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COUNTY FOLK-LORE

VOL. III.

PRINTED EXTRACTS No. 5

EXAMPLES OF PRINTED FOLK-LORE
CONCERNING THE
ORKNEY & SHETLAND ISLANDS

COLLECTED BY

G. F. BLACK

AND EDITED BY

NORTHCOTE W. THOMAS

“What kind of a country of guisards and gyre-carlines is this?”

SCOTT, *The Pirate.*

Published for the Folk-Lore Society by
DAVID NUTT, 57-59 LONG ACRE
LONDON

1903

YIPSEVIMU
YRABELL
LUNBOTTONA

PREFACE.

THE material for the following pages was brought together some years ago by Mr. G. F. Black, and would have been passed through the press by him but for his absence from England. Mr. Black having gone to reside in the United States since he placed his collections in the hands of the Council for publication, the Society is indebted to Mr. N. W. Thomas for undertaking the duty of editing the MSS., as well as for some additional matter, and for the care he has bestowed on the whole work. The Council desire to express their thanks to the compilers of the volume, to Mr. Gilbert Goudie, Mr. A. K. Williamson, and the Rev. Thomas Mathewson, for notes communicated to Mr. Black, and to those owners of copyright works who have permitted extracts therefrom to appear in the ensuing pages.

It may perhaps be well to remind members of the scope and object of the series of County Folklore volumes; namely, to bring together in an accessible form the scattered notices of local folklore which occur in local records, old topographies, travellers' diaries, miscellaneous periodicals, and other such out-of-the-way sources. It is designed to form a record of the past, not a description of the present. Hence information from oral or modern sources is only exceptionally used or quoted in its pages.

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The present volume, therefore, borrows nothing from the interesting little work on *Shetland Folklore* by Mr. John Spence, F.E.I.S., of the Schoolhouse, Vassa, Shetland (Lerwick: Johnson and Greig, 1899), reviewed in *Folklore*, XII., 330. The two books illustrate and supplement each other. Besides information about the prehistoric antiquities of the Shetlands, Mr. Spence gives a detailed account of the superstitions and customs connected with fishing, anecdotes of trows, selkies, witches, and Finns, some notices of festival customs, and a good deal on medical magic, with some incantations and word-charms, and upwards of a hundred and fifty proverbs. He informs us (p. 168), that "Forker's Pig," the bowl stolen from the Trows, described by Mr. Edmondston and Mrs. Saxby in the passage quoted *infra*, p. 30, is now in his possession, but he does not mention the belief recorded by them, that the ointment in the "pig" was never exhausted.

One curious point about the folklore of the islands may be noted. With two exceptions only (*infra*, pp. 35, 141), no item of plant-lore has been recorded by any writer consulted.

The Norwegian Earldom of Orkney and Shetland, mainly inhabited by a Scandinavian population since the time of its colonisation from Norway in the ninth century, was not annexed to Scotland till the fifteenth. The Norn language continued to be the ordinary speech of the people during the sixteenth century, lingering in Orkney to the end of the seventeenth, and in Shetland to the middle of the eighteenth. We find the witch-trials of the seventeenth century conducted in the native *Law-ting*, and the *dooms* pronounced by the native *Dempster*, though the official

record of the proceedings is couched in literary Lowland Scottish. Even to this day the old Norn Yule-tide festival prevails over the Scottish Hogmanay. With a past so simple, so well ascertained, and differing so entirely from that of any other part of the United Kingdom, the modern parliamentary "county" of Orkney and Shetland affords a singularly favourable field for the investigation of that ethnological side of folklore, to elucidate which is the principal object of the County Series.

By order of the Council.

E. W. BRABROOK, *President* 1901.

* * * For an account of the Uphelly A' or Yule-tide festival as now celebrated at Lerwick, see *Folklore*, vol. xiv., p. 74.

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ERRATA.

- Pp. 1-80, *passim* for "Edmonston" read "Edmondston."
 P. 55, line 3, for "Sinclair" read "Sinclar."
 P. 65, line 12, for "bame" read "becam."
 P. 159, line 29, for "49 n" read "493."
 P. 195, line 22, for "Sandstiney, Aithstiney" read "Sandsting, Aithsting."

Word-taboos.— A peculiarity in fishermen's observances is their custom of proscribing certain words and names of persons or things as forbidden to be uttered while at sea. Prominently among these are the ordinary terms relating to the church, the minister, or his abode; and from this the inference may be drawn that at an early period it was believed that the mention of the new faith and its priests was hateful to the sea-god, and likely to bring his displeasure on those who named it. Later, when the English tongue was displacing the Norse of the islands, the old words were employed instead of the new when it was necessary to mention those forbidden or unlucky things, and thus, as in a dead language, these fishermen's words and phrases were preserved and handed down to the present day.—LAURENSEN, *Proceed. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. x. p. 714.

See also *ante*, "Luck," and *I. c.*, "Turbot."

To use ordinary words brings ill-luck [at sea]. Then the sea has to be called "holy toyt." A boat is spoken of as a "fair."—*New Rev.* p. 621.

For other fishing customs, etc., see *I. f.*, "LEECHCRAFT," *II. a.*, "Fishermen's Foy."

SELKIES.

