

THE FISH IN FOLK-LORE.

BY THE EDITOR.

BASED upon old folk traditions, fairy tales reflect the religious views of distant prehistoric ages, and this, we make bold to say, is most probably true of a story related of a fish and preserved in a Low German dialect. As it now reads it is simply funny and teaches the moral of contentment, but incidentally also it throws light upon the significance of the fish in the imagination of primitive mankind.

One day, so the story begins, a fisherman caught a wonderfully fine fish, and the fish said to the fisherman, "If you will let me go, I will grant you a wish." The fisherman was so astonished to hear a fish talk that without asking any favor he let him go; whereupon the fish said to him, "Whenever you need me, call upon me, and I will come."

In old Saxon days a fish was called a "but," and this term is still preserved in the German word *Butte* and in the modern English word "halibut," i. e., holy fish, the fish which is eaten as a holiday dish on feast days. The story before us preserves this old Saxon word and speaks of this wonderful fish as a "but."

At home the fisherman told his wife about his encounter with the but, and she said, "What a fool you are! Why didn't you wish that our hovel should change into a snug little house with all that goes with a decent homestead?" He answered, "Oh, our old hovel is good enough," but she made it so unpleasant for him at home that he hurried back to the beach and shouted loudly:

"Mankin, mankin,¹ timpe te,
Butkin, butkin in the sea,
'Tis my wife, my Ilsebill,
Wills not so as I would will."

¹ The original reads *Mannije* and appears to mean "mankin," i. e., little man, probably denoting the mysterious magician hidden in the fish. "Timpe te" may be a mere jingle.

At once the but made his appearance and said, "What does she want?" Then the fisherman explained that she was anxious to have in place of the wretched old hovel a snug little house and all that goes with a decent homestead. Thereupon the but said, "Be it so!" and when the fisherman came home he rubbed his eyes, for the hovel had disappeared and a snug little house was in its place.

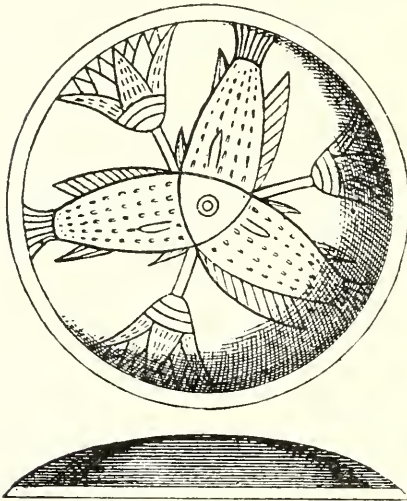
The story continues by representing the fisherman as always pleased with his condition while his wife is never satisfied. She is soon disgusted with the snug little house because it is too small, and sends her husband out again to ask for a comfortable mansion, then for a palace,—and every wish is granted.

Madame Ilsebill's contentment never lasted long. She was greatly displeasèd that there were rich barons living in the neighborhood, and she wanted to belong to the aristocracy too. So she charged her husband to ask the but to make him a count; but even that was not enough. She sent him to the beach again to become king, then emperor, and finally pope. Yet even when basking in the glory of her power, having all Christendom at her feet, she remained dissatisfied because there were things in this world over which she had no command. She ordered her husband to appear before her and said: "Every sunrise and sunset makes me fret because I can not make the sun move as I please. Therefore go down to the beach again and request the but to make me the Good Lord, who has command over the sun and bids him rise and set." The modest fisherman who always objected to asking too many bounties of the but, finally yielded to the demand of his wife though not without great reluctance—in fact with more reluctance than ever. When he came down to the beach he saw a storm rising along the horizon. Again he expressed disapproval of his wife's wishes, saying:

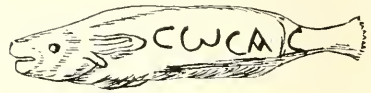
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The but appeared and said, "What does she want?" He answered, "She wants to be the Good Lord who controls the sun and bids it rise and set." Thereupon a terrific thunder clap made the earth tremble, and when the fisherman looked around he found that all the palaces, all the courtiers and carriages had gone, and in their place was the wretched old hovel and in it his wife in her former state.

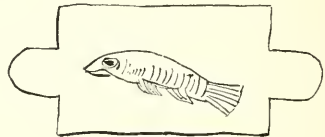
The story has been recorded by the Grimm brothers and its present form will have to be dated back to the Middle Ages when the papacy was at its zenith. The nucleus of this tale, however, as



A LATE EGYPTIAN BOWL
(CHRISTIAN).
From Münter.

