AMONGST THE MERMAIDS

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"WALK up!" he shouted from the tent door. "Walk up! Walk up! and see the marvellous mermaid! Only four sous!" It was at the Gingerbread Fair of Neuilly, and the showman was a squat little fellow, ridiculously like the gingerbread figures which his neighbour was selling, and from which the Fair derives its name.

I admit I did not expect to see a mermaid, but I was tired of peep-shows and waxworks and fasting men, and there was something so incongruous in the idea of a mermaid, even an imaginary one, being exhibited in this rickety booth, by the light of a naphtha lamp, that, for a moment, I stopped to listen. The man stood in the doorway, shouting, to attract the passer-by, and there was a picture too, to aid him: the picture of a wondrous creature with flaxen hair and a hectic flush, and decked with a silvern tail. I listened to his patter. She must be a wonderful person, this mermaid: she could swim, she could eat, and, at times, she could even talk. She was as large as life, and, by all accounts, she was more than twice as natural. So, at length, I paid my twopence, and I saw—a seal! There it lay, at the bottom of a miniature bear-pit, and with its wistful face and its great pathetic eyes it really did look quite as human as the majority of its audience. The thing was a

swindle, I suppose, a fake—and yet, after all, this Gingerbread showman in this Gingerbread City was not the first to work the merry cantrip. For wherever seals are common, be it in our own northern islands or in further foreign lands, there will these mermaid legends be wrought around them. Only in Orkney or the Hebrides they are most easily garnered, for the language is our own language. One of the most beautiful of them, when told in full, is the tale of the Mermaid Wife.

On a moonlight night, as an Orkney fisherman strolled by the sea-shore, he saw, to his amazement, some beautiful maidens dancing a saraband on the smooth beach. In a heap by their side lay a bundle of skins, which, on his approach, the maidens seized and then plunged with them into the surf, where they took the form of seals. But the fisherman had managed to snatch up one skin, which lay apart from the rest, and so one maiden was left behind. Despite her entreaties and her tears, he kept the skin, and she was at last obliged to follow him to his hut. They married and had many children, who were like all other children, except for a thin web between their fingers, and for years husband and wife lived at peace. But every ninth night she would steal down to the beach and talk with one large seal in an unknown tongue, and then return with saddened countenance. And so the years passed, until one day, whilst playing in the barn, one of the children found an old dried skin. He took this to his mother gleefully, and she, snatching it from him, kissed him and his brothers and sisters, and then rushed down to the sea. And the fisherman, when he returned home that evening, was just in time to see his wife take the form of a seal and dive into the water. He never saw her again, but sometimes she would call o' nights,

as she sported on the shore with her first husband, who was, of course, the large seal.

That is the story as they tell it to-day in Orkney, and that is the story as told by Haroun al Raschid. Only, in the "Arabian Nights" it is called the "The Melancholy Youth," and the seal is replaced by a dove, but all the essentials—the maidens, the bathing, the skins, the wedding, the flight—remain as they do to-day.

The seal is well known to be an animal in which the maternal instinct is abnormally developed, and many of the tales have this fact as their basis. Here is a particularly charming one—the story of Gioga's son:

One day, as a boat's crew were completing a successful raid on the seals, a great storm came on, and one of the party, who had become separated from the rest, was unavoidably left behind on the Skerry. The waves were dashing against the low rocks, and the unfortunate man had resigned himself to his fate, when he saw several of the surviving seals approaching. The moment they landed they threw off their skins, and appeared before him as Sea-trows or Seal-folk. And even those seals who had lately been skinned by the boatmen also revived in time, and took their human form, but they mourned the loss of their sea-vestures, which would for ever prevent them from returning to their homes beneath the ocean. Most of all did they lament for the son of Gioga, their queen. He, too, had lost his skin, and would be banished for ever from his mother's kingdom. But, seeing the forsaken boatman, who sat watching the rising waters in despair, Gioga suddenly conceived a plan to retain her son. She would carry the man on her back to the mainland, if he,

in his turn, would restore the missing skin. She even consented to his cutting some gashes in her flanks and shoulders that he might more easily retain his hold; so the mariner, leaving his perilous position, started on his scarcely less perilous voyage through the storm. But at length Gioga landed him safely, and he, for his part, kept the bargain and restored the skin of her son, so that there was great rejoicing on the Skerry that night.

