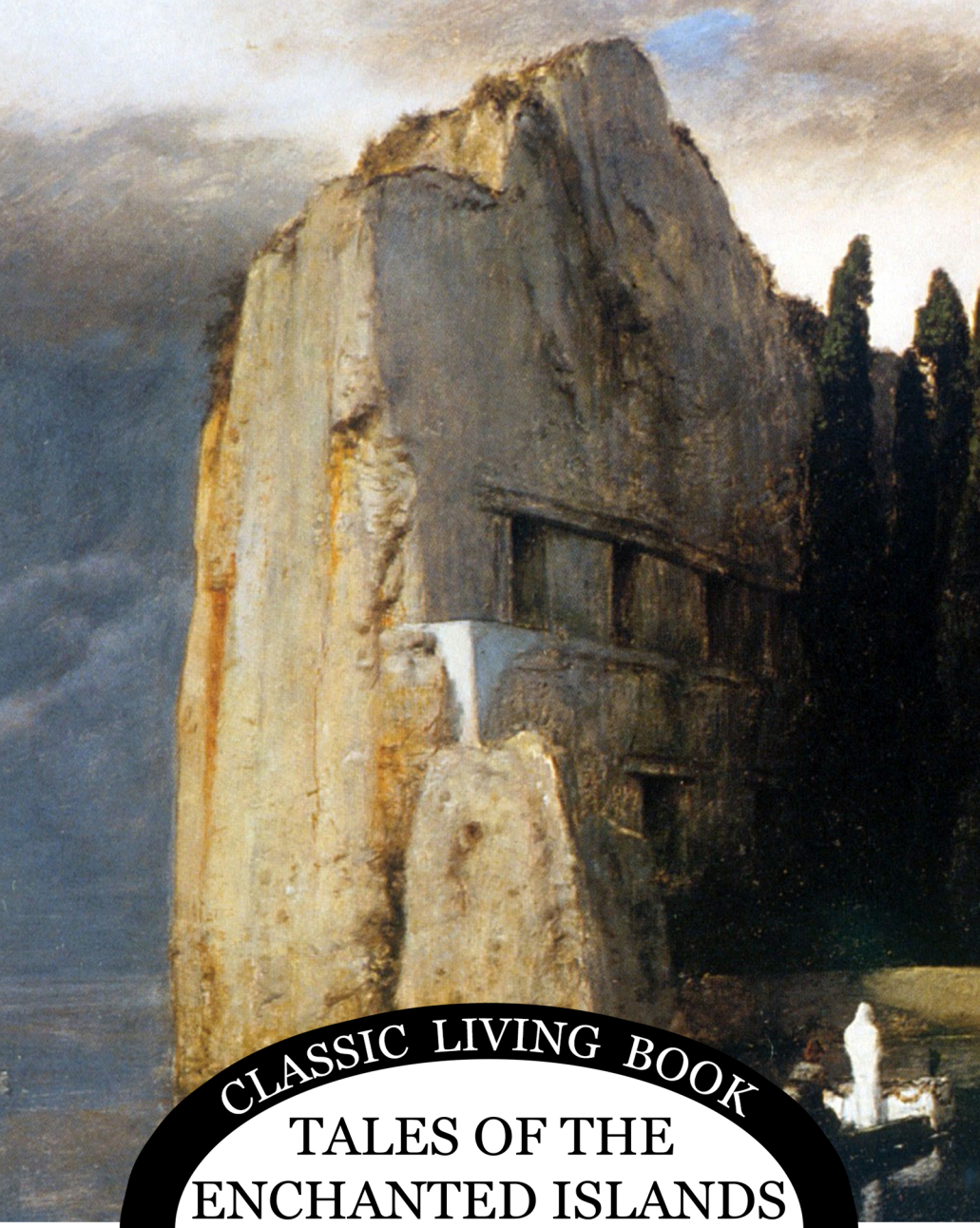

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

TALES OF THE ENCHANTED ISLANDS

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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by

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

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PREFACE

HAWTHORNE in his *Wonder Book* has described the beautiful Greek myths and traditions, but no one has yet made similar use of the wondrous tales that gathered for more than a thousand years about the islands of the Atlantic deep. Although they are a part of the mythical period of American history, these hazy legends were altogether disdained by the earlier historians; indeed, George Bancroft made it a matter of actual pride that the beginning of the American annals was bare and literal. But in truth no national history has been less prosaic as to its earlier traditions, because every visitor had to cross the sea to reach it, and the sea has always been, by the mystery of its horizon, the fury of its storms, and the variableness of the atmosphere above it, the foreordained land of romance.