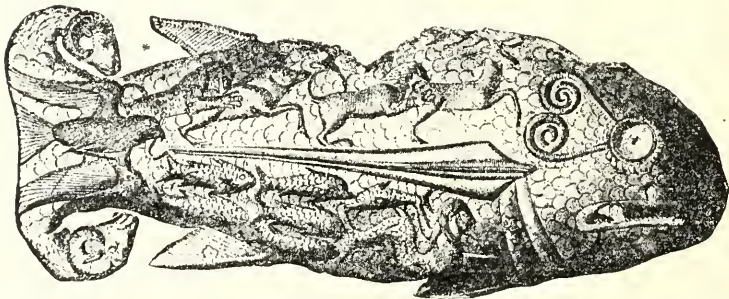


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INSCRIPTIONS IN THE
CATACOMBS.
From Becker.

well as other genuine folk-tales, is much older, and we can not doubt that it is prehistoric and pre-Christian. It characterizes a religious faith in which the fish was looked up to as the representative of a



A VOTIVE FISH DECORATED WITH MANY SYMBOLS.
From Ohnefalsch-Richter.

most mysterious power. The fish grants wishes, transforms and transfigures the lives of mankind, and is a source of all possible blessings; but at the same time it has power to take away what it

has given, and may dissolve the whole fabric of its bounties into the original chaotic state.

Folklore, and in general any notion, has an interest for us proportional to its similarity, or kinship, or historical connection with our own ideas, and so pagan religions claim our attention mainly if they somehow or other elicit comparison with Christianity. Thus a devout reverence for the fish among primitive peoples would simply be a curiosity were it not for the fact that the fish was a religious symbol of profound significance among the early Christians. During the second and third centuries, the fish was identified with Christ, and the idea of salvation became somehow closely associated with this mysterious emblem.

Origen says: "Christ is figuratively called 'fish,'" (in Matt. iii., p. 584, ed. B). Tertullian is more elaborate when saying, "We small fish are like unto *Ichthys*,² our Jesus Christ, born in the water, and are saved only by remaining in the water." (*De Bapt.* 5). Sev-



COINS OF CONSTANTINE.

erianus of Gabala in Spain solemnly declares that "if Christ were not a fish, he would never have risen from the dead."

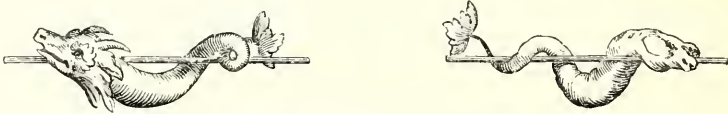
The fish has been sacred among almost all nations of the world, in Asia not less than in Europe. On the other hand we find that traditions and beliefs are more persistent than at first sight would appear, and when a new religion replaces an old worn-out faith, many of the old institutions, rituals, customs, practices, festivals and symbols remain. People are so accustomed to them that they unconsciously cling to them and when they try to account for them, invent new interpretations.

Such has been the fate of the symbol of two intersecting lines, (+) the thwart, which was used as an auspicious omen and a mark of protection among pagans all over the world. When Christianity

²ΙΧΘΥΣ, the Greek word for fish.

preached the gospel of Jesus the crucified, the thwart was interpreted to mean a cross and still bears that name. Such, furthermore, has been the fate of the labarum, the *signum salutis* of the Celtic soldiers of Emperor Constantine. After the emperor's conversion its pagan significance with the exception of its obscure name was forgotten and it came to denote the initials of the word Christ, being now called the Christogram. Constantine used the labarum before he became a Christian, which is proved by the fact that this emblem appears on his pagan coins. The fish symbol has encountered a similar fate as that of the cross and the labarum.

The sea had a peculiar meaning of its own. It served to symbolize the great gulf between life and death, and anything that could cross the sea (a ship, a dolphin, a bird of passage such as the crane, the swan or the wild goose, and more than all the fish,) represented



CHRIST AS A FISH ON THE ROD.
In the Catacombs.

the being which could reach the shore of the other world. The sea is salt, and salt has a preserving power. So salt too became a symbol of sanctity and even to-day holy water is salted.

Sometimes the dividing tide was regarded as a stream (called in Greece the Styx) and presumably it was not merely thought of as a means of separation but also the source of the renewed life hereafter; and the fish, the inhabitant of the deep, as its genius, its spirit, and representative, partakes of the reverence cherished for the sacred element, the source of life, the water.

We shall see in later articles that the fish remained a sacred symbol in the Christian church, but it received a new interpretation as the symbol of Christ which found its final expression in the famous acrostic

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which means

Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ
"Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour."

This interpretation sanctified the old pagan symbol, innumerable pictures of which we find in the catacombs.