5 Search for the Hidden People: The Barn House, Burford

The folklorist who specializes in fairy-lore is often asked if he believes in fairies — that is, in fairies as a subjective reality ... For myself, I am an agnostic. Some of the fairy anecdotes have a curiously convincing air of truth, but at the same time we must make allowances for the constructive power of the imagination in recalling old memories, and for the likelihood that people see what they expect to see.

(K.M. Briggs, Preface to 'A Dictionary of Fairies')

It was not very long after the happy reunion at Dalbeathie at the close of the war that Katharine was off on her travels again. She never settled for long at Dalbeathie now, but kept the Oxford terms at Burford, and often extended her stay there beyond them. For the next ten years until their mother's death in 1956, her sisters were constantly on the move between Scotland and the Cotswolds. Sometimes they were trapped at one end or the other by bad weather, as in the bitter winter of 1947, and sometimes they made short trips abroad, but for the most part their world was divided between Dalbeathie and the Barn House. Katharine was at Burford in 1946, as soon as she could contrive it, making the house habitable and writing a happy account of settling in to console her mother, who worried about her being alone there:

> I am enjoying myself so much. Of course it will be nicer still when you come down, and I hope you will find it warm and comfortable; but it's lovely to be studying again, and I love the little bustle round the house to put things in order before I go, & finding it nice and friendly when I arrive back.

In the early days she stayed at the Bay Tree Hotel, not far away, and continued over the years to make use of it for meals and for entertaining visitors, but comfortable and friendly as it was, she assured her mother, 'there's nothing like being in a home of your own.'

She had made arrangements to work for the degree of B. Litt. at Lady Margaret Hall, and had as her supervisor Ethel Seaton, Tutor in English Literature at St Hugh's College. Miss Seaton worked on somewhat obscure subjects, but found fascinating material in them. She had published her main work, *Literary Relations of England and Scandinavia in the Seventeenth Century,* in 1935, and at the time when Katharine first came into contact with her was working on the life of the poet Sir Richard Roos. She must have been a stimulating person with whom to work, and she was able to put Katharine in touch with many important and little-known sources. Katharine had evidently now made up her mind about her subject, and wanted to work on fairy lore, witchcraft and other aspects of popular beliefs in the supernatural world in the seventeenth century. The final title of her thesis was 'Some aspects of folk-lore in early seventeenth-century literature', since the amount of material was so great that she had to limit it to some extent. Certain alterations had also to be made when her supervisor recommended that she should work for a D.Phil. rather than a B.Litt.

It would seem that by this time she had written *Kate Crackernuts,* a story of witchcraft set in seventeenth-century Scotland, and had finished *The Personnel of Fairyland,* since she took this with her when she went to see Miss Seaton for the first time:

> I went into Oxford in the afternoon to see Miss Seaton. She's elderly, as you'd expect, with a very, very gentle voice, and very learned. I feel rather nervous; I left the Personnel of Fairyland with her, and I'm afraid she may think it very unscholarly.

These two books contain the key to Katharine's new line of work and future development. She had moved away from the historical figures of the seventeenth century to those of the fairy world and of men's contacts with it, although her knowledge of the historical background was necessary and invaluable. She had always been interested in folk and fairy tales; her father had introduced her to them, as to so much else. She had devoured all the collections in his library at an early age, and later shared his enthusiasm for Scottish tales and legends. Her work with Guides and Summer Players had set her on a continual search for tales, rhymes and ballads suitable for mimes and story-telling. The lonely period in the WAAF must have given her time to let her mind dwell further on traditional literature, and she had found that it might appeal to most unlikely

audiences, such as the airmen in the RAF. She had also become increasingly inquisitive about the different types of fairies after her instinctive reaction against the confusing hotchpotch of fairy lore presented to the Brownies. Years of story-telling to children had taught her that the old tales from our own popular tradition were the most successful in holding their interest. Much of the sophisticated material from France, elegant narratives of Cinderella or Bluebeard, and the flimsy, sentimental figures which flitted through contemporary stories for children, were, she realised, far inferior to the native material on creatures of the Other World, which was little known and yet well within our reach.