In all ages and with all sea-going races there has always been something especially fascinating about an island amid the ocean. Its very existence has for all explorers an air of magic. An island offers to us heights rising from depths; it exhibits that which is most fixed beside that which is most changeable, the fertile beside the barren, and safety after danger. The ocean forever tends to encroach on the island, the island upon the ocean. They exist side by side, friends yet enemies. The island signifies safety in calm, and yet danger in storm; in a tempest the sailor rejoices that he is not near it; even if previously bound for it, he puts about and steers for the open sea. Often if he seeks it he cannot reach it. The present writer spent a winter on the island of

Fayal, and saw in a storm a full-rigged ship drift through the harbor disabled, having lost her anchors; and it was a week before she again made the port.

There are groups of islands scattered over the tropical ocean, especially, to which might well be given Herman Melville's name, "Las Encantadas," the Enchanted Islands. These islands, usually volcanic, have no vegetation but cactuses or wiry bushes with strange names; no inhabitants but insects and reptiles—lizards, spiders, snakes,—with vast tortoises which seem of immemorial age, and are coated with seaweed and the slime of the ocean. If there are any birds, it is the strange and heavy penguin, the passing albatross, or the Mother Cary's chicken, which has been called the humming bird of ocean, and here finds a place for its young. By night these birds come for their repose; at earliest dawn they take wing and hover over the sea, leaving the isle deserted. The only busy or beautiful life which always surrounds it is that of a myriad species of fish, of all forms and shapes, and often more gorgeous than any butterflies in gold and scarlet and yellow.

Once set foot on such an island and you begin at once to understand the legends of enchantment which ages have collected around such spots. Climb to its heights, you seem at the masthead of some lonely vessel, kept forever at sea. You feel as if no one but yourself had ever landed there; and yet, perhaps, even there, looking straight downward, you see below you in some crevice of the rock a mast or spar of some wrecked vessel, encrusted with all manner of shells and uncouth vegetable growth. No matter how distant the island or how peacefully it seems to lie upon

the water, there may be perplexing currents that ever foam and swirl about it—currents which are, at all tides and in the calmest weather, as dangerous as any tempest, and which make compass untrustworthy and helm powerless. It is to be remembered also that an island not only appears and disappears upon the horizon in brighter or darker skies, but it varies its height and shape, doubles itself in mirage, or looks as if broken asunder, divided into two or three. Indeed the buccaneer, Cowley, writing of one such island which he had visited, says: "My fancy led me to call it Cowley's Enchanted Isle, for we having had a sight of it upon several points of the compass, it appeared always in so many different forms; sometimes like a ruined fortification; upon another point like a great city."

If much of this is true even now, it was far truer before the days of Columbus, when men were constantly looking westward across the Atlantic, and wondering what was beyond. In those days, when no one knew with certainty whether the ocean they observed was a sea or a vast lake, it was often called "The Sea of Darkness." A friend of the Latin poet, Ovid, describing the first approach to this sea, says that as you sail out upon it the day itself vanishes, and the world soon ends in perpetual darkness:—

"Quo ferimur? Ruit ipsa Dies, orbemque relictum Ultima perpetuis claudit natura tenebris."

Nevertheless, it was the vague belief of many nations that the abodes of the blest lay somewhere beyond it—in the "other world," a region half earthly, half heavenly, whence the spirits of the departed could not cross the water to return;—and so they were constantly imagining excursions

made by favored mortals to enchanted islands. To add to the confusion, actual islands in the Atlantic were sometimes discovered and actually lost again, as, for instance, the Canaries, which were reached and called the Fortunate Isles a little before the Christian era, and were then lost to sight for thirteen centuries ere being visited again.

The glamour of enchantment was naturally first attached by Europeans to islands within sight of their own shores—Irish, Welsh, Breton, or Spanish,—and then, as these islands became better known, men's imaginations carried the mystery further out over the unknown western sea.