Orkney. In Orkney, selkie was the popular name for seal. Seals were popularly divided into two classes; namely, first, the common seal, here called tang fish, which had no power to assume the human form. These, like other inhabitants of the sea, were called fish. To the other class belonged all seals larger in size than the *Phoca vitulina*; such as the great seal, rough seal, Greenland seal, crested seal, and gray seal,—all of which have been seen in Orkney waters. And it was this class of larger seals that were called "selkie folk," because they had the power of assuming the human form. The believers in this myth were never at a loss to account for its existence; but the

causes assigned for the origin of this amphibious human race, so far as known to me, must have been imagined since the introduction of Christianity. Some say the selkie folk were fallen angels, who, for a more trivial fault than that of those consigned to the infernal regions, were condemned to their present state. Others held that the selkie folk were human beings, who, for some grave misdemeanour were condemned to assume the seal's form, and to live in the sea, and were yet allowed to take human form and shape when on dry land. "And who kens," said one of my old gossips, "but they'll maybe some day get leave to come back tae their auld state?"

It was believed that males among the selkie folk sometimes held secret and illicit intercourse with females of the human race. Sometimes these marine gallants became the paramours of married women. The ballad which I hope later on to give is an instance of such connection. And however ungainly the appearance of these gentlemen when in the sea, on assuming human shape they became in form fair, attractive, and in manner winning; and by their seductive powers the female heart seems to have been easily conquered. And if the selkie gentlemen were attractive in the eyes of earth-born women, the selkie females were no less charming in the estimation of men.

Indeed, to see a bevy of these lovely creatures, their seal skins doffed, disporting themselves on a sea-side rock, was enough to fire with admiration the coldest heart.

Let it be noted that the selkie nymphs always appear in groups; they never sit alone combing their hair like the mermaid; and, unlike her, are not represented as wearing long golden hair. And, unlike the mermaid, the selkie folk were never represented as dwelling in "Finfolk-a-heem."

The only home of the selkie folk was some far outlying skerry, or sea-surrounded rock. Indeed, my old informants regarded the selkie folk as a wholly different race of beings from the Finfolk.

Writers on the subject, trusting to incorrect versions of old stories, have often confounded mermaids and seals together, and have often treated the two as identical.

Hibbert in his valuable work on Shetland has fallen into this error, and has been followed by most others whose writings on the subject I have seen. This error is easily accounted for. Most of those writers were unfamiliar with, and had not from childhood lived among the peasantry; had not sat for long winter evenings by the cottage fireside listening to the often tedious and long-winded, but spontaneous flow of old tales, from the lips of men and women who believed in the truth of what they told; and, more essential still, those narrators had not a doubt but that their fireside hearers believed in what they heard.

No Orcadian peasant would lay bare the treasures of his wild lore before the eyes of a stranger. The peasant believed, often correctly, that educated people held his lore in contempt. When they asked questions on old subjects, he suspected their only object was to make him and his stories objects for amusement. In asking for old lore among the Orkney peasantry, I suspect the proverb must be read, "Seek and ye shall not find it."

But to return, the seals when in human shape were generally seen on a dry, but sea-surrounded rock, where in groups they lay basking in the sunshine, or gambolling about in the sunny atmosphere, with their seal skins lying beside them on the rock. The moment that any disturbance arose, or alarm was given, the whole flock flung their sea garments on, and leaped into the sea.

It was only at certain periods and conditions of the tide in which the seals had power to assume the human shape. But these periods were a subject of dispute among my oral authorities.

Versions of the story I am now to tell were at one time rife in every Orkney island; and some of them have

already appeared in print. The man who told me this tale was a native of North Ronaldshay, was well read in English literature, and so familiar with Shakespeare that any six lines of that author you quoted he would tell you from what play your quotation was taken. Though above superstitious belief in, he possessed an inexhaustible store of old-world tales. He often assisted me in clearing up some difficulty in Orkney folk-lore.

The goodman of Wastness was well-to-do, had his farm well-stocked, and was a good-looking and well-favoured man. And though many braw lasses in the island had set their caps at him, he was not to be caught. So the young lasses began to treat him with contempt, regarding him as an old young man who was deliberately committing the unpardonable sin of celibacy. He did not trouble his head much about the lasses, and when urged by his friends to take a wife, he said, "Women were like many another thing in this weary world, only sent for a trial to man; and I have trials enouch without being tried by a wife." "If that ould fool Adam had not been bewitched by his wife, he might have been a happy man in the yard of Edin to this day." The old wife of Longer, who heard him make this speech, said to him, "Take doo heed de sell, doo'll may be de sell bewitched some day." "Ay," quoth he, "that will be when doo walks dry shod frae the Alters o' Seenie to dae Boar of Papa."

Well, it happened one day that the goodman of Wastness was down on the ebb (that portion of the shore left dry at low water), when he saw at a little distance a number of selkie folk on a flat rock. Some were lying sunning themselves, while others jumped and played about in great glee. They were all naked, and had skins as white as his own. The rock on which they sported had deep water on its seaward side, and on its shore side a shallow pool. The goodman of Wastness crept unseen

till he got to the edge of the shallow pool; he then rose and dashed through the pool to the rock on its other side. The alarmed selkie folk seized their seal skins, and, in mad haste, jumped into the sea. Quick as they were, the goodman was also quick, and he seized one of the skins belonging to an unfortunate damsel, who in terror of flight neglected to clutch it as she sprang into the water.

