



Scotland's Storybook

A collection of Scottish tales, legends, folk and fairy stories for all of Scotland's children, young people and *big folk*.



Wondrous tales and translations by Scottish storytellers Tom Muir and Martin MacIntyre, with new illustrations by artist Kate Leiper.

With special thanks to Dr Donald Smith and the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh.

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FIONN MAC CUMHAIL AND THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE



The Story of Fionn Mac Cumhail comes from Ireland, but his tales are well known throughout the West Coast and Highlands of Scotland where he is known as Finn Mac Cool. He was the leader of the Fianna, a band of warrior poets who fought to defend Ireland from invaders who came from over the sea.

To be accepted into this band you had to be able to stand in a pit up to your knees and ward off nine spears thrown at you simultaneously by nine warriors with only your arms as a shield. You had to be able to run through a forest as fast as a deer while being pursued by armed warriors and during this chase you had to jump over branches as high as your forehead and dive under branches as low as your knee without disturbing a leaf or breaking a twig and without loosening a braid of your hair.

At the end of the pursuit you had to be able to hold a sword in your hand without the slightest tremble being detected in the blade. You also had to possess the gift of poetry, as culture was valued as highly as courage.

Once you joined the Fianna you had to forsake your own tribe and family and swear an oath that you would never avenge the death of a relative, nor be avenged by them should you be killed.

All women were to be protected and their honour upheld, and no member of the Fianna would accept a dowry with his bride. The Fianna supported themselves by fishing and hunting deer with their great grey hounds, but in the winter the Kings of Ireland supplied them with food in return for their protection.

There was once a time when two mighty clan chieftains claimed to be the leader of the Fianna; one was called Urgriu Mac Lugaid Corr and the other was Fionn's father, Cumhail Mac Trenmor.

The two warring clans clashed in battle at Cnucha and many fine warriors met their death that day, including Cumhail Mac Trenmor himself. His wife, Muirne, was carrying the unborn Fionn in her womb and she knew that if her child was to fall into the hands of her husband's enemies then he could expect no mercy from them. When the child was born Muirne took him to a powerful druidess called Bodhmal (some say it was the boy's grandmother or aunt) and she raised him in secret in a forest.

He was given the name Demne, and soon grew to be both strong and intelligent; he was tall and handsome with blond hair and was quick to learn everything that the druidess could teach him. As he grew older Demne started to wander away from the forest and was seen by local boys, who were no match for him at ball games.

When they returned home the boys told their family about the strange boy who had beaten them all at games. When the lord of the land came to hear of the boy he asked what he looked like and was told that he was very fair and good looking, so he gave him the name Fionn, meaning the fair one, and he was called by that name, as well as Demne.

One day he was in the forest with the druidess when they saw a herd of deer grazing in the distance and she said that they would eat well if only they had one of those deer to roast. Demne said that he would catch one and ran so fast that he caught and killed a deer and carried it back to the druidess. She said that he had proved that it was time for him to leave and to make his own way in the world.

He travelled from one place to another taking up military service with kings, but his strength and royal bearing was starting to become obvious to them and he was urged to keep moving in case his father's enemies should capture him.

He was told about an old man who lived by the side of the River Boyne and who possessed great wisdom, and it was advised that he should seek him out and learn from him. He found the old man by the side of a pool and told him that his name was Demne and that he wanted to be his servant and to learn from him.

The old man, whose name was Fionn, agreed to this and so they both lived quietly by the side of the pool. Old Fionn told the young man that he had spent the last seven years sitting by the side of Fec's Pool trying to catch the Salmon of Knowledge that was supposed to live in this pool. This salmon was said to contain all the knowledge of the world, both from the past and from the future, and that there was an ancient prophesy that said that it was destined to be eaten by a man called Fionn.

One day, just a week after Demne had joined the old man, the Salmon of Knowledge was finally caught in a net in the pool. Old Fionn was so excited that he could hardly do a thing, so he gave the precious fish to Demne to roast for him over an open fire, but he warned him not to eat any of the flesh of the fish. Demne promised him that he would not eat any of it, and he placed the fish over the fire to cook.

When he tried to lift it to bring to the old man some of the hot juice from the fish spurted out onto Demne's thumb and burnt it. Demne instinctively put his thumb into his mouth and as soon as he had done this his head filled with all the knowledge of the world.

He brought the fish to the old man who asked him if he had eaten any of it. Demne said no, but that he had burst a blister on its skin and that the juice had burnt his thumb and he had put it into his mouth to ease the pain.

A look of disappointed horror passed over the old man's face and he said:

'You told me your name was Demne. Tell me, do you have any other names?'

'Why, yes, they call me Fionn.'

'Then it must have been you that was destined to eat the Salmon of Knowledge. Eat it all now, for its power is already in you.'

So Demne ate the Salmon of Knowledge and after that there was no one in the world that had greater wisdom than he. If he was to put the thumb that had been burnt under his front tooth, then he had the gift to see into the future. Demne now gave up his boyhood name and was afterwards called Fionn.

He gathered together his father's scattered tribe and with his newly gained magical skills he brought his former enemies under his command and became the leader of the Fianna.