The line of legend gradually extended itself till it formed an imaginary chart for Columbus; the aged astronomer, Toscanelli, for instance, suggesting to him the advantage of making the supposed island of Antillia a half-way station; just as it was proposed, long centuries after, to find a station for the ocean telegraph in the equally imaginary island of Jacquet, which has only lately disappeared from the charts. With every step in knowledge the line of fancied stopping-places rearranged itself, the fictitious names flitting from place to place on the maps, and sometimes duplicating themselves.

Where the tradition itself has vanished we find that the names with which it associated itself are still assigned, as in case of Brazil and the Antilles, to wholly different localities.

The order of the tales in the present work follows roughly the order of development, giving first the legends which kept near the European shore, and then those which, like St. Brandan's or Antillia, were assigned to the open sea or,

like Norumbega or the Isle of Demons, to the very coast of America.

Every tale in this book bears reference to some actual legend, followed more or less closely, and the authorities for each will be found carefully given in the appendix for such readers as may care to follow the subject farther. It must be remembered that some of these imaginary islands actually remained on the charts of the British admiralty until within a century. If even the exact science of geographers retained them thus long, surely romance should embalm them forever.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

I.

THE STORY OF ATLANTIS

The Greek sage Socrates, when he was but a boy minding his father's goats, used to lie on the grass under the myrtle trees; and, while the goats grazed around him, he loved to read over and over the story which Solon, the law-giver and poet, wrote down for the great-grandfather of Socrates, and which Solon had always meant to make into a poem, though he died without doing it. But this was briefly what he wrote in prose:—

"I, Solon, was never in my life so surprised as when I went to Egypt for instruction in my youth, and there, in the temple of Sais, saw an aged priest who told me of the island of Atlantis, which was sunk in the sea thousands of years ago. He said that in the division of the earth the gods agreed that the god Poseidon, or Neptune, should have, as his share, this great island which then lay in the ocean west of the Mediterranean Sea, and was larger than all Asia. There was a mortal maiden there whom Poseidon wished to marry, and to secure her he surrounded the valley where she dwelt with three rings of sea and two of land so that no one could enter; and he made underground springs, with water hot or cold, and supplied all things needful to

the life of man. Here he lived with her for many years, and they had ten sons; and these sons divided the island among them and had many children, who dwelt there for more than a thousand years. They had mines of gold and silver, and pastures for elephants, and many fragrant plants. They erected palaces and dug canals; and they built their temples of white, red, and black stone, and covered them with gold and silver. In these were statues of gold, especially one of the god Poseidon driving six winged horses. He was so large as to touch the roof with his head, and had a hundred water-nymphs around him, riding on dolphins. The islanders had also baths and gardens and sea-walls, and they had twelve hundred ships and ten thousand chariots. All this was in the royal city alone, and the people were friendly and good and well-affectioned towards all. But as time went on they grew less so, and they did not obey the laws, so that they offended heaven. In a single day and night the island disappeared and sank beneath the sea; and this is why the sea in that region grew so impassable and impenetrable, because there is a quantity of shallow mud in the way, and this was caused by the sinking of a single vast island."

"This is the tale," said Solon, "which the old Egyptian priest told to me." And Solon's tale was read by Socrates, the boy, as he lay in the grass; and he told it to his friends after he grew up, as is written in his dialogues recorded by his disciple, Plato. And though this great island of Atlantis has never been seen again, yet a great many smaller islands have been found in the Atlantic Ocean, and they have sometimes been lost to sight and found again.

There is, also, in this ocean a vast tract of floating seaweed, called by sailors the Sargasso Sea,—covering a region as large as France,—and this has been thought by many to mark the place of a sunken island. There are also many islands, such as the Azores, which have been supposed at different times to be fragments of Atlantis; and besides all this, the remains of the vanished island have been looked for in all parts of the world. Some writers have thought it was in Sweden, others in Spitzbergen, others in Africa, in Palestine, in America. Since the depth of the Atlantic has been more thoroughly sounded, a few writers have maintained that the inequalities of its floor show some traces of the submerged Atlantis, but the general opinion of men of science is quite the other way. The visible Atlantic islands are all, or almost all, they say, of volcanic origin; and though there are ridges in the bottom of the ocean, they do not connect the continents.