The selkie folk swam out a little distance, then turning, set up their heads and gazed at the goodman. He noticed that one of them had not the appearance of seals like the rest. He then took the captured skin under his arm, and made for home, but before he got out of the ebb, he heard a most doleful sound of weeping and lamentation behind him. He turned to see a fair woman following him. It was that one of the selkie folk whose seal skin he had taken. She was a pitiful sight; sobbing in bitter grief, holding out both hands in eager supplication, while the big tears followed each other down her fair face. And ever and anon she cried out, "O bonnie man! if there's onie mercy i' thee human breast, gae back me skin! I cinno', cinno', cinno' live i' the sea without it. I cinno', cinno', cinno' bide among me ain folk without my ain seal skin. Oh, pity a peur distressed, forlorn lass, gin doo wad ever hope for mercy theesel'!" The goodman was not too soft-hearted, yet he could not help pitying her in her doleful plight. And with his pity came the softer passion of love. His heart that never loved women before was conquered by the sea-nymph's beauty. So, after a good deal of higgling and plenty of love-making, he wrung from the sea-lass a reluctant consent to live with him as his wife. She chose this as the least of two evils. Without the skin she could not live in the sea, and he absolutely refused to give up the skin.

So the sea-lass went with the goodman and stayed with him for many days, being a thrifty, frugal, and kindly goodwife.

She bore her goodman seven children, four boys and three lasses, and there were not bonnier lasses or statelier boys in all the isle. And though the goodwife of Wastness appeared happy, and was sometimes merry, yet there seemed at times to be a weight on her heart; and many a long longing look did she fix on the sea. She taught her bairns many a strange song, that nobody on earth ever heard before. Albeit she was a thing of the sea, yet the goodman led a happy life with her.

Now it chanced, one fine day, that the goodman of Wastness and his three eldest sons were off in his boat to the fishing. Then the goodwife sent three of the other children to the ebb to gather limpits and wilks. The youngest lass had to stay at home, for she had a beelan foot. The goodwife then began, under the pretence of house-cleaning, a determined search for her long-lost skin. She searched up, and she searched down; she searched but, and she searched ben; she searched out, and she searched in, but never a skin could she find, while the sun wore to the west. The youngest lass sat in a stool with her sore foot on a cringlo. She says to her mother, "Mam, what are doo leukan for?" "O bairn, deo no tell," said her mother, "but I'm leukan for a bonnie skin, tae mak a rivlin that wad ceur thee sare fit." Says the lass, "May be I ken whar hid is. Ae day, whin ye war a' oot, an' ded tought I war sleepan i' the bed, he teuk a bonnie skin doon; he gloured at it a peerie minute, dan folded hid and led hid up under dae aisins abeun dae bed." (Under the aisins—space left by slope of roof over wall-head when not beam-filled.)

When her mother heard this she rushed to the place, and pulled out her long-concealed skin. "Fareweel, peerie buddo!" (a term of endearment), said she to the child, and ran out. She rushed to the shore, flung on her skin, and plunged into the sea with a wild cry of joy. A male of the selkie folk there met and greeted her with every token of

delight. The goodman was rowing home, and saw them both from his boat. His lost wife uncovered her face, and thus she cried to him: "Goodman o' Wastness, fareweel tae thee! I liked dee weel, doo war geud tae me; bit I lo'e better me man o' the sea!" And that was the last he ever saw or heard of his bonnie wife. Often did he wander on the sea-shore, hoping to meet his lost love, but never more saw he her fair face.

Not only did females of the finfolk sometimes become the temporary wives of men, but males of the watery race frequently formed illicit connection with fair ladies on land. These gentlemen never abode for any length of time on shore. They only came on land to indulge unlawful love. And as when divested of their sea skins they were handsome in form and attractive in manners, they often made havoc among thoughtless girls, and sometimes intruded into the sanctity of married life.

Many wild tales were told of the amorous connection between fair women of earth and those amphibious gentlemen. If a young and fair girl was lost at sea, she was not drowned, but taken captive by selkie folk or finfolk. And in olden times mothers used to sin, that is, to paint the sign of the cross on the breasts of their fair daughters before going by sea to the Lammas Fair. If a beautiful girl grew up to womanhood without the enjoyment of matrimonial bliss, she sometimes indulged in illicit amours with one of the selkie folk. Again, if a married woman found her husband unfaithful to her, she would revenge herself by secret intercourse with a marine lover.

Among many wild tales of the kind, I give one said to have happened in the last bygone century. The name only of our heroine is changed, because her descendants are still among us; and if any of them should read these lines, let them not think that aught offensive is intended. If the lady was their ancestor, she was also a near relative of ancestors of mine.

Ursilla was the daughter of a laird belonging to one of the oldest families in Orkney. She was handsome and pretty, but had a sternness of manner, and that firmness of features which often presents a masculine exterior in females of Norse blood, and often hides, as with a film of ice, a loving heart within.