They defended Ireland from invading foes and defeated evil giants, great serpents and all forms of monsters that plagued the land. Their many exploits and adventures have been passed down to us through the mists of time from an age when warriors were huge in stature and when honour was considered as important as courage in battle.

Tom Muir, Orkney

OISÍN AND TIR NA N-OG

Fionn Mac Cumhail had a son called Oisín (Ossian in Scotland), a name meaning 'young deer' or 'little fawn'. He was considered to be the finest athlete and the most gifted poet among all the Fianna.

One day the Fianna were hunting deer in the Kerry Mountains and had stopped their horses by the shores of Loch Lene to rest. Fionn held up his hand for silence and said that he could hear the sound of silver horse shoes approaching them. No one else could hear a thing, as Fionn had the keenest hearing of them all.

Then, through the early morning mist that hung over the lake, they saw a beautiful young woman who seemed to be bathed in a radiant light come riding towards them on a large white horse that was galloping over the surface of the water. They stood enchanted by her beauty while the horse with its silver shoes, golden plume and silver bells raced towards them. It hardly sent a drop of water flying from the surface of the lake that it was riding over, so lightly did it tread. They saw that the woman riding the horse wore a silken mantle of deep red that was bedecked with stars of red gold and had a border that was embroidered with silk thread and trimmed with gems that were fashioned to look like flowers and honey bees. On her feet were small boots of shiny black leather and on her head was a crown of silver from which her hair cascaded like spun gold.

Fionn and his men admired her magic and her skill in controlling such a large horse with such ease, despite her small, delicate build. When she reached Fionn she reigned in her horse and greeted him in the most courteous manner. He bowed deeply, and offered her the hospitality of the Fianna, but she declined with a smile so sweet that no one could be in the least offended. She spoke with a voice as clear as a crystal stream flowing over smooth stones;

'Fionn Mac Cumhail, I know of your great deeds and of your bravery; of your love for the hunting of the stag and of your two great hounds, Bran and Sceolaing. I know of your great knowledge in all things, and of your wisdom tooth that can let you know everything that ever was or ever will be.'

'My fair lady,' said Fionn, 'what is it that you want from me? But before I speak, I must know your name and where you come from, as I cannot risk using my powers to aid evil.'

'My name is Niamh Cinn-Oir; Niamh of the Golden Hair, and I seek something from you.'

'Name it, and it shall be yours if I possess it, and if I do not, I shall seek it for you.'

'You have it, but you do not possess it. It is yours, but not yours to give.'

'Then what is it; the answer to this riddle?'

Niamh smiled again and said in her clear voice: 'I have come to seek your son Oisín as my husband.' Fionn looked behind him to where Oisín sat astride his horse gazing at the beautiful woman, rooted to the spot like an ancient oak tree is rooted in the ground.

'Where do you come from?' asked Fionn.

Niamh looked off into the distance, and from her lips poetry flowed as she talked of a land beyond dreams, where music and laughter filled the air and care and worry were things that no one knew of.

She talked of orchards of fruit trees, their branches drooping under the weight of the fruit, and of honey dripping from the forest trees. Her words wove a picture of peace and plenty, of wine and mead and of sport that was played all day long. A land of the blessed; where age is banished and pain unknown. She looked again into the eyes of Oisín and said;

'I am the princess of Tir na n-Og, the Land of the Young, and I offer Oisín my hand in marriage and a kingdom to rule over where he will never grow old or weary. Where love and laughter will fill our days and nights. He will wear a crown of gold and be the sovereign lord over the realm of the blessed, and I will be his loving queen.'

As she spoke she gazed into Oisín's green eyes, and the very air around them seemed to stand still; no bird sang, no leaf rustled on the trees, no hound coughed. Fionn found that for the first time in his life he was without words. Niamh looked at him, and with a tinge of sadness in her voice she addressed the leader of the Fianna.

'For seven long, weary years I have searched for Oisín. I saw him hunting one day when I was travelling with my father. He ran through the forest with such a soft tread that he moved like the caress of moonbeams through the trees. I saw his strong arms and heard his musical voice, and I fell in love with him. I have seen him here many times, but he has never seen me, as I was invisible to him. It is only now that my father has given me his permission to be seen by mortal men; to show myself to you in my own form.'

Fionn looked at her and then at Oisín before saying, 'Your words were true, lady of Tir na n-Og; Oisín is not mine to do with what I will.'

'Then what am I to do? How am I to marry him?' Niamh looked at Oisín with a mixture of love, longing and fear in her eyes. Fionn looked at her with a kind expression on his face and said gently, 'You must ask him.'

Niamh looked at Oisín and said in a voice no louder than a silken whisper, 'Will you marry me Oisín? Will you come with me to Tir na n-Og and be the lord of the Land of the Young?'

Oisín looked at the beautiful girl that sat before him and he smiled and said, 'My lady; I would follow you to the ends of the earth.'

He rode over to where her horse stood and slipped from his saddle to sit behind her. He grasped his hands around her slender waist, and she turned her horse away from Fionn and the Fianna and rode back across the surface of the lake and out of sight. As the mysterious lady departed the radiant light that had engulfed them slowly faded and they were left in the cold, damp light of morning.