There is one other story of particular interest, in that it contains features not generally found amongst the bulk of the Seal-folk legends. It is the story of the Wounded Seal.

There was once an islander who made his living by the killing of seals. One night, as he sat by the fire, resting after his day's work, he heard a knocking at the door, and, on opening it, found a man on horseback. The stranger explained that he had come on behalf of one who wished to buy a large number of skins, and then told him to mount up behind. Hoping to effect a good sale, the seal-hunter obeyed, and was carried away at a wild gallop, which ended on the brink of a precipice. There his strange companion grasped him, and plunged with him into the sea. Down they went, and down, till at length they reached the abode of the Seal-folk. Here, after a not unfriendly reception, the hunter was shown a huge jack-knife. It was his own—one which, that very morning, he had left in the back of a seal, and this seal, so he learned, was the father of the horseman. He was then taken to an inner cavern, where the wounded creature lay, and was requested to touch the wound. This he did, and the seal was forthwith cured. Great rejoicings followed, and the hunter was given a safe conduct home, after swearing never

to slay a seal again. The return was effected in the same way as the previous journey, and the horseman, on his departure, left sufficient gold to compensate the islander for the loss of his means of livelihood.

This story is the only one out of the scores told to me in which the seal may be said to take the offensive, and I cannot trace it to any foreign source.

Mr. Walter Traill Dennison in his "Orcadian Sketches" tells us that the seal held a far higher place among the Northmen than any of the lower animals. He had a mysterious connection with the human race, and had the power of assuming the human form and faculties, and every true descendant of the Vikings looks upon the seal as a kind of second cousin in disgrace. Old beliefs die hard, and, in illustration of this, the following paragraph from a Scottish daily newspaper may be appropriately given:

A MERMAID ON AN ORKNEY ISLE.—A strange story of the mermaid comes from Birsay, Orkney. The other day a farmer's wife was down at the seashore there, and observed a strange marine animal on the rocks. When she returned with her better half, they both saw the animal clambering amongst the rocks, about four feet of it being above water. The woman, who had a splendid view of it, describes it as a "good-looking person," while the man says it was "a woman covered over with brown hair." At last the couple tried to get hold of it, when it took a header into the sea and disappeared. The man is confident he has seen the fabled mermaid, but people in the district are of opinion that the animal must belong to the seal tribe. An animal of similar description was seen by several people at Deerness two years ago."

Mr. Dennison, in the above-mentioned book, only touches on seals once, but the story he gives is new to me and I have translated it and curtailed it from the Orcadian dialect. I wonder if the old Norseman who told it had ever heard of Androcles?

THE SELKIE THAT DEUD NO' FORGET

A long time ago, one Mansie Meur was gathering limpets at the ebb tide, off Hackness, when he heard a strange sound coming from the rocks some distance off. Sometimes it would be like the sob of a woman, and sometimes louder, like the cry of a dying cow, but it was always a most pitiful sound. For a while Mansie could see nothing except a big seal close in to the rocks, who was craning his neck above the surface, and peering at a creek some distance off. And Mansie noticed that the seal was not frightened and never ducked his head once, but gazed continually at that creek. So Mansie crossed an intervening rock, and there, in a crevice, he saw a mother-seal lying in labour. And it was she who was moaning, whilst the father-seal lay out in the water watching her. Mansie stayed and watched her too, and after a while, she gave birth to two fine seal-calves, who were no sooner on the rocks than they clutched at their mother. Mansie thought to himself that the calf-hides would make a nice waistcoat, so he ran forward, and the seal-mother rowed herself over the face of the rock with her fins into the sea, but the two young ones had not the wit to flee. So Mansie seized them both, and the distress of the mother was terrible to see. She swam about and about, and beat herself with her fins like one distracted; and then she would clamber up, with her fore-fins on the edge of the rock, and glower into Mansie's face. He turned to go off with the two young ones under his arm—they were sucking at his coat the while—when the mother gave such a cry of despair, so human, so desolate, that it went straight to Mansie's heart, and turning again, he saw the

mother lying on her side with her head on the rock, and the tears were streaming from her eyes. So he stooped down and placed the little selkies near her, and the mother clasped them to her bosom with her megs and then she looked up into Mansie's face, and all the happiness in the world was in that look: for on that day the selkie did everything but speak.