Ursilla was not one to wait patiently till some one turned up to offer himself as her husband. Indeed, had any one presumed to approach her as a lover, she would have treated him with haughty disdain, regarding his bold presumption as sufficient ground for his rejection. She determined not to be chosen, but to chose for herself. Her choice fell on a young handsome fellow, who acted as her father's barn-man. But she knew that any disclosure of her passion would mortally offend her old father and bitterly mortify his family pride, and might lead him to disinherit her. So she locked up her love in her own breast ; kept watchful eye on the object of her love, and treated him to a full share of the scoldings she daily bestowed on the servants.

When, however, her father died, and her tocher was safe, she disclosed her passion to the young man, and commanded him to marry her—a command which he was too gallant to disobey. Her marriage excited among the gentry great indignation : to think that one of their class should marry a farm servant ! Ursilla treated their contempt with indifference ; she made a good housewife, managed her house well, and also, it was said, managed her husband and the farm.

So far I have given what I believe to be a true account of Ursilla, having had it from descendants of her relatives. What follows I believe to be an imaginary tale, invented by gossips, in order to account for a strange phenomenon visibly seen on her descendants : and it is only given to illustrate one of the popular beliefs.

Yes, Ursilla was married, and all went well and happy, so far as outward appearances showed ; yet Ursilla was not

happy. If disappointed in her husband, she was far too proud to acknowledge it, knowing that the gentry would only say in derision, "She shaped her own cloth, let her wear her ill-fitting dress." Whatever the cause might be, there was a terrible want—a want that Ursilla felt bitterly. And she was not the woman to sit down and cry over sorrow; she determined to console herself by having intercourse with one of the selkie folk.

She went at early morning and sat on a rock at high-tide mark, and when it was high tide she shed seven tears in the sea. People said they were the only tears she ever shed. But you know this is what one must do if she wants speech with the selkie folk. Well, as the first glimpse of dawn made the waters gray, she saw a big selkie swimming for the rock. He raised his head, and says he to her, "What's your will with me, fair lady?" She likely told him what was in her mind; and he told her he would visit her at the seventh stream (spring tide), for that was the time he could come in human form. So, when the time was come, he came; and they met over and over again. And, doubtless, it was not for good that they met so often. Any way, when Ursilla's bairns were born, every one of them had web hands and webbed feet, like the paws of a selkie. And did not that tell a tale? The midwife clipped the webs between every finger, and between every toe of each bairn. "She showed the shears that she used to my grandmother." So said the narrator. And many a clipping Ursilla clipped, to keep the fins from growing together again; and the fins not being allowed to grow in their natural way, grew into a horny crust in the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. And this horny substance is seen in many of Ursilla's descendants to this day.

Whatever may be thought of this tale, its last sentence is quite true. The horn still appears in feet and hands of some of the lady's descendants. One, two, or three in a family may show the abnormal horny substance; while

brothers and sisters are entirely free from the troublesome horn.

Some ten years ago, while engaging a harvest hand, I said to one of these men, "Of course, you can do all kinds of harvest work?" "Oh na, sir," said he, "hid's nae use tae tell a lee about hid; but I cinno' bind a sheaf wi' this plaguid horn in me livs." Another of the same family told me that when, through the growth of the horn, he was unable to walk or work, he would, with hammer and chisel, cut off large slices of horn from the soles of his feet. This growth is by no means confined to those engaged in manual labour. I have felt it on the hands of one of the same race who followed a profession where manual labour was not required.

This curious phenomenon seems well worthy of careful investigation by the physiologist. Pity it could not be traced to the seal; we might then be in sight of the missing link.

Many wild tales were told of the offspring of such strange parentage who had webbed hands and feet; but the foregoing will serve to illustrate a once popular belief.

DENNISON in *Scottish Antiquary*, v. vii. pp. 171-177.

Shetland. Of mermen and merwomen, many strange stories are told. Beneath the depths of the ocean, an atmosphere exists adapted to the respiring organs of certain beings, resembling, in form, the human race, who are possessed of surpassing beauty, of limited supernatural powers, and liable to the incident of death. They dwell in a wide territory of the globe far below the region of fishes, over which the sea, like the cloudy canopy of our sky, loftily rolls, and they possess habitations constructed of the pearly and coralline productions of the ocean. Having lungs not adapted to a watery medium, but to the nature of atmospheric air, it would be impossible for them to pass through the volume of waters that intervenes between the

sub-marine and supra-marine world, if it were not for the extraordinary power that they inherit, of entering the skin of some animal capable of existing in the sea, which they are enabled to occupy by a sort of demoniacal possession. One shape that they put on is that of an animal human above the waist, yet terminating below in the tail and fins of a fish, but the most favourite form is of the larger seal or Haaf-fish ; for, in possessing an amphibious nature, they are enabled not only to exist in the ocean, but to land on some rock where they frequently lighten themselves of their sea-dress, resume their proper shape, and with much curiosity examine the nature of the upper world belonging to the human race. Unfortunately, however, each merman or merwoman possess but one skin, enabling the individual to ascend the seas, and if, on visiting the abode of man, the garb should be lost, the hapless being must unavoidably become an inhabitant of our earth.—HIBBERT, p. 566.

Ve Skerries, Shetland. The Ve Skerries are, according to popular belief, the particular retreat of the fair sons and daughters of the sea, where they are defended by a raging surf, that continually beats around them, from the obtrusive gaze and interference of mortals ; here they release themselves from the skins within which they are intralled, and, assuming the most exquisite human forms that ever were opposed to earthly eyes, inhale the upper atmosphere destined for the human race, and, by the moon's bright beams, enjoy their midnight revels.