Over the lake they rode, and then down the river that led to the ocean. Onwards they raced towards the sea, sending swans and wildfowl flying out of their way. Down the river the great white steed ran, leaping waterfalls and rocks with ease. They passed a family who were paddling their frail coracle by

the banks of the river, but by now they were invisible to mortal eyes. Onwards they flew, past huts where the smoke of the morning fires were curling from the thatched roofs, and where they were seen by the wondering eyes of the youngest children who were playing by the riverside, as only the young and the wild creatures of nature can see those who come from the land of the blessed. The trees began to thin out along the banks of the river and open land with rising cliffs now came into view. Oisín clasped tightly to Niamh as the great white steed rode onwards; the smell of the salt sea was now in his nostrils. Above them loomed the walls of a great fort, where warriors leaned on their spears and gazed westwards over the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean.

Onwards the horse flew over the ocean at great speed. Oisín looked behind him to see the hills of Ireland fade into the distance, when suddenly a great mist engulfed them and he saw no more of the land of his birth. As they rode through the mist that hung over the sea Oisín saw many strange things. A deer sprang past them, being chased by a black bear. The walls and towers of a castle reared up beside them; pennants fluttering from every spire. More deer were seen bounding over the waves, being hunted by large white hounds with red ears. A girl, as stately as a queen, dressed in a satin saffron robe, rode by on a black horse and in her hands, she carried a golden apple. Two young men on chestnut horses rode behind her; one wore a short white cloak and carried a golden sword while the other wore a short black cloak and carried a silver sword. An older man who was tall and had white hair and the look of wisdom on his face rode behind them carrying a casket before him which rested on the pommel of the saddle.

Before Oisín had a chance to ask Niamh who they were she raised her hand and said, 'Welcome to Tir na n-Og, Oisín Mac Fionn.' The mist parted and there before him he saw white beaches with high sand dunes behind them. A welcoming party of horsemen were waiting for them, all dressed in white and gold, including a young man who carried a shield of gold and copper, inlaid with coloured glass and precious gems. They were all smiling, and they greeted them with joy.

They rode over the dunes and there before them stretched a beautiful green land, the like of which Oisín had never seen before. In the distance was a castle whose long, curving walls were decorated with silk pennants of seven colours streaming down from the roofs to the ground. Oisín realised that they were all the colours of the rainbow and looked so bright that they might have been parts of the rainbow itself, torn from the sky to adorn the castle of the king of Tir na n-Og. The castle walls were longer than they were high and had no towers, but it seemed that they curved to form a circular building of great beauty. An avenue of trees led to the great arched front door, which was made of wood in two halves, each one decorated with a golden panel that bore the same design as that on the shield of the young warrior who had met them on the shore.

'Behold, the land of Tir na n-Og,' said Niamh, 'is it not the most beautiful place that you have ever seen?' Beyond the castle were orchards of trees bearing ripe, succulent cherries, apples, oranges and lemons. No disease ever blighted the fruit, and when one was picked then another one would grow in its place. Oisín looked at the green hills that lay beyond the castle and asked Niamh, 'What lies beyond those green hills?'

'Our farms lie there,' answered Niamh.

'And what do they farm?' asked Oisín.

'Dreams,' replied Niamh.

'And what lies beyond those lofty mountains?' asked Oisín.

'That is the Land of Silence,' answered Niamh. 'In Tir na n-Og silence is valued, and the Land of Silence is where you can go to contemplate life in solitude, but without sorrow or worry. When you look at the ground you can see that the earth's surface is a mixture of light and dark, colour and shade, and you can contemplate what has passed in the sweet stillness of this land. If you look up, then the sky is filled with colours and patterns that pleases the eye and stimulates thought.'

'How long can you stay in the Land of Silence?' asked Oisín.

'There is no time in Tir na n-Og,' replied Niamh, 'this is something that you must understand. Time has no meaning here; it does not exist. There is no day and night in Tir na n-Og; if you get tired of the sun overhead then you can wish for the velvet softness of night, with the smile of the silver moon and the gentle twinkling of the stars. It only rains here when we wish it to, but this experience is yours alone; it might be night in your reality and daytime in your companion's.'

'How big is Tir na n-Og?' asked Oisín.

'It is as big as the ocean, and as small as a clearing in a forest,' answered Niamh, 'it is bigger than the sky and as small as an ant nest.'

'Are there any conditions that I must live by?' asked Oisín.

'Only that as soon as you touch the land of Tir na n-Og you must remain here and not return to your old home,' replied Niamh, 'for if you leave you will be beyond the Guardianship of Youth and the years that have passed in your mortal realm will bear down on you.'

They rode on towards the great castle, where brightly coloured striped tents had been erected, and the people danced to the music of the pipes. Children ran before them, scattering flowers under the feet of their horse. Everywhere laughter filled the air, as children, young people and old people gathered to cheer their arrival. 'These are your people, Oisín,' said Niamh, 'and they have come to welcome their new prince.'

They rode over a silver drawbridge that spanned a moat that was filled with white and black swans and then through the huge white stone walls of the castle and into a great courtyard. There to greet them was an old man on horseback that bore a remarkable resemblance to Niamh.