At any rate, this was the original story of Atlantis, and the legends which follow in these pages have doubtless all grown, more or less, out of this first tale which Socrates told.

II

TALIESSIN OF THE RADIANT BROW

In times past there were enchanted islands in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Wales, and even now the fishermen sometimes think they see them. On one of these there lived a man named Tegid Voel and his wife called Cardiwen. They had a son, the ugliest boy in the world, and Cardiwen formed a plan to make him more attractive by teaching him all possible wisdom. She was a great magician and resolved to boil a large caldron full of knowledge for her son, so that he might know all things and be able to predict all that was to happen. Then she thought people would value him in spite of his ugliness. But she knew that the caldron must burn a year and a day without ceasing, until three blessed drops of the water of knowledge were obtained from it; and those three drops would give all the wisdom she wanted.

So she put a boy named Gwion to stir the caldron and a blind man named Morda to feed the fire; and made them promise never to let it cease boiling for a year and a day. She herself kept gathering magic herbs and putting them into it. One day when the year was nearly over, it chanced that three drops of the liquor flew out of the caldron and

fell on the finger of Gwion. They were fiery hot, and he put his finger to his mouth, and the instant he tasted them he knew that they were the enchanted drops for which so much trouble had been taken. By their magic he at once foresaw all that was to come, and especially that Cardiwen the enchantress would never forgive him.

Then Gwion fled. The caldron burst in two, and all the liquor flowed forth, poisoning some horses which drank it. These horses belonged to a king named Gwyddno. Cardiwen came in and saw all the toil of the whole year lost. Seizing a stick of wood, she struck the blind man Morda fiercely on the head, but he said, "I am innocent. It was not I who did it." "True," said Cardiwen; "it was the boy Gwion who robbed me;" and she rushed to pursue him. He saw her and fled, changing into a hare; but she became a greyhound and followed him. Running to the water, he became a fish; but she became another and chased him below the waves. He turned himself into a bird, when she became a hawk and gave him no rest in the sky. Just as she swooped on him, he espied a pile of winnowed wheat on the floor of a barn, and dropping upon it, he became one of the wheat-grains. Changing herself into a high-crested black hen, Cardiwen scratched him up and swallowed him, when he changed at last into a boy again and was so beautiful that she could not kill him outright, but wrapped him in a leathern bag and cast him into the sea, committing him to the mercy of God. This was on the twenty-ninth of April.

Now Gwyddno had a weir for catching fish on the sea-strand near his castle, and every day in May he was wont to take a hundred pounds' worth of fish. He had a son named

Elphin, who was always poor and unsuccessful, but that year the father had given the son leave to draw all the fish from the weir, to see if good luck would ever befall him and give him something with which to begin the world.

When Elphin went next to draw the weir, the man who had charge of it said in pity, "Thou art always unlucky; there is nothing in the weir but a leathern bag, which is caught on one of the poles." "How do we know," said Elphin, "that it may not contain the value of a hundred pounds?" Taking up the bag and opening it, the man saw the forehead of the boy and said to Elphin, "Behold, what a radiant brow" (Taliessin). "Let him be called Taliessin," said Elphin. Then he lifted the boy and placed him sorrowfully behind him; and made his horse amble gently, that before had been trotting, and carried him as softly as if he had been sitting in the easiest chair in the world, and the boy of the radiant brow made a song to Elphin as they went along.

"Never in Gwyddno's weir
Was there such good luck as this night.
Fair Elphin, dry thy cheeks!
Being too sad will not avail,
Although thou thinkest thou hast no gain.
Too much grief will bring thee no good;
Nor doubt the miracles of the Almighty:
Although I am but little, I am highly gifted.
From seas, and from mountains,
And from the depths of rivers,
God brings wealth to the fortunate man.
Elphin of lively qualities,
Thy resolution is unmanly:
Thou must not be oversorrowful:
Better to trust in God than to forebode ill.
Weak and small as I am,
On the foaming beach of the ocean,

In the day of trouble I shall be
Of more service to thee than three hundred salmon.
Elphin of notable qualities,
Be not displeased at thy misfortune:
Although reclined thus weak in my bag,
There lies a virtue in my tongue.
While I continue thy protector
Thou hast not much to fear."