As the green-haired denizens of the ocean are mortal, the visits that they pay the upper world are not always unattended with peril. But the greatest danger to which these rangers of the sea seem liable are from the mortal hurts that they receive, upon taking on themselves the form of the larger seals or Haaf-fish ; for when shot under this shape, the blood no sooner issues forth from the wound, and mixes with the ocean's brine, than it possesses the

supernatural power of causing an awful swell and break of the sea, in the vicinity of the spot where the victim, from a sense of the pain inflicted, has been seen to dive. On the Ve Skerries the inhabitants of submarine depths are liable to considerable peril, whenever the natives of Papa Stour repair thither, at certain times of the year, for the purpose of attacking the seals, as they lie in the hollow of a certain crag. A story is told of a boat's crew that landed with this design at one of the Stacks ;—they stunned a number of these animals, and, in this state, stripped them of their skins, with the fat attached to them,—left the carcasses on the rock, and were about to set off for the shore of Papa Stour, when such a tremendous swell arose, that every one flew quickly to the boat, and were successful in entering it, except one man, who had imprudently lingered behind. The crew were unwilling to leave a companion to perish on the skerries, but the surge increased so fast, that after many unsuccessful attempts to bring the boat close in to the stack the unfortunate wight was left to his fate. A stormy night came on, and the deserted Shetlander saw no prospect before him but of perishing with cold and hunger, or of being washed into the sea by the breakers which threatened to dash over the rocks. At length, he perceived many of the seals, who in their flight had escaped the attack of the boatmen ;—they approached the skerry, disrobed themselves of their amphibious hides, and appeared like the sons and daughters of the ocean. Their first object was to assist in the recovery of their friends, who, having been stunned by clubs, had, in this state, been deprived of their skins. When the fled animals had regained their sensibility, they assumed their proper form of mermen or merwomen, and began to lament in mournful lay, wildly accompanied by the storm that was raging around, the loss of their sea-dress, which would prevent them from enjoying their native azure atmosphere, and coral mansions that lay below the deep waters of the

Atlantic. But their chief lamentation was for Ollavitinus, the son of Gioga, who, having been stripped of his seal's skin, would be for ever parted from his comrades, and condemned to be an outcast inhabitant of the upper world. Their song was at length broken off, by observing one of their enemies viewing, with shivering limbs, and looks of comfortless despair, the wild waves that dashed over the stack. Gioga immediately conceived the idea of rendering subservient to the advantage of her son the perilous situation of the man. She addressed him with mildness, proposing to carry him safe on her back across the sea to Papa Stour, on condition of receiving the seal-skin of Ollavitinus. A bargain was struck, and Gioga clad herself in her amphibious garb; but, the Shetlander, alarmed at the sight of the stormy main that he was to ride through, prudently begged leave of the matron, for his better preservation, that he might be allowed to cut a few holes in her shoulders and flanks in order to procure, between the skin and the flesh, a better fastening for his hands and feet. The request being complied with, the man grasped the neck of the seal, and committing himself to her care, she landed him safely at Acres Gio in Papa Stour; from which place he immediately repaired to a skeo at Hanna Voe, where the skin was deposited, and honourably fulfilled his part of the contract by affording Gioga the means whereby her son could again revisit the ethereal space over which the sea spread its green mantle.

HIBBERT, pp. 567-569.

Shetland. *The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry.*—Another version of the foregoing story is given by Capt. F. W. L. Thomas, according to which the silky who rescued the man was not the mother but the mate of the one whose skin was to be restored. Two holes are cut in the Silky's skin by the rescued man to hold on by, and the truth of his story is proved some weeks afterwards to the incred-

lous people by the body of a large seal being found upon the shore, having the two holes in the skin by which the fisherman had held. Capt. Thomas continues: Such is one of the legends of the Shetlanders, as related to me during my residence among the natives of these northern Isles; and which may serve as an illustration of the popular belief in which the following ballad originated. The ballad itself is too regular and well constructed to be very old, but it may prove interesting to the Society as a graceful record of Scandinavian romance. I must not forget to add that it was sung to a tune sufficiently melancholy to express the surprise and sorrow of the deluded mother of the Phocine babe.

An eart'ly nourris sits and sings,
 And aye she sings "Ba lily wean;
 Little ken I my bairnis father,
 Far less the land that he staps in."

Then ane arose at her bed fit,
 An' a grumly guest I'm sure was he;
 "Here am I thy bairnis father,
 Although that I be not comelie.

"I am a man upo' the lan',
 An' I am a Silkie in the sea;
 And when I'm far and far frae lan',
 My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie."

"It was na weel," quo' the maiden fair.
 "It was na weel, indeed," quo' she;
 "That the Great Silkie of Sule Skerrie,
 S'uld hae come and aught a bairn to me."

Now he has ta'en a purse of goud,
 And he has pat it upo' her knee;
 Sayin' "Gie to me, my little young son,
 An' tak' thee up thy nourris fee.

"An' it sall come to pass on a simmer's day
 Quhen the sin shines het on evera stane,
 That I will tak my little young son,
 An' teach him for to swim the faem.