In *Kate Crackernuts* she takes an old folktale and expands it into a book. It has echoes of a short story she wrote before the war, *The Witches' Ride,* which was printed by Winifred on their own press.[1] This was the tale of a young girl, Sally, who discovered that the old woman she worked for was a witch, but through innocence and good luck she was saved from harm and found a crock of gold. It is a slight story, simply told, but the atmosphere of evil and terror investing the witches is effectively conveyed. In *Kate Crackernuts,* a similar theme of evil witchcraft is played out in seventeenth-century Scotland. The book was not published by the Alden Press until 1963, after *Hobberdy Dick* had appeared, but a reference in one of Katharine's letters shows that she began it at Syerston in 1943, and it was evidently the first of the two to be written. She may have altered it during the years, but it does not give the impression of revision; it has a vividness and power marking it out from her other writings. Parts of it have the quality of a memorable dream, and there is deep emotion expressed in it. It seems as though much of Katharine's inner experience went into this book, transmuted though it may have been into a tale of enchantment which she took over ready-made.

The tale is a strange one, of how one half-sister freed the other from a spell, and finally married a prince whom she rescued from the power of the fairies. It was sent to Andrew Lang by a reader of *Longman's Magazine* in 1889,[2] and was said to have been contributed by a lady whose name is not given, but who claimed that it was told 'by an ancient lady of an old family in Angus' to her descendants. In 1890 Lang published it in the journal *Folk-Lore,* and Joseph Jacobs retold it in his collection of folktales in the same year.[3] Katharine told the tale in her own words in *The Anatomy*

of Puck,[4] and used Lang's version in her *Dictionary of Folktales.*[5] In this the fair sister who is bewitched is not given a name, although Jacobs names her Anne; however it is implied in Lang's version that both girls are called Kate, although this point could be easily missed: 'The king had a dochter, Kate, and the queen had one.' Katharine evidently interpreted it in this way, since in her summary she refers to 'the king's Kate' and 'the queen's Kate.' The mother of the dark girl, Kate Crackernuts, marries the father of the fair one, and the new queen, resenting the beauty of her stepdaughter, puts her under a spell and sets a sheep's head on her shoulders. The other Kate takes her half-sister away to a neighbouring kingdom and works in the palace kitchen while the bewitched Kate hides herself in an attic and is seen by none. Kate Crackernuts then rescues the king's son from enchantment after entering a fairy mound, and discovers also how to free her sister from the evil spell. She marries the king's son, while her sister marries his brother, and they live happily ever after.

Katharine keeps faithfully to the outline of the tale, only making some slight alterations, such as marrying the fair Kate to an older man, a friend of her father. She places the tale in Galloway, a part of Scotland she knew well, at the time of the Civil War, and changes it from a story of kings and queens to one of minor landed gentry in Scotland and Yorkshire. She states in her introduction: 'It may be that the real Katharine Crackernuts had a homelier setting, and had to be contented with a laird for her stepfather and a dame for her mother, and a rough-hewn Galloway keep for a royal palace.' She makes the father of 'the laird's Kate' Andrew Lindsay of Ackenskeoch, who fought under Gustavus Adolphus and brought a Swedish wife back to Galloway. When the tale opens, his wife and his sons had died, and little Katharine was his only surviving child. When she was twelve, he married a widow called Grizel Maxwell, a handsome but sinister woman, thought to have dealings with the local witches. Grizel also had a daughter called Kate, who loved to roam wild over the hills and collect nuts and berries, so that she was called Kate Crackernuts. But in contrast to this realistic setting, the little girls, who became friends at an early age, are introduced as figures resembling creatures of the Other World. The small Katharine was dressed in white, a fashion of mourning which came from her Swedish nurse, and she had pale-gold hair and 'eyes of deep misty blue':

> Kate's heart turned over at the sight, for it seemed that she was one of the white fays, those high and rarely seen fairies that haunt old majestic ruins and places of which great stories are told, or who glimmer through the mist beside tall, old rocks high up in the hills. They are more than mortal in stature, and this little creature seemed like one of their children, which might sometimes stray into mortal haunts.