'Father, I have returned with Oisín, the young deer,' said Niamh.

The old king greeted Oisín with great respect and kindness, saying that as soon as his foot touched the land of Tir na n-Og then he would become the lord of the realm. Niamh looked into Oisín's eyes and said to him once more, 'Remember, my love; as soon as your feet touches the land then you cannot return to your old life.' Oisín said in a clear, firm voice, 'I am Oisín Mac Fionn; warrior, poet, hunter and member of the Fianna. I said that I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, Niamh Cinn-Oir, and so I shall.'

Without another word he leapt from the saddle and landed on the soil of Tir na n-Og. As soon as his feet touched the ground a great transformation took place. The lines on his forehead smoothed out and disappeared and he became younger looking and his hair lightened and curled over his shoulders, which had also become broader and more powerful. He seemed to grow in stature and strength, and

his skin glowed with a radiant light, just as Niamh had appeared to the Fianna. The cloak and tunic of rough, homespun wool seemed to fade away and instead he was wearing a blue silken tunic and a short saffron coloured cloak of light wool that was held together by a large brooch of gold and copper with a huge emerald in the centre of it. His rough leather sandals had gone too, and in their place were shoes of kid leather with gold decorations at the toes and heels.

The king embraced him warmly and said that he should go and prepare for a feast that was to be held in his honour. The young warrior who carried the golden shield came over and told Oisín that he was to be his officer and to see that he had everything that he desired. He would show him the stables where he could choose a horse for himself and then they would go to the armoury to collect the sword and spear that had been made for him and then to the wardrobe where new clothes were waiting for him. He also told him that a musical instrument was to be made for him; a harp with strings of pure gold that are as fine as a spider's web but as strong as the blade of his new sword.

Oisín and Niamh walked into the hall of the castle, where beautifully woven carpets covered the stone floor and tapestries were hung from the walls. Everywhere there was the gleam of gold and silver that glittered in the firelight like the sun and the moon. They reached the foot of a grand staircase and Niamh said to Oisín;

'Soon we will be married, to the great joy of everyone in Tir na n-Og, and after that my father wishes to withdraw to the Land of Silence and leave you as the ruler of the realm. He has longed to go there and enjoy the tranquillity of that place, but he couldn't leave his people. But now he has you to look after them and is at peace.'

At the top of the stairs they parted and Oisín was led to a large room where a hot bath was waiting for him. All the servants left, except for one old woman who poured hot water into the bath. Oisín looked at her kindly face and then asked, 'Why does everyone in Tir na n-Og smile the whole time?'

The old woman smiled even more, and said 'Why shouldn't they?'

'If this is supposed to be the Land of Eternal Youth,' said Oisín, 'then why are there old people like you here?'

The old woman smiled and said, 'I was a lot older when I arrived at the shores of this land. We all were. But we will get younger and younger until we are children once more. Many of the children here were once old people, but now they enjoy the wisdom that comes with age mixed with the wonderment of childhood. When you die, those who have lived good lives, they are washed up on the shores of Tir na n-Og with every wave. Every time a wave breaks on the sand, a soul is brought with it. That is how we reach this blessed place and the years fade from our faces and from our hearts.'

After he was dressed Oisín gazed out from the top of the castle walls, but he realised that while the journey from the sea shore had not been long, there was no longer any sign of the sea. Even the road along which they had travelled had gone and the green fields and trees stretched before him, right to the purple mountains of the Land of Silence. Tir na n-Og was whatever you wanted it to be.

Oisín married Niamh of the Golden Hair, and the old king kissed his daughter goodbye and left for the peace of the Land of Silence. Oisín loved Niamh beyond the sun and the moon, and she loved him twice

as much as that. He hunted the stags that lived in the forests and his days were filled with sport and laughter. So why should he ever want to leave such a place? Why would anyone want to leave such a land of plenty and beauty and a wife whose beauty and love was more than a mortal's words can describe? But this was his fate.

One day, as Oisín stood on the castle walls, staring into space, searching for a sight of that he could not see; Niamh came to him and asked, 'What is wrong with you Oisín? You have lost your smile and sadness has crept into your handsome face. That is something that has never been seen before in Tir na n-Og.' 'My thoughts were with my own son Oscar and with my father Fionn and the Fianna. I miss them, and would love to see them, and my dear Ireland, just one last time.'

'You know that you cannot return there,' said Niamh, 'it is dangerous.'

'But couldn't I return, just one last time?'

'Yes, but the dangers are great. I will give you my white horse to ride over the waves to Ireland, but you must promise me one thing.'

'Anything; what is it?'

'You must promise me that you will not, under any circumstance, touch the ground. Remain on the horse and you will be safe but leave the saddle and you will no longer be under the Guardianship of Youth and all the years that has passed in your realm will fall on your shoulders.'

Oisín promised, and was given the white horse, and with one last kiss from Niamh he set off back to Ireland.

Over the waves rode Oisín, as fast as the horse could carry him. Soon he saw the rocky shores of Ireland before him and he wasted no time in visiting the old hunting ground in Kerry where the Fianna chased the stag. He called for his son and his father, but there was no reply. He rode on to where Fionn's great fortress stood, but when he reached it, he was horrified to see it lying in ruins, covered over with long grass and trees. Everything looked different to Oisín now, the land seemed smaller somehow, yet he thought that he had only been away for a year.

