



# **TALES OF THE DARTMOOR PIXIES**

**WILLIAM CROSSING**

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**TALES OF THE  
DARTMOOR PIXIES**

**GLIMPSES OF ELFIN HAUNTS AND ANTICS**

**BY  
WILLIAM CROSSING**

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Tales Of The Dartmoor Pixies By William Crossing.

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suspicion from themselves. Sometimes, however, these stories seem to owe their origin to little other than pure invention. An inhabitant of the parish in which I reside--South Brent--has told me that he very well remembers how, in his youth, the people used to believe implicitly in the pixy riders, or, at all events, some of the people did. Farmers' horses which were kept on Aish Ridge, a common adjoining the moor, were frequently found in the morning in a very exhausted condition, having, apparently, been ridden hard during the night. This was set down as the work of the pixies, and it was, of course, very easy for those who desired that such a belief should be accepted to go so far as to actually aver that they had seen the little goblins riding them. And that there were those who had such a desire is true enough. It appears that some of the more adventurous spirits in the neighbourhood were, at this time, engaged in the not unprofitable practice of smuggling, and on the expected arrival of a cargo of contraband goods on the coast--generally somewhere about Tor Cross--would make their way across country through the night, in order to assist at the landing, and afterwards to bear away the kegs of cognac. Now, the horses employed upon these midnight journeys were borrowed (without going through the form of making an application for them to their owners) from those kept on Aish Ridge, and were duly returned before daybreak. Such good people as were totally oblivious of the fact that there were men engaged in "deeds of daring" living in their midst, saw the condition of the animals, and not being able to account for their tired and jaded appearance in any other way, straightway supposed that they had been ridden by the pixies. Though their surmises were incorrect, it is still true enough that the steeds would never have been found in such a state, were it not for the *spirits*.

More than one story is related of the narrow escapes from capture by the coastguard, which the contrabandists experienced, having been chased by them, on several occasions, far inland.

Stories are sometimes told of pixy doings to account for eccentricities in the construction of buildings, such as a hole in a wall--said to have been left for the little sprites to go in and out of--or a piece of the natural rock awkwardly showing itself in a corner of the farm kitchen. This latter, though it may seem a rather strange object to find in a living apartment, is, in some of the

rougher built of the moorland cottages, not such a very uncommon thing after all. If a big lump of granite rock happened to lie within the area designed by the builder of a house to be enclosed by his walls, he didn't seem to mind it, but proceeded with his erection, knocking off as much of the protruding rock as he conveniently could, and allowing the rest to remain, to excuse which slovenly mode of building stories of the supernatural were invented.

But the consequences of interfering with such things are no longer dreaded. Old Daniel Leaman, of Dart-meet, in order to rid his cottage of such an obstacle to the proper disposition of his furniture, sought the aid of gunpowder, determined upon clearing his room of the rock, in spite of all the pixies on Dartmoor. Like Mrs. Brown, the washerwoman, who, desirous of curing a smoky chimney, poured the contents of a powder-horn into the fire "to burn up by degrees," Daniel was not so well acquainted with the power of the agent he employed as he imagined, and the contents of his room, and window glass, suffered in consequence.

An unweeded garden has been shown as an example of a spot on which no plants would grow, and for the reason that having originally been laid out and planted with flowers for the special delectation of the pixie's, it was afterwards taken away from them, and sought to be put to other uses.

On the banks of the Teign, not far from Holy Street, near Chagford, is a rock, known as the Puggie or Puckie Stone, in the midst of wild and romantic scenery. The name of this rock has been thought to be equivalent to Pixy Stone, and that the word pixy is derived from *puck* or *pwc*, meaning *sprite* or *goblin*, there does not seem much reason to doubt. Shakespeare's Puck is our pixy exactly. The Fairy asks him:--

Are you not he,

That frights the maidens of the villagery;

Skim milk; and sometimes labour in the quern;

And bootless make the breathless housewife churn;

And sometime make the drink to bear no barm;

Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?

Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,

You do their work, and they shall have good luck:  
Are not you he?"

To which Puck replies:

Thou speak'st aright;  
I am that merry wanderer of the night."<sup>1</sup>

The Puckie Stone is not the only object in that neighbourhood connected by tradition with the elfin race, for a group of rocks further down the river, near the gorge of the Teign, is known as the Pixies' Parlour.

Though it is generally in the barn or pound-house that the pixy takes it upon himself to assist the farmer, yet there are not wanting instances when he has meddled in his out-of-door concerns, as the following story will show. It will be seen, however, that in this case there is a doubt whether the goblins were bent on mischief, or were endeavouring to help forward the good man's labour.