Then Elphin asked him, "Art thou man or spirit?" And in answer the boy sang to him this tale of his flight from the woman:—

"I have fled with vigor, I have fled as a frog,
I have fled in the semblance of a crow scarcely finding rest;
I have fled vehemently, I have fled as a chain of lightning,
I have fled as a roe into an entangled thicket;
I have fled as a wolf-cub, I have fled as a wolf in the wilderness,
I have fled as a fox used to many swift bounds and quirks;
I have fled as a martin, which did not avail;
I have fled as a squirrel that vainly hides,
I have fled as a stag's antler, of ruddy course,
I have fled as an iron in a glowing fire,
I have fled as a spear-head, of woe to such as have a wish for it;
I have fled as a fierce bull bitterly fighting,
I have fled as a bristly boar seen in a ravine,
I have fled as a white grain of pure wheat;
Into a dark leathern bag I was thrown,
And on a boundless sea I was sent adrift;
Which was to me an omen of being tenderly nursed,
And the Lord God then set me at liberty."

Then Elphin came with Taliessin to the house of his father, and Gwyddno asked him if he had a good haul at the fish-weir. "I have something better than fish." "What is that?" asked the father. "I have a bard," said Elphin. "Alas, what will he profit thee?" said Gwyddno, to which

Taliessin replied, "He will profit him more than the weir ever profited thee." Said Gwyddno, "Art thou able to speak, and thou so little?" Then Taliessin said, "I am better able to speak than thou to question me."

From this time Elphin always prospered, and he and his wife cared for Taliessin tenderly and lovingly, and the boy dwelt with him until he was thirteen years old, when Elphin went to make a Christmas visit to his uncle Maelgwyn, who was a great king and held open court. There were four and twenty bards there, and all proclaimed that no king had a wife so beautiful as the queen, or a bard so wise as the twenty-four, who all agreed upon this decision. Elphin said, on the contrary, that it was he himself who had the most beautiful wife and the wisest bard, and for this he was thrown into prison. Taliessin learning this, set forth from home to visit the palace and free his adoptive father, Elphin.

In those days it was the custom of kings to sit in the hall and dine in royal state with lords and bards about them who should keep proclaiming the greatness and glory of the king and his knights. Taliessin placed himself in a quiet corner, waiting for the four and twenty bards to pass, and as each one passed by, Taliessin made an ugly face, and gave a sound with his finger on his lips, thus, "Blerwm, Blerwm." Each bard went by and bowed himself before the king, but instead of beginning to chant his praises, could only play "Blerwm, Blerwm" on the lips, as the boy had done. The king was amazed and thought they must be intoxicated, so he sent one of his lords to them, telling them to behave themselves and remember where they were.

Twice and thrice he told them, but they could only repeat the same foolishness, until at last the king ordered one of his squires to give a blow to the chief bard, and the squire struck him a blow with a broom, so that he fell back on his seat. Then he arose and knelt before the king, and said, "Oh, honorable king, be it known unto your grace that it is not from too much drinking that we are dumb, but through the influence of a spirit which sits in the corner yonder in the form of a child." Then the king bade a squire to bring Taliessin before him, and he asked the boy who he was. He answered:—

"Primary chief bard I am to Elphin,
And my original country is the region of the summer stars;
I am a wonder whose origin is not known;
I have been fostered in the land of the Deity,
I have been teacher to all intelligences,
I am able to instruct the whole universe.
I was originally little Gwion,
And at length I am Taliessin."

Then the king and his nobles wondered much, for they had never heard the like from a boy so young. The king then called his wisest bard to answer Taliessin, but he could only play "Blerwm" on his lips as before, and each of the king's four and twenty bards tried in the same way and could do nothing more. Then the king bade Taliessin sing again, and he began:—

"Discover thou what is
The strong creature from before the flood,
Without flesh, without bone,
Without vein, without blood,
Without head, without feet;
It will neither be older nor younger

Than at the beginning;
Great God! how the sea whitens
When first it comes!
Great are its gusts
When it comes from the south;
Great are its evaporations
When it strikes on coasts.
It is in the field, it is in the wood,
Without hand and without foot,
Without signs of old age,
It is also so wide,
As the surface of the earth;
And it was not born,
Nor was it seen.
It will cause consternation
Wherever God willeth.
On sea and on land