In her turn, Kate Crackernuts 'seemed no less a creature of fairy to Katharine', since her mother, in spite of the minister's disapproval, insisted on dressing her in green, the fairy colour:

> So Katharine saw before her the very image of a fairy, one of the People of Peace who swarm about the hills — a lean, tall child with her green kirtle kilted high and dark elf-locks hanging about her narrow face, who looked at her out of shining dark-green eyes.

But neither was afraid; they loved one another from their first meeting, and their affection and loyalty is the main thread running through the story. Later on the fairy association is emphasised again. Katharine, hiding away in a farmhouse while her sister works, does housework by night like a Brownie, while Kate finds her way into the fairy hill and is able to hold her own there and make friends with a fairy boy.

The picture of the witches' gathering, to which Grizel takes her daughter Kate, is a superb evocation of the mingled nastiness and heady attraction of witchcraft. Kate feels the pull, and is strongly tempted, but is saved from giving away to it by the goodness and innocence of her step-sister. Grizel's increasing mental desperation and destructive hatred, as 'the cloud surrounding her mind came closer and darkened', are powerfully conveyed. The highlight of the book is the terrifying scene where Grizel apparently triumphs, and through her contrivance the evil old henwife Mallie sets a sheep's head on the fair Katharine. This is baldly stated in the original story, but here it takes on a new, hideous and convincing reality:

> The fire was burning up and she could see the pot above it, clear in the light from the smoke-hole. She went quickly to it and lifted the lid, intent on getting her errand over.
>
> 'What's in the pot? What's in the pot?' sang out Mallie Gross behind her.
>
> 'A sheep's head', said Katharine.

'Look well at it, look closely, peer in and make siccar.'

'It is a sheep's head, but it is no way to dress it for the pot.'

'Is it woolly? Is it hairy? Has it goggling een?' sang Mallie.

'It is hairy, it's woolly and rolls its eyes on me,' said Katharine, shrinking back.

'Is it in the pot? Is it out of the pot? Is it in the pot? Is it out of the pot?

'It is rising,' said Katharine in a whisper.

'Aye it is rising sure enough. Look up, it is hanging in the reek above you. It is hanging, it is floating, it is gliding down fast. Ha, ha!' said Mallie with a scream of laughter. 'Your bonny face is hidden in an old sheep's head. Best take your kerchar and hide yourself from sight.' ...

Katharine ... kept her head down, with the dirty cloth drawn tight over it, for she was convinced in her heart that if she lifted her hands they would touch a long, woolly snout, and she seemed to see double out of golden eyes, set at each side of her head.

The question is skilfully left open as to whether this is merely an hallucination on Katharine's part. When Kate persuades her to show her face, it appears to be still human but cruelly disfigured:

> The face was so altered that she felt that she might hardly have known her Katherine. The face was pale and swollen with the lips strangely thrust forward, and the eyes were so wandering and starting that they seemed hardly the same.

The fear and torment in Katharine's mind, from which she is delivered by the devotion and courage of Kate and finally cured by the blessed white stones dropped into the Lady's Well, are convincingly conveyed. The account of the healing of Katharine, and also that of Will Frankland, who was drawn by the Seven Whistlers into the Fairy Hill, and left in a state of depression which would have ended in death had it not been for Kate, are as moving as anything which Katharine Briggs ever wrote. Moving and exciting also is the description of the drowning of the evil witches, Grizel and Mallie. Kate's suffering at the end because she knows her mother to have been evil and laments her loss while she cannot regret it, is poignantly expressed, even while allayed, in true fairy-tale fashion, by her new love for the laird's son: 'Oh Mother! Mother!' she said weeping, 'You loved me well in your way and I just couldna love you again.'