He rode on until he saw some men labouring in a quarry and struggling to raise a slab of rock. Even these people seemed small in stature compared to the men of his day. He spoke to them, but they couldn't understand what he was saying at first, and he couldn't understand their speech either. After a time, they were able to understand each other, so Oisín asked what had happened to Fionn and the Fianna. The men huddled together and talked among themselves until one turned and said; 'Fionn and the Fianna aren't real. They are just in the old legends, and it was said that they were killed in battle long, long ago.'

Oisín sat dumbfounded in his saddle. Fionn Mac Cumhail a legend? What did this puny man mean; a legend? He looked at the slab of rock that they couldn't lift, and he leant forward and grasped it and picked it up, but as he did so the girth strap of the saddle broke and he fell to the ground.

As soon as he touched the land the white horse disappeared, and to the horror of the men around him they saw Oisín's face grow wrinkled and start to wither. His golden curls turned to white and then to

dust. His broad shoulders shrank as the long years caught up with him at last, for Oisín had not been away for a year, but for three hundred years.

The men set off to look for St Patrick, who was travelling through Ireland preaching about the new God. Patrick took the ancient Oisín to his house and tended him. He tried to convert Oisín to this new religion, saying that Fionn and the Fianna would all be burning in the fires of Hell. Oisín said that he could not believe that his God would not be honoured to know Fionn Mac Cumhail, and that if he didn't let him into heaven, then he would be happy to join Fionn and the Fianna in hell and share their fate.

Patrick wrote down many of the stories about Fionn Mac Cumhail that Oisín told him before he finally succumbed to the years that he had left behind during his time in Tir na n-Og.

Tom Muir, Orkney

KING DAVID AND THE STAG



King David I, the son of King Malcolm Canmore and St Margaret, was a keen hunter and there was nothing that he liked better than to hunt stags in the forest of Drumsheugh.

One day, in the year 1128, as he prepared to go hunting, he was approached by the priest who reminded him that it was the 14th of September; Holy Rood Day. The word 'Rood' was used as a term for the Holy Cross, and that day was considered to be a very holy one, and not a day for sport.

King David ignored the rebuke of the priest and gathered together the hunters and had the horses saddled ready for the hunt.

As the party rode through the forest King David found himself separated from his friends.

Suddenly, a large, fierce stag appeared from out of nowhere and knocked him from his horse. The stag lowered his mighty antlers and seemed ready to gore the king, whose lips were moving in silent prayer; he was sure that his time had come. He seized the stag by the antlers and grappled with it, but to his amazement the antlers seemed to twist into the shape of a cross, which the king was left holding as the stag turned tail and fled through the forest.

Shaken by this, the king returned to Edinburgh Castle and the comfort and safety of his court. That night, as King David lay asleep in his bed, he dreamed that a voice spoke to him, commanding him to have an abbey built on the spot where he had wrestled with the stag.

The next morning, he ordered the building of Holyrood Abbey, which was said to house a fragment of the True Cross. His orders were carried out and a fine abbey was built for a community of Augustinian Canons who flourished there for many years.

Tom Muir, Orkney

KING ARTHUR AND THE LADY OF THE LAKE



King Uther Pendragon burned with passion and lust for the Lady Igraine, the wife on the Duke of Tintagel. He led an army to Cornwall and besieged the castle in his attempt to force the lady to share his bed. As the Duke of Tintagel's lifeless body grew cold on the field of battle, Merlin the sorcerer used his magic powers to transform King Uther's shape into that of the duke and he went straight away to Igraine and lay with her in the form of her husband. By this deception Arthur was conceived, but he was given to Merlin to be fostered so his mother never saw him grow up. She married King Uther and her three daughters by the Duke of Tintagel were married to kings, including King Lot of Orkney who married Margawse.

The legend says that Arthur was discovered to be the true heir to the throne of England when he pulled out a sword that was embedded through an anvil and into a large stone. This lay in London with a sign that proclaimed:

WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ALL
ENGLAND

Arthur had not realised this when he pulled it out, but it was soon known that this young man was the rightful king of the land.

Arthur was accompanied by Merlin, but he lamented that he had no sword of his own, and who had ever heard of a king without a sword? Merlin took him to a lake where he saw a woman's arm clad in white silk that was interwoven with gold and silver thread rise from the water clutching a sword.

Arthur also saw a beautiful woman walking over the surface of the lake towards them. He asked Merlin who it was, and he replied that it was Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, and that he must ask her for the sword, for it was her property.

She greeted Arthur well, and he asked her if he may have the sword that was held aloft above the surface of the lake and she agreed, saying that it was called Excalibur and that it would serve him well. They were directed to a barge that lay by the water's edge and they rowed to where the sword was held aloft. Arthur gripped the sword, which was protected by a beautiful scabbard made of gold and inlaid with precious gems, and the hand that had held it slipped back under the surface of the water. Merlin asked Arthur which he preferred, the sword or the scabbard? Arthur said that he valued the sword best, but Merlin told him that he had chosen unwisely, for the scabbard had the power to protect him from harm on the battlefield and he should look after it with care. This scabbard would later be stolen by Arthur's half-sister, the sorceress Morgan le Fay, who threw it into a lake when she was pursued by Arthur and his knights. She turned herself and her knights into stone to avoid being found, but the loss of the scabbard sealed Arthur's fate.