“An’ thu sall marry a proud gunner,
 An’ a proud gunner I’m sure he’ll be ;
 An’ the very first schot that ere he schoots,
 He’ll schoot baith my young son and me.”

Capt. F. W. L. Thomas in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 1851, vol. i. pp. 86-89.

See III. c, Ballads, “*Ballad o’ de Lathie Odivere.*”

Unst, Shetland. Sometimes mermen and merwomen have formed connubial attachments with the human race. A story is told of an inhabitant of Unst, who, in walking on the sanday margin of a voe, saw a number of these beings dancing by moonlight, and several seal-skins strewed beside them on the ground. At his approach they immediately fled to secure their garbs, and taking upon themselves the form of seals, plunged immediately into the sea. But as the Shetlander perceived that one skin lay close to his feet, he snatched it up, bore it swiftly away, and placed it in concealment. On returning to the shore he met the fairest damsel that was ever gazed upon by mortal eyes, lamenting the robbery, by which she should become an exile from her submarine friends, and a tenant of the upper world. Vainly she implored the restitution of her property; the man had drunk deeply of love, and was inexorable,—but offered her protection beneath his roof as his betrothed spouse. The merlady, perceiving that she must become an inhabitant of the earth, found that she could not do better than accept of the offer. This strange connubial attachment subsisted for many years, and several children were the fruits of it, who retained no further marks of their origin than in the resemblance which a sort of web between their fingers, and a particular bend of their hands, bore to the fore-foot of a seal,—this peculiarity being possessed by the descendants of the family at the present day. The Shetlander’s love for his merwife was unbounded; but his affection was coldly returned. The lady would often steal

alone to the desert strand, and on a signal being given, a large seal would make his appearance, with whom she would hold, in an unknown tongue, an anxious conference. Years had thus glided away, when it happened that one of the children, in the course of his play, found concealed beneath a stack of corn a seal's skin, and, delighted with the prize, ran with it to his mother. Her eyes glistened with rapture,—she gazed upon it as her own,—as the means by which she could pass through the ocean that led to her native home,—she burst forth into an ecstasy of joy, which was only moderated when she beheld her children, whom she was now about to leave, and, after hastily embracing them, fled with all speed towards the sea-side. The husband immediately returned,—learned the discovery that had taken place,—ran to overtake his wife, but only arrived in time to see her transformation of shape completed,—to see her in the form of a seal, bound from the ledge of a rock into the sea. The large animal of the same kind with whom she had held a secret converse soon appeared, and evidently congratulated her, in the most tender manner, on her escape. But, before she dived to unknown depths, she cast a parting glance at the wretched Shetlander, whose despairing looks excited in her breast a few transient feelings of commiseration. “Farewell,” said she to him, “and may all good attend you. I loved you very well when I resided upon earth, but I always loved my first husband much better.”

These inhabitants of a submarine world were, in the later periods of Christianity, regarded as fallen angels, who were compelled to take refuge in the seas: they had, therefore, the name of Sea-Trows given to them, as belonging to the dominion of the Prince of Darkness.

HIBBERT, pp. 569, 570.

Shetland.—From their shyness, their great strength, and the singular intelligence of their aspect, the Shetland

fishermen imagine seals to be fallen spirits in metempsychosis, enduring in the form of seals a mitigated punishment. For this reason, however eagerly they may be killed for the sake of their valuable skins and blubber, it is generally done not without compunction and misgivings, it being supposed that they are both powerful to injure and malevolent to revenge. [A young fisherman caught one and skinned it, afterwards tossing the carcass into the sea ; thereafter joining his companions who were waiting for him.] Meanwhile the seal having only been stunned and stripped, soon revived to feel particularly cold, and still more disconsolate at his changed and disfigured condition. Sad and miserable he wandered through the waters lamenting, and in this plight he retired to the neighbourhood of a coral bower, where a mermaid had her abode. The latter overheard the sad plaint of the cruelly used seal, and after kindly soothing, asked if she could help him. *Selkie* imagined she might, but only by regaining for him the covering of which he had been so ruthlessly bereft. Whereupon, the kind and gentle being darted off on her compassionate and friendly errand.

Now the spoiler's conscience had by this time sorely smitten him for having destroyed the seal that morning ; he believed some evil would assuredly overtake him ; he muttered many a prayer and many a vow, and carefully concealed his fault from his comrades, giving them to understand, that he had obtained the much coveted skin from an animal found dead on the shore. How horrified then was he, when a hook on their fishing-lines drew into their boat a mermaid !

Eagerly he implored the other men to release her instantly ; but they over-ruled his wishes, from the conviction that they would obtain a considerable reward for such an extraordinary capture. The mermaid was therefore consigned to a secure place in the boat, and laid carefully on *the skin of the seal*, that very prize for which

she had thus risked her life. After a few plaintive cries, the self-devoted maiden of the sea began to feel, that out of her native element she could not long survive, and that she would soon indeed fall a victim to her friendship; but at the same time, she well knew, the demons of the deep would avenge her, and that when the boat had sunk to the caves and groves below, though all too late for her, the seal would find his robe again. It so proved accordingly. The mermaid had hardly gasped her last, when a sudden and terrific storm arose. In the hurry and alarm of the moment the men forgot their late prey; but the murderer of the seal believed firmly his hour was come, and that the associates of the "fallen angel" [the seal, a name by which the animal is known in Shetland] were busy at their demon work of revenge. The boat was lost with all her crew. When she sunk in the whelming billows, the unhappy seal recovered his clothing, but had to lament over the dead body of his devoted friend. For this reason, the seals have ever since constituted themselves the especial guardians of the mermaid race. They watch them with grateful solicitude,—often supply them with dainties from dangerous deeps, where mermaids may not venture; and while frequently themselves charmed listeners of the sea-maids' wondrous songs, never remit a vigilant guard over their safety, or neglect to give prompt alarm should danger approach. Indeed, it often happens, that seals fall victims to this self-imposed task, thus repaying the dearly displayed devotion of a mermaid to one of their race.