It neither sees, nor is seen.
Its course is devious,
And will not come when desired.
On land and on sea
It is indispensable.
It is without equal,
It is many-sided;
It is not confined,
It is incomparable;
It comes from four quarters;
It is noxious, it is beneficial;
It is yonder, it is here;
It will decompose,
But it will not repair the injury;
It will not suffer for its doings,
Seeing it is blameless.
One Being has prepared it,
Out of all creatures,
By a tremendous blast,
To wreak vengeance
On Maelgwyn Gwynedd."

And while he was thus singing his verse near the door, there came suddenly a mighty storm of wind, so that the king and all his nobles thought the castle would fall on their heads. They saw that Taliessin had not merely been singing the song of the wind, but seemed to have power to command it. Then the king hastily ordered that Elphin should be brought from his dungeon and placed before Taliessin, and the chains came loose from his feet, and he was set free.

As they rode away from the court, the king and his courtiers rode with them, and Taliessin bade Elphin propose a race with the king's horses. Four and twenty horses were chosen, and Taliessin got four and twenty twigs of holly which he had burnt black, and he ordered the youth who was to ride Elphin's horse to let all the others set off before him, and bade him as he overtook each horse to strike him with a holly twig and throw it down. Then he had him watch where his own horse should stumble and throw down his cap at the place. The race being won, Taliessin brought his master to the spot where the cap lay; and put workmen to dig a hole there. When they had dug deeply enough they found a caldron full of gold, and Taliessin said, "Elphin, this is my payment to thee for having taken me from the water and reared me until now." And on this spot stands a pool of water until this day.

III

THE SWAN-CHILDREN OF LIR

King Lir of Erin had four young children who were cared for tenderly at first by their stepmother, the new queen; but there came a time when she grew jealous of the love their father bore them, and resolved that she would endure it no longer. Sometimes there was murder in her heart, but she could not bear the thought of that wickedness, and she resolved at last to choose another way to rid herself of them. One day she took them to drive in her chariot:—Finola, who was eight years old, with her three younger brothers,—Aodh, Fiacre, and little Conn, still a baby. They were beautiful children, the legend says, with skins white and soft as swans' feathers, and with large blue eyes and very sweet voices. Reaching a lake, she told them that they might bathe in the clear water; but so soon as they were in it she struck them with a fairy wand,—for she was of the race of the Druids, who had magical power,—and she turned them into four beautiful snow-white swans. But they still had human voices, and Finola said to her, "This wicked deed of thine shall be punished, for the doom that awaits thee will surely be worse than ours." Then Finola asked, "How long shall we be in the shape of swans?" "For

three hundred years," said the woman, "on smooth Lake Darvra; then three hundred years on the sea of Moyle" (this being the sea between Ireland and Scotland); "and then three hundred years at Inis Glora, in the Great Western Sea" (this was a rocky island in the Atlantic). "Until the Tailkenn (St. Patrick) shall come to Ireland and bring the Christian faith, and until you hear the Christian bell, you shall not be freed. Neither your power nor mine can now bring you back to human shape; but you shall keep your human reason and your Gaelic speech, and you shall sing music so sweet that all who hear it shall gladly listen."

She left them, and ere long their father, King Lir, came to the shore and heard their singing. He asked how they came to have human voices. "We are thy four children," said Finola, "changed into swans by our stepmother's jealousy." "Then come and live with me," said her sorrowing father. "We are not permitted to leave the lake," she said, "or live with our people any more. But we are allowed to dwell together and to keep our reason and our speech, and to sing sweet music to you." Then they sang, and the king and all his followers were at first amazed and then lulled to sleep.

Then King Lir returned and met the cruel stepmother at her father's palace. When her father, King Bove, was told what she had done, he was hot with anger. "This wicked deed," he said, "shall bring severer punishment on thee than on the innocent children, for their suffering shall end, but thine never shall." Then King Bove asked her what form of existence would be most terrible to her. She replied, "That of a demon of the air." "Be it so," said her father, who had also Druidical power. He struck her with his wand, and