Arthur extended his rule over all of Britain, defeating Scotland, Wales and Ireland in his campaigns. He married the Lady Guinevere, built a fine castle that he called Camelot and created the order of the Knights of the Round Table. But Arthur would bring about his own doom by fathering a child on his half-sister, Margawse, the wife of King Lot of Orkney. At that time Arthur didn't know who his parents were and so was unaware that Margawse was his half-sister. Merlin told him of his awful mistake, but by that time it was too late. The son that was born from this union was called Mordred, and he would bring about Arthur's death when he tried to seize the throne from him. At the last battle Arthur drove his spear into Mordred, but Mordred, feeling his death draw near, forced himself along the shaft of the spear until he could strike Arthur a great blow on the side of his head. Mordred lay dead with Arthur lying mortally wounded by his side. His trusted knight, Sir Bedevere, tried to comfort the dying king, but Arthur said to him, 'Take my sword Excalibur to the lake that lies over there and to throw it into the water and to come back and tell me what you saw.'

Sir Bedevere carried Excalibur to the water's edge, but when he looked at the fine sword, with its golden pommel inlaid with gems, he thought that it was a waste to lose such a valuable weapon, so he hid it under a tree and returned to where King Arthur lay.

'Well?' said Arthur, 'What did you see?'

'I saw nothing, my king; just the ripples on the water when it entered.' The king grew angry, saying, 'You are trying to deceive me! Go now and throw Excalibur into the lake. My life depends on it.'

Sir Bedevere went back to the lake and picked up Excalibur, but when he looked at it, he still could not bring himself to throw the sword into the lake, so it returned it to its hiding place and went back to the king.

'Well?' said Arthur, 'What did you see?'

'Nothing, my king, just the ripples on the water.'

King Arthur's face flushed red, 'You traitor! You have betrayed your king twice and placed more value on a sword than on my life. I will kill you with my own hands if you do not throw Excalibur into the lake. Hurry, for I don't have much time and I am feeling the cold grip me.'

Sir Bedevere went back to the water's edge and this time he took Excalibur in his hands and threw it with all his might into the lake. A woman's arm, clad in white silk that was interwoven with gold and silver thread, rose up out of the lake and caught Excalibur by the hilt and then shook it three times before slipping silently beneath the surface of the water.

Bedevere went back to King Arthur and told him what he had seen. King Arthur ordered him to help him down to the lake, so Bedevere carried him to the water's edge where he saw a barge approach that had many beautiful women onboard it. They wept when they saw Arthur, and carefully Bedevere laid him in the bottom of the boat where the women tended him.

One was Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, and as silently as they had arrived the boat slipped away from the shore, leaving Bedevere staring in wonder. Arthur was taken to the enchanted island of Avalon where he could be healed of his wounds. Some say that he is still there, waiting until such time as Britain is threatened by foreign invaders. Some say that he is asleep and will only be awoken when his country needs his protection.

Tom Muir, Orkney

ANGUS AND BRIDE



Beira was old, as old as time itself. She was the mother of all the Gods and Goddesses of Scotland and ruled the land in winter, which led to her being called the Winter Queen in ancient times. The land that we see in Scotland was created by Beira, who raised the mountains as her stepping-stones and then shaped them so that each one had its own form that could be recognised from afar. The only tool that she used was a hammer within which was carried all the cold of winter. With this hammer she could create great valleys when she struck hard with it, but a light tap was enough to turn the ground as hard as iron with frost. She was huge in stature and her clothes were all grey, apart from a spotted bonnet on her head. She was terrible to look upon, for her face and hands were deeply wrinkled by the hundreds of years that she had lived through, and her skin was as blue as a corpse's lips. Her hair hung over her shoulders as white as the hardest frost; her teeth were as red as rust and she had but one eye. She had as her servants eight hags who rode over the land on the back of shaggy goats and whatever they touched was instantly covered with frost and ice.

She had many giant sons; horrible monsters with tempers as foul as their appearance who were constantly fighting with each other. Some of them had horns growing out of their heads while others had several heads, all with faces as ugly as its neighbour. Beira would get angry with these unruly monsters and would lock them up in the mountains that she built, but they would climb up onto the roof and throw boulders at each other, many of which can still be pointed out to this day. The tallest mountain in Scotland (indeed in all of Britain), Ben Nevis, she kept for herself and this was Beira's mountain throne.

Now it happened that Beira had captured a beautiful princess called Bride, and she dressed her in ragged clothes and set her to work in the kitchen. Beira treated her cruelly so that the poor maid's life was not worth living. One day she gave her a brown sheep's fleece and ordered her to go to the stream and scrub it until it was as white as the snow that covered the land. Bride went to a pool beneath a waterfall and she scrubbed and scrubbed the fleece, but no matter how hard she worked the fleece remained brown. When she returned with the brown fleece that evening Beira was angry and said, 'You are a worthless, lazy hussy!'