EDMONDSTON, *Sketches*, pp. 79-82.

Quarf, Shetland. *Mermen and Mermaids.*—About two Years and an half or three Years ago, there was a Boat passing with several Gentlemen of the Countrey in it, and by the way in the Voe of Quarf, through which they went, there appeared something unto them with its Head above

the Water, which as they could discern, had the Face of an old Man, with a long Beard hanging down; first it appeared at some distance from them, and then coming nearer to their Boat, they had a clear sight of it; The sight was so very strange and affrighting, that all in the Boat were very desirous to be on Land, tho the Day was fair and the Sea calm; a Gentleman declaring, (as a Minister in Company with them, and saw this sight informed me), that he never saw the like, tho he had travelled through many Seas.

I heard another remarkable story like unto this, that about 5 Years since, a Boat at the Fishing drew her Lines, and one of them, as the Fishers thought, having some great Fish upon it, was with greater difficulty than the rest raised from the Ground, but when raised it came more easily to the surface of the Water upon which a Creature like a Woman presented it self at the side of the Boat, it had the Face, Arms, Breasts, Shoulders, &c. Of a Woman, and long Hair hanging down the Back, but the nether part from below the Breasts, was beneath the Water, so that they could not understand the shape thereof: The two Fishers who were in the Boat being surprised at this strange sight, one of them unadvisedly drew a Knife, and thrust it in her Breast, whereupon she cried, as they judged, *Alas*, and the Hook giving way she fell backward and was no more seen: The Hook being big went in at her Chin and out at the upper Lip. The Man who thrust the Knife into her is now dead, and, as was observed, never prospered after this, but was still haunted by an evil Spirit, in the appearance of an old Man, who, as he thought, used to say unto him, *Will ye do such a thing who Killed the Woman*; the other Man then in the Boat is yet alive in the Isle of Burra. This a Gentleman and his Lady told me, who said they had it from the Baillie of that place to which the Boat did belong: It being so strange I enquired at severals thereanent, which

tho many were ignorant of, yet some said that they had heard thereof, and judged it to be very true.

BRAND, pp. 113, 114.

Shetland. A mermaid had the ill-luck once to be caught on a hook, and dragged into a boat. She begged for liberty, and promised, if the men let her go, that any wish they might chose should be granted. The skipper thereupon dropped the mermaid over the gunwale, and as she dived to her home she sang gleefully :

“Muckle gude I wid you gie,
And mair I wid ye wish,
There’s muckle evil in the sea,
Scoom weel your fish.”

“Cheated, and by a mermaid !” cried the skipper, and only one of the six men belonging to the boat took any notice of the sea-maiden’s injunction. But one *did* scoom weel his fish, and found a splendid pearl among the scooming.

EDMONDSTON and SAXBY, p. 228.

Sometimes they catch with their Nets and Hooks *Tritons*, they call them *Shoupiltins* and Mermaids, but these are rare and but seldom seen.—SIBBALD, p. 9.

Shetland. “*Noggle.*” — There is a “trow” called a “Neogle,” somewhat akin to the water-kelpie of other lands, who makes his appearance about mills, particularly when grinding, in the shape of a beautiful poney [*sic*]. That he may attract the attention of the person who acts the part of the miller, he seizes and holds fast the wheel of the mill ; and, as is natural, the miller goes out to examine into the cause of the stoppage ; when, to his astonishment, a beautiful poney, saddled and bridled, is standing, and ready to be mounted ; who but an old miller could let slip such a fair opportunity for a ride ? But if he should neglect warnings, and unguardedly put his foot in the stirrup, his fate is sealed. Neither bit or bridle avail him anything. Off goes the poney, bog or

N

bank arrest not his course, till in the deep sea he throws his rider, and himself evanishes in a flash of flame. But some millers are proof against the temptation, having been taught caution by the fate of others; and instead of taking a ride, salute his Neogleship with a fiery brand through the lightning-tree hole, which makes him immediately scamper away.—*New Stat. Acct.*, p. 142.

With regard to the legendary attributes of the Nuggle, he was believed to be more deceitful than courageous; and his sole bent seemed to be to play mischievous pranks on the human race. I am not aware of any Shetland word that connects the name with water, but the tradition is that the Nuggle was never found at any distance from the water; generally frequenting a footpath near a loch or a burn on which water-mills were built. The object the Nuggle had in frequenting footpaths near a loch, was to offer his services to any unsuspecting wayfarer who might feel disposed to take advantage of them, in order to facilitate his progress, if likely to be benighted. In form he was exactly like a pony, with the exception of his tail, which was said to resemble the rim of a wheel, but which he cunningly kept concealed between his hind legs, when he meant to victimise any pedestrian; and woe be to the man who bestrode him without examining that appendage! It was not stated whether he used his tail as a means of locomotion or not; but no sooner had he felt the weight of his victim, than with lightning speed he flew into the water, and the equestrian found himself submerged beyond his depth, and if he ever gained the shore, it was no fault of the Nuggle. He did not, however, attempt attack; but it is said when the rider got his head above water, he saw him disappear in cloudy vapour or blue flame.