It is to be supposed that much reading and thinking went into the detailed and effective treatment of the old tale in its seventeenth-century setting, and to the presentation of the witch's curse, the Seely Rade of the fairies, and the visit to the Fairy Hill. It may have been some years before Katharine had the book as she wanted it, but the story must have been chosen at the beginning because it had some special significance for her. 'This little obscure tale happens to be dear to me', she said at the International Helsinki Conference on Folk-Narrative Research in 1974, when she read a short paper on this story, called 'An Untypified Tale.'[6] The opposed figures of the two sisters, both essentially loyal and good, are given the names of 'the King's Kate' and 'the Queen's Kate' in her account of the story. They may perhaps have represented for her the two sides of her own nature — her father's Katharine, the adventurous, brave, boyish Kate Crackernuts, and her mother's Katharine, the quiet, truly feminine Katharine Lindsay.

Katharine's mother Mary Briggs was herself good and innocent, with no suggestion of the wicked witch, and yet in some ways she posed a problem and a torment for Katharine, in her continual anxiety and over-protectiveness. Although she never attempted to keep Katharine with her, any more than she had done to Ernest, she threatened by her very devotion to deny her daughter the kind of life she wanted to lead, by keeping her safe, protected and unfulfilled. This aspect of her mother became increasingly apparent as she grew older, as is indicated by the letters which passed between Dalbeathie and the Barn House. Katharine frequently wrote to her mother, seeking to interest and amuse her by accounts of her doings, but she had to reassure her continually that she was not cold, or lonely, or working too hard, or failing to get proper meals, or without domestic help, or driving to Oxford in bad weather. Her various feats before the War, such as walking ninety-eight miles, or spending two days blindfolded, had had to be concealed from her mother, and now any careless statement about activities at Burford could give rise to fresh waves of anxiety in Mary's mind. Therefore the picture of the daughter Kate who had perforce to escape from her mother could have had special significance for Katharine.

Even the sheep's head and the nuts, both part of the original tale, may be seen as fitting into the inner situation which Katharine and her sisters in their loyalty never seem to have put explicitly into words. In the story, the well-protected and cherished daughter was

threatened by the sheep's head, symbol of ignorance and isolation from her own kind, while the nuts in which the other Kate delighted, and which in the end were the means by which she found a cure for her sister, might serve as a fitting symbol for the folk tales to which Katharine now devoted her energies: 'Folktales give the mind something to bite on', Margaret Hodges remembers her saying. More than one person who knew Katharine has recognised her likeness in old age to Mrs Dimbledy in *Hobberdy Dick,* but a different and no less essential side of her may also be seen in *Kate Crackernuts,* which I would claim as one of her major achievements. The reviews of the book emphasise the difficulties of the Scots dialect, which the critics felt made it unsuitable for a children's book, but it is a mistake to judge it from this angle: it is far more than an entertaining adventure story for children.

The picture of the two kinds of fairy, the white and the green, in this story indicates Katharine's interest in the various types of fairy people in folklore and literature, which was to become her main area of study. In *The Personnel of Fairyland* she had already found the key to the problem; the development and working out of this insight was to take many years, gradually winning her an international reputation and a wide reading public extending far beyond the narrow academic field. It would be helpful to know what Ethel Seaton said about her manuscript, but clearly she did not attempt to block Katharine's line of approach as many literary scholars might have done. A writer who quoted with approval in her introduction Purchas' remark, 'My Genius delights rather in by-wayes than high-wayes' was likely to be a good supervisor for Katharine. They quickly became friends, and Ethel Seaton used to visit the Barn House, while Katharine kept in touch with her after her retirement.