Bride begged her to have pity on her, saying, 'I have scrubbed it all day in the cold, icy water of the pool, but no matter how hard I scrub, the wool always remain brown.'

Beira had no pity in her ice-cold heart and told the girl, 'You will be sent back to the same pool tomorrow to scrub it, and if you don't get it as white as snow then you will go back the day after that and every other day until it is white.'

Bride went to her bed and wept.

One day, as Bride sat weeping and scrubbing the fleece in the pool beneath the waterfall, an old man with a long grey beard walked towards her and said, 'Who are you? And why do you weep, child?'

Bride looked up at his kindly face; the tears streaming over her cheeks. 'I am the Princess Bride. I am a prisoner of Beira, and she has ordered me to scrub this fleece until it is as white as snow, but there is no hope of turning a brown fleece white.'

The old man smiled over the poor wretched girl and said, 'I feel sorry for you, my dear.'

'Who are you?' asked Bride, 'And where do you come from?'

'I am Father Winter,' said the old man, 'and if you give me your fleece, I will make it as white as snow for you.'

Bride handed the old man the fleece, and he shook it three times and it was transformed from brown into pure white.

'Oh, you are so kind, Father Winter,' said Bride, 'and you have saved me from this impossible task.' The old man handed the fleece to Bride, and then he held out his other hand and gave her a small bunch of flowers. 'Take these snowdrops,' he said, 'and if Beira is angry with you give them to her and she will forget her rage. When she asks you where you got them, say that they are growing between the fir trees, and that the cress is growing by the side of the stream and the grass is putting up new shoots in the meadows.'

Bride returned to Beira's castle with the fleece and the flowers. When she saw Beira, she handed her the fleece, saying, 'Here is your brown fleece, which I have washed as white as snow.'

Beira said nothing, for she could not take her eyes off the bunch of snowdrops that Bride held in her hand. 'Where did you find those?' Beira demanded.

'Why, I found them growing between the fir trees; the cress is growing by the sides of the streams and the grass is putting up new shoots in the meadow.'

'This is evil news that you bring me,' said Beira, who looked visibly shaken.

Beira called her hags to her and they set off in a great fury to blight the flowers with their frosty grip and to cast blizzards of snow over the land like a deadly blanket. The ocean was whipped up like a cauldron of boiling water, and huge snowflakes mixed with the white foam to blind the mariner and cast ships onto the rocks. The shepherd lay down and died with his flock as the blizzard raged through the land, destroying all in its path. But Bride smiled, for she knew that Beira, the Winter Queen, was losing her power and that summer would set her free.

Beira had a son called Angus-the-Ever-Young, a fair youth, handsome and gentle, unlike the many headed giants who were also Beira's offspring. He was called Ever-Young because the years never touched him, nor age lined his face. He lived in the Green Isle, the Land of Youth as it is also called, that lay out west in the Atlantic Ocean. There he passed the winter, waiting until the time came when his strength would grow, and he would rule the land in place of his mother. Beira knew that Angus was destined to fall in love with Bride when he saw her, so she had seized the girl in order to keep her as a prisoner and to prevent her from ever having the chance to meet with her true love. But Angus saw her in his dreams. He saw her beauty and her kindness, and his heart yearned for her. When he woke, he went to the King of the Green Isle and asked for his advice.

'Last night,' said Angus, 'I dreamed that I saw a beautiful maiden who sat weeping by a stream. I asked an old man with a grey beard who stood near her why she was crying. He said that she was a prisoner of Beira, and that she was treated with cruelty and that was why she wept. I would give anything to set her free.'

The King of the Green Isle said, 'The maiden you saw was Princess Bride, and when you rule as the King of the Summer then she will be your queen. Your mother, Beira, knows this and is trying to keep the maiden from you because she knows that if you marry Bride then her own power will be weakened.'

'I long to free her,' said Angus, 'and will leave in search of her now, although it is still the wolf-month (February). I will borrow three days from August and weave a spell over the land and sea so that they are calm, and I will ride out on my white steed in search of Bride.'

And so, Angus borrowed three days from August and stilled the sea and then he rode to Scotland on his white steed to search for Bride. He never rested but searched for Bride all of those borrowed days of summer, but he didn't find her. Bride also saw him in her dreams as he searched for her to set her free, and her heart swelled with joy and love for this handsome young man. When she thought of him the warm tears would flow from her eyes and drop onto the ground, and up would spring a violet; each one as blue as her eyes. When the three days ended Beira blasted Angus with such a furious gale of icy wind that it blew him right back to the Green Isle. But he returned, time after time, until one day he saw Bride sitting in a clearing in a forest, surrounded by violets and the soft delicate beauty of the yellow primroses.

He took her in his arms and said, 'My lady, I saw you in my dreams weeping bitter tears of sorrow.' 'And I saw you in my dreams,' said Bride, 'riding over mountains and through glens on your white steed in search of me.'