Mansie was a young man then, and some time afterwards he married and settled on the west of Eday. One evening when he was fishing for sillocks on an ebb-rock, which could only be reached dry-shod at low water, the fish took unusually well, so that he stood and filled his basket. Indeed they took so well that he forgot all about the tide, and soon found himself cut off from the land. Mansie shouted and shouted, but he was far from any house, and nobody heard him. The water rose until it reached his knees, and then his hips, and then his shoulders. He shouted until he was hoarse, and then gave up all hope of life. But just as the sea was encircling his neck and coming now and then in little ripples to his mouth, just as the sea had almost lifted him from his rock, he felt something grip him by the collar of his coat, and in a few moments he found himself in shallow water. Looking round, he saw a big seal swimming to the rock, where she dived, picked up his basket of fish, and then swam back to the land. He took the basket from her mouth and then said with all his heart, "Geud bless the selkie that deus no' forget," for it was the same seal which he had seen on Hackness forty years before. She was a very old seal now but Mansie would have known her motherly face amongst a thousand.

In the folklore of the Hebrides, also, the seal occupies a

prominent place. Not only has a certain mystery been woven into his life, but even in death his carcass has been accredited with various magical properties. The *Highland Monthly* for November 1892 contained an article dealing with this subject, by Mr. William Mackenzie, Secretary to the Crofters' Commission.

That the skin, after being dried, should sometimes have been made into waistcoats, is only natural, but it appears that it was also put to a more esoteric use, for persons suffering from sciatica wore girdles of it, with a view to driving that malady away.

The smoker and chewer, Mr. Mackenzie tells us, cut the skin into small squares, and converted them into spleuchain, or tobacco pouches, whilst the husbandman made thongs, which he used for the harness of his primitive plough.

Seal oil was also thought to possess medicinal virtues of no mean order, and, until quite recently, a course of oal-roin was a favourite, if not a never-failing, specific for all chest diseases. Furthermore, it is asserted by Martin (*circa* 1695) that seal liver, pulverised and taken with aqua vitæ, or red wine, is a good prescription for diarrhœtic disorders.

Seal oil was used for lighting purposes in the monasteries, as the skins were for clothing, and from the pages of Adamnan we learn that the monks of Iona, in the time of St. Columba, had their own seal preserve.

The animal was also very popular as an article of food. The natives of the Western Islands, says Martin, used to salt the flesh of seals with burnt seaware. This flesh was eaten by the common people in the spring-time "with a pointed long stick instead of a fork, to prevent the strong smell which

their hands would otherwise have for several hours afterwards." Persons of quality made hams of the seal flesh, and broth, made from the young seals, served the same purpose medicinally, but in a minor degree, as seal oil. In Roman Catholic districts the common people ate seals in Lent, on the ground that they were fish and not flesh! Annual raids were made on the seals after dark, usually in the autumn, and large numbers were captured. All, however, did not belong to the captors, for other persons of prominence were entitled to a share.

The parish minister, according to Martin, "hath his choice of all the young seals, and that which he takes is called by the natives Cullen-Rory, that is, the Virgin Mary's seal. The Steward of the Island hath one paid to him, his Officer hath another; and this by virtue of their offices."

In the Hebrides, as in Orkney, the seal is regarded not as an animal of the ordinary brute creation, but as one endowed with great wisdom, and closely allied to man. One of the old beliefs is that seals are human beings under magic spells.

The seal was credited with being able to assume human form. While in human guise, he contracted marriages with human beings, and if we are to credit tradition, the MacCodrums of North Uist are the offspring of such a union. In former times the MacCodrums were known in the Western Islands as *Sliechd nan Ron*, or the offspring of the seals. As a seal could assume the form of a man and make his abode on land, so a MacCodrum could assume the form of a seal and betake himself to the sea! While in this guise we are told that several MacCodrums had met their death.

