we are then at liberty to stray into and out of many worlds of enchantment. But without this norm of human friendliness the tales would be only remarkable instances of how not to tell a story. Only James Stephens could have estab-

lished this norm; by establishing it he has been able to bring us into the world of Irish mediaeval romance—a world of enchantment, compared to which the enchantment in Marie de France's Lays and in the Mabinogion of the Welsh story-tellers is only a far-flung echo.

We are made believe that James Stephens' fulness of humorous, fantastic, and lovely descriptiveness is the equivalent of the bardic exuberance of language that Standish Hayes O'Grady indicates. It would certainly take one of the Gaelic shanachies to better the description of the dog which Mananan produced from under his cloak.

But it is not only in descriptions of what is grotesque that James Stephens has this abundance and this mastery. His descriptions of things that have loveliness and grace are masterful too. The book has all the glamour of Celtic romance, but it has also the humour and the conscious extravagance that are in that romance. Anglo-Irish renderings of Celtic stories have created a legend of tragedy and distress. "They went forth to battle but they always fell" has been made the key-note of that romance. But the mediaeval Irish rejoiced in boisterous humour. Here, for instance, out of the Speckled Book that was written six hundred years ago is a description that might well describe the re-creator of that age to-day—the writer of Irish Fairy Tales:

"A youngster of deep lore, entertaining and delightful. And he must be well-served; for he is melancholy, passionate, impetuous, violent, and impatient; and he is eager, fond of eating early; and he is voracious, niggardly, greedy; and yet he is mild and gentle . . . and easily moved to laughter. And he is a man great in thanksgiving and in upbraidings. And no wonder; for he has wit both to censure and to praise the hearth of a well-appointed, gentle, fine, mirthful house with a mead-hall."

PADRAIC COLUM