This was one of his pranks, the other was alleged to be played on people grinding corn at the water-mill. All of a sudden the mill would stand still, while the

water was running on the wheel, or "tirl" in full power. This was very unpleasant to an individual who was alone in the mill in the night—perhaps a mile from the nearest habitation. The cure for this was to throw a fire-brand down the "lighting-hole" in the "looder." It appears the miscreant can't stand fire, for no sooner is the cure, applied than he lets go his hold of the "tirl," and the machinery is again in motion. Numerous instances are recorded, illustrating both these phases of his propensity to work mischief.

[From Mr. Laursen Mr. Blind obtained an account of a man who had "quite recently" seen the "Nuggle." Mr. Laursen says:]

"The Man is a very worthy, 'decent' man (as they call a sensible well-behaved person here), and well known to me from childhood. But I certainly never would have supposed that he believed in the 'Njuggle,' had we not accidentally come on the subject. He told me that, when a young man, one night his sister and he were coming down by a 'burn,' each carrying a lighted brand, to show them their way, a very common mode of lighting up the path in the Shetland country districts in winter. The night was very dark. Some sparks from their brands blew into the water, and that moment 'a creature like a Shetland horse' rose in the middle of the burn, rushed down stream, straight out the mouth of the burn, and away into the sea. They were then near the sea; and they saw it vanish therein. Then they knew it was the 'Njuggle,' because, when fire touches the water, he rushes off. My informant had a friend who one night was grinding in his mill. Suddenly the mill stopped. He suspected it was the 'Njuggle,' and slipped a lighted brand down the shaft hole of the mill. When it touched the water, the wheel went round again, as before, the Njuggle having let it go. He is of a grey colour."

In an account of the Nuggle obtained from another correspondent it is stated that :

“The Water Nuggle—also called in some parts of Shetland, the Shoepultie—resembles the Scotch Water Kelpie strongly in almost every particular, save the tail, . . . which he knew how . . . to use on certain occasions as a propeller.”

BLIND, *Contemporary Review*, 1881, pp. 189-191.

An ancestor of George Henderson, of Burravoos, who dwelt in Unst, was wont to rise early. One morning he rose early, and went out for a walk. On his way home, he was coming along the edge of a loch, and wished that he had something to ride on. And he soon came to a white mare, and he jumped on her, and rode her along the loch, and she always sought towards the loch, and he tried to keep her from it. But as they rode along, she grew so persistent that he came off, and she went on the loch and over the water in a blue “low.”

KARL BLIND, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1882, p. 369.

Foula, Shetland. One noted spirit,—the “Nygel,” or “Nigle” was supposed to appear near streams of running-water, and particularly about water-mills, where, in the night, he seized and held fast the water-wheel with his teeth, until he was driven away by brands of fire thrown at him. In colour and size he varied, but behaved always to be shaped like a quadruped,—to have glaring eyes, terrible teeth, and a tail like the rim of an immense wheel turned up over his back. It is said that he once entered a dwelling and expelled the inmates, after which the place was not occupied for thirty years.—REID, p. 31.

[Mr. G. F. Black has been informed by a native of Foula that until within recent years it was common for mothers in putting their children to bed at night to caution them : “Now be good or the Noggle will come and take you away.”]

Delting, Shetland. "Dey wir great stories about da Nyugl whan I was young. Dey said 'at da Nyugl wid stop da water mills. He wid grip hed o' da fedirs o' da tirl an' stop da mill. An' dey wid slip fire doon da lightneen' tree-hole, ir stik a knife ita da groti. (Da widen busheen i' da understeen, 'at da spindle kam up troo, dey caad dat da groti.) An as syün as da knife kem ita da groti, da Nyugl wid slip an' flee. An' dey wid see him too. He wiz lek a horse; gre, ir some colour lek dat. An' dey wid see him upo' da daylight. If dey wir gyain' alang a loch, he wid come ta dem, gyain' da sam way. An' he wid come upo' dem; an' some wiz fül enough to ride him. An' if dey did, he ran upo' da loch wi' dem, an' dey got a dookin'. Ir if dey said da neem o' Gyüd, he wid vanish. He aye vanished in a fire."—KARL BLIND, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1882, p. 370. Written down from the recitation of an old man in Delting, Shetland.

Whalsay, Shetland. There was a man in Whalsay, who did not believe in Nyogles, or fairies, or spirits. And one night he was at the *kreigs* at Skura, and had drawn his *büdi* of piltaks. And ere long, on his way home, he came to a black horse, and he went on him. And the horse began to run, until he was going so fast that the man did not know whether he was on the earth *or in the air*. At last he took his knife and drove it into the horse, and he went from under him, and went over the banks *in a blue "low"*.—KARL BLIND, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1882, pp. 369-70.

See also II. a, "YULE."