The little book which Katharine had feared Ethel Seaton might find unscholarly is unpretentious enough, with its sub-title: 'A short account of the Fairy People of Great Britain for those who tell Stories to children.' In the preface she emphasises the lamentable weaknesses of many fairy-tales in circulation, as she had discovered when looking for material for the Brownies:

> A good many of the stories which children are told are not folk stories, nor true to the robust tradition of folklore. They are full of careful and innocuous prettinesses, and offer food for the fancy

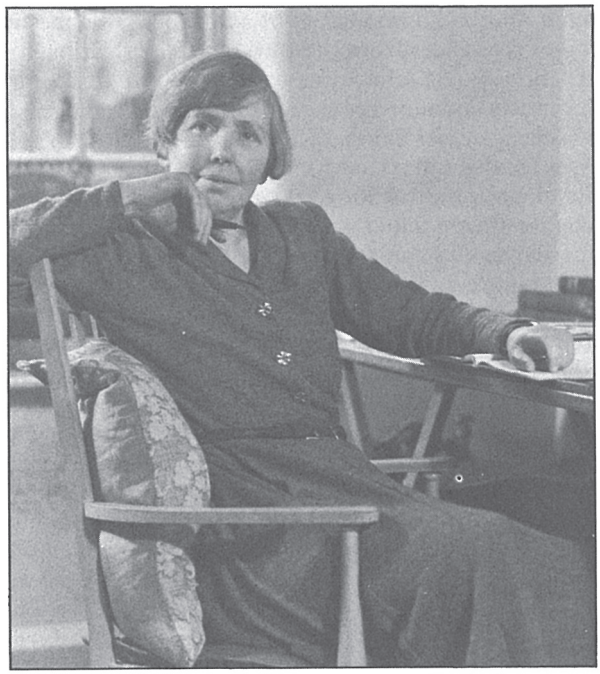
> rather than for the imagination. For folklore the native story-tellers seem to go chiefly to foreign sources, and our native sources are curiously neglected.

Her intention, she declared, was 'to describe the characteristics of British Fairies', most of the book being taken up by actual tales. It is a collection of short but well-selected stories, such as 'Childe Roland', 'Cherry of Zannor', 'The Woman of Peace and the Kettle', with little gems like 'The Cauld Lad of Hilton', and includes a variety of rhymes linked with the old tales, like the Cauld Lad's song:

> Wae's me, wae's me!
> The acorn's not yet
> Fallen from the tree
> That's to grow the wood
> That's to make the cradle
> That's to rock the bairn
> That's to grow to the man
> That's to lay me!

There are brief comments on the existence of parallels to the various stories, and the material is taken from many different parts of the British Isles. More important, they are not put together at random or according to geographical distribution, but arranged under main headings, such as Heroic Fairies, Small Trooping Fairies, Tutelary Fairies, and Nature Fairies, with one section on Monsters, Demons, and Giants. In an article in *Folklore* in 1957 on 'The English Fairies',[7] Katharine states that she derived these divisions from Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales,* which had been in her father's library. However Yeats only singles out Trooping Fairies and Solitary Fairies, arranging his Irish tales accordingly. Much more concerning the general pattern of fairy lore and local variants already emerges from *The Personnel of Fairyland.*

Once settled in the Barn House, Katharine was prepared for hard work. The deprivation of reading and study in the war years no doubt spurred her on to concentrate joyfully on new exploration of the world of books, to spend many hours in libraries and later to accept the wearisome labour of checking references. Here Ethel Seaton's influence was of great value. She started Katharine off on books which opened new vistas to her:



Katharine after the war, probably at Burford.

> I am still very excited about my reading; but it is an enormous subject, & I have so much to read. I hardly know what to do first. Still it's nice to have a big subject; it gives me a nice spacious feeling. I've finished St Augustine's City of God, but I'm only about a quarter through Johann Wayer, the Latin book.

There were entertaining sidelines, like the illustrations in the work of the Swede Olaus Magnus, which she commended to Winifred as possible embroidery designs, and later was to use in her own books. When Katharine published *The Anatomy of Puck,* she dedicated it to Ethel Seaton, referring to 'her advice and encouragement … steady scholarship and unwearying enthusiasm' which 'have set a standard for many students as well as for the author.' Her letters record her working steadily through the chapters of her thesis, getting them typed, and adding references and bibliography, which she found the most trying part of the work. She relied on the help of several people