And from that moment the earth seemed warmer under their feet, and the birds sang for joy from the branches of the trees. And as the two young lovers looked on in wonder, the Queen of the Fairies came to them with her hand-maidens and she cast her wand over Bride, and she was transformed into her summer glory. She radiated beauty, like the sun through a break in the clods, and her long golden-brown hair that hung down to her waist was decorated with snowdrops, violets, daisies and primroses; her ragged dress was now a snow-white gown that shimmered with inlays of silver and on her breast there shone a clear crystal. They went with the Queen of the Fairies to her hall where they were married, and a great feast was held. Wherever Beira's hags had frozen the water, Bride's touch turned it once more into flowing streams and lakes.

When Beira heard that Angus had found Bride and that they were married she flew into a rage and gathered together all of her strength. She mounted her black steed, and with her eight hags riding on their shaggy goats, they set off for the hall of the Queen of the Fairies. When the Fairies saw Beira amidst the black clouds that bore down on them, they fled in terror to their underground home and shut tight the door. Angus took Bride up behind him on his white steed and rode west, back to the Green Isle where they were safe. Time and time again Angus rode back to Scotland, only to be driven back by Beira and her hags.

As the spring approached Angus made a great effort which defeated the eight hags and drove them far away to the north. Beira called up the icy gales that swept over the land and sea so that fishermen could not venture out to sea to fill the bellies of their families, nor farmers feed their animals who were dying of hunger. Beira struck the land with her hammer and froze it as hard as iron once more. She rode north to her hags and ordered one last charge against Angus. Beira then used her magic to borrow the three days of winter that Angus had replaced with three days from August, and so, with that extra power, she drove Angus from Scotland. This storm killed a great many animals and people, but it used up the last of her strength. Beira grew weak, and Angus, the King of Summer, returned when the March days were of equal length. Bride, his queen, touched the frozen water to melt the last of the ice, and as she did so the eight hags were lulled to sleep once more. Beira's strength had deserted her, and she rode her black steed to the Green Isle where she drank from the Well of Youth and was restored as a young maiden once more.

At midsummer she reached womanhood, but as the autumn passed, she grew older again and her strength grew until she was able to drive Angus and Bride from Scotland and rule once more as Beira, the Queen of Winter.

Tom Muir, Orkney

ST COLUMBA AND ST MAGNUS



Two men who have left their mark on the Christian history of Scotland are St Columba and St Magnus. Although separated in time by almost 600 years, both these men left a lasting legacy in two island groups; the Hebrides and Orkney. It is ironic that the monastery founded by Columba in Iona would be attacked by Vikings in the late 8th century, while Magnus was descended from the very same Vikings who once ransacked churches to steal their valuables. But Columba had a warlike past too, being the son of a powerful chieftain in Ireland.

ST COLUMBA

St Columba was born around the year 521 AD into a powerful family with links to the High Kings of Ireland in County Donegal. He studied to become a priest and founded churches in County Derry. While studying as a student under St Finnian he copied a Psalter belonging to Finnian without his permission, and then refused to surrender it when ordered to. Columba took the Psalter against Finnian's wishes, and so Finnian took the complaint to King Dermott who ruled in his favour.

When Columba refused to hand the Psalter over King Dermott raised an army to take it by force, but Columba was from a high-born family who also raised an army to defend him. The two sides clashed in battle in the year 561 AD, and many warriors were slain on both sides before Columba eventually won the day. For this act Columba was forced to leave Ireland as an exile, and along with twelve companions he sailed to Scotland where he founded a monastery on the island of Iona. He swore that he would convert as many people to the new religion as had died in battle because of him. His name, Columba, comes from the Irish words 'Colm Cille', meaning 'dove of the church'.

One day he called a monk to him and said that on the morning of the third day a visitor would come to the island, a crane, which is a bird that lives in Ireland but not in Scotland. This bird would have been blown to Iona by strong winds and it would land on the west shore of the island in front of where the monk was told to sit, but it would be too exhausted to move. The monk was ordered to take it home with him and to tend it with loving care until it was strong enough to return home, as it had come from the same land as they had done. The monk went to the shore on the west side of the island, as he was told to, and at the appointed hour he saw the crane fly towards the shore and land in an exhausted state. Gently, he picked up the crane and took it to his dwelling where he fed it and tended to its needs. That evening St Columba passed him and thanked him for his kindness towards the bird, saying that it would not stay long but would want to fly away after three days. It all happened just as he said, and after three days the crane was ready to return to its own home in Ireland. It flew higher and higher in the sky, and then it turned its direction back south towards Ireland where it had come from. Columba must have thought that this bird was an exile from Ireland, just the same as he was.

St Columba set out for the court of the Pictish King Bridei in order to make converts among his people. While he was journeying through Scotland, he had to cross the River Ness, which flows from that great body of water Loch Ness. When he reached the side of the river, he saw a group of people busily burying the body of a friend. Columba asked what had killed the man and the frightened people said that there was a terrible monster that lived in the river and that it had attacked this poor man and had savagely torn him with its awful teeth. Columba ordered one of his men to swim over the lake to where a boat was tied on the other side and to row it back over to him. The man stripped off his clothes and jumped into the river and began to swim across it. The monster, which was lying on the bottom of the river, saw the man swimming above it and rose to the surface with a terrible roar. It started to swim towards the man with its