There is one local story which stands out from the rest, in that it contains a song by the animal:

A band of North Uist men slaughtered a number of seals on the Heisker rocks, and brought them to the main island. They were spread out in a row on the strand. One of the party was left in charge of them over night. To vary the monotony of his vigil he wandered a little distance away from the row of dead seals. When sitting under the shelter of a rock he beheld coming from the sea a woman of surpassing beauty, with her rich yellow tresses falling over her shoulders. She was dressed in an emerald robe, and, proceeding to the spot where the dead seals lay, she identified each as she went along soliloquising as follows:

Speg Spaidrig,
Spog mo chulein chaoin chaidrich,
Spog Fhienngala,
Speg me ghille fada fienna—gheala,
'S minig a bheis a' greim de rudain,
A Mhic Unhdainn, 'ic Amhdainn,
Speg a ghille mhoir ruaidh
'S olc a rinn an fhaire 'n raeir.

Translated:

The paw (or hand) of Spaidrig,
The paw of my tenderly cherished darling,
The paw of Fingalia,
The paw of my long-legged, fair-haired lad,
Who frequently sucked his finger—
Son of Œdan, son of Audan,
The paw of the big red-haired lad
Who badly kept the watch last night.

The watchman surmised that the beautiful woman who now stood before him was a "spirit from the vasty deep," and

resolving to kill her, hurried off for his weapons. She saw him, fled towards the sea, and in the twinkling of an eye assumed the guise of a seal and plunged beneath the waves.

Although tales about sea-trows and mermaids are still plentiful in the islands of Orkney, the land fairies are acknowledged to have departed for ever. This is the story of their departure as it has been pieced together by Mr. R. Menzies Fergusson.

Once upon a time, many years ago, the trows became dissatisfied with their residence upon Pomona. They determined, therefore, to leave the Pomona hills and knowes, and take up their dwelling beside the Dwarfie Stone on the island of Hoy.

The change was to be effected one evening at midnight, when the moon would be full and everything in favour of their flitting. The fateful night arrived, and the fairy train set out upon their journey. They bade farewell to the grassy hillocks upon which they had danced so often, and to the rocky caverns, the scene of their nightly revels, and all hied to the trysting-place, which was the Black Craig of Stromness, chanting an elfin song as they went.

There they made the preparations necessary for crossing the intervening sea. They took a number of *simmons*, or straw bands used in thatching houses, and, tying them together, made a long rope of sufficient length to stretch across the sound. One end was fastened to the top of the Black Craig, and a sentinel was told off to watch that it did not slip. The other end was seized by a long-legged trow called "Hempie," the "Ferry-leuper," who made an enormous leap

and alighted upon the opposite shore. There he secured his end of the straw bridge and made ready to receive his fellow trows as they crossed.

At length a start was made and all the trows were soon upon the rope, but just as they reached the middle, he who was in charge at the Stromness end let go his hold, and the whole company of fairies were thrown into the sea, dragging Hempie along with them in their descent. And the sea, being rough at the time, overwhelmed them all, so that every one was drowned. When he who had caused the calamity saw what had occurred, he too plunged into the angry water, so as not to survive his friends, and thus perished with them.

For a few moments a solitary figure appeared upon one of the rocks. It was the Dwarf of Hey. He gazed at the scene of the catastrophe, chanted a fairy dirge, and then vanished for ever.

Such was the end of the land-trows, and, although it put a stop to the making of further fairy-stories, it opened up a new hunting-ground for the weaver of romances in the caves beneath the sea. And even where there is no definite tale or detailed legend to tell beside the inglenook, there is sure to be some quaint conceit of metempsychosis which they can whisper when a seal comes near them. Was not Pharaoh's army turned into a school of seals? And that great white seal, which the fishermen have seen, and whose track is like the wash of an ocean steamer, is that not Pharaoh himself? So the stories spread, and the passer-by may take his fill of them, but I, for one, like best of all the tale of Gioga's son. And if just one passer-by on hearing it is held from firing just one shot, the tale has not been told in vain.

But if ever I see that great white seal, whose track is like the wash of an ocean steamer, I am not quite sure but that I might raise a gun myself. I think it would be rather good fun to have a shot at Pharaoh, for I never liked the man much.

NORMAN ROE.

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THE EQUINOX

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