#### VICKEYTOAD.

It was harvest time, and the sun had not long risen, when a yeoman, whose farm was situated on the borders of the moor, betook himself to the field where, on the previous day, the sickle had been busy among the golden grain. What was his surprise on arriving there to find that a great number of the sheaves, which had been left standing in shocks, had been dragged to one corner of the field, and there piled in a confused heap, while others were lying about time ground. He was completely mystified at first, but upon turning the matter over in his mind, came to the conclusion, that it was nothing less than the work of the pixies, though what cause they had for acting in such a manner he could not readily divine. He could scarcely bring himself to believe that they had done it out of mischief, for he had always heard that they seldom played such pranks upon those who had never given them any cause for it, and he had certainly no recollection of having done aught to incur their displeasure.

<sup>1</sup> Midsummer Night's Dream, Act II., Sc. I



His surmises were of course of no avail. It was perfectly plain what had been done, and all that now remained was to put the sheaves up again in shocks, and this he accordingly set about doing without wasting any more time, and with no little labour accomplished the task.

But when evening drew nigh, the farmer began to reflect that it was extremely probable that the pixies would visit his field again, and being desirous of preventing a repetition of their mischievous pranks, determined upon keeping watch.

The sun went down, and time shades of evening began to creep over the face of nature, till at last the big harvest moon mounted into the heavens, and shed around a light of such silvery brightness that every object was plainly discernible. The farmer stepped out upon the threshold and looked about him. Everything was calm and peaceful, and with the exception of an occasional bark of some sheep-dog, no sound broke the quiet of the night. The moon mounted higher and higher, bathing in its beams the old house, and the barn across the yard, and plainly revealing the path which led to the harvest field. This was but a short distance from the house, and on time very edge of the common that rose beyond it, where the grey granite rocks cast dark shadows upon the tall patches of fern that almost covered the surface of the ground.

The good yeoman approached the field very cautiously, and peeping through the interstices of the rough moorstone wall, beheld a sight, which, though partially prepared for, filled him with astonishment.

A considerable number of diminutive elves were busily engaged in pulling down the sheaves of corn, and dragging them to the corner of the field. They were all working very hard indeed, and it was evidently as much as several of them could do, to remove a sheaf. They did not, however, appear to be at all dismayed at the magnitude of the task they had set themselves to do, but all worked with a hearty good will, chattering incessantly to one another, though what they were saying the farmer was not close enough to hear. So interested was he in what was going forward, that he almost forgot he had come to prevent any such proceedings, and could not for the life of









The tradition connected with Fitz's, or Fice's Well, near Princetown, is of pixy-led travellers, and affords an instance of the virtue of water in all such cases.

John Fitz and his lady falling under the spell of the goblins, when riding over Dartmoor, were utterly at a loss to find their way home, but chancing to light upon a spring, they had no sooner tasted of the water, than all difficulty about the matter vanished, and they were able to proceed without difficulty. The erection over the well, which has inscribed upon it the initials of John Fitz, and the date 1568, was erected by him out of gratitude at having been delivered from so perplexing a predicament.<sup>2</sup>

That such a superstition as the belief in the efficacy of water to destroy the spells cast over the traveller should obtain on Dartmoor, is not much to be wondered at, for there is no doubt that many a wanderer, lost in a mist, and believing himself to be pixy-led, has found his way off the moor by coming upon a stream of water and following its course.

And that the mists are responsible for a great deal is certain. Often do we hear of farmers being unable to find the gate by which they have entered a field or new-take, and of their great perplexity in consequence; and it is more than probable that such misadventures have happened during one of these mists, which frequently arise very suddenly, but the pixies have nevertheless had to bear the blame.

But if the elfin sprites occasionally mislead the traveller, they more than make up for it, if it be true as we are sometimes told, that they indicate spots where metals may be found. Beneath the fairy rings where they dance and sing by night, the miner has only to dig and he will be sure to hit upon a precious lode; that the goblins themselves occasionally engage in such a pursuit almost seems to be the case, for it is told how they may be heard

space of five hours, and was even then only able to crawl away on his hands and knees. Not knowing in what direction he was proceeding, he fell at length into a stream, and on pulling himself out of it, recognized his whereabouts, and made the best of his way home. Here he was remonstrated with by his wife for not having turned his pocket inside out, a charm which could not fail to counteract the magic power of the pixies. It is stated that a man named Short--a tailor--was a few years since pixy-led in the same wood, and continued under the spells of the goblins until morning.

<sup>2</sup> It is somewhat interesting to note that in the story which comes to us from Torrington. the man was unable to find his way home until he met with a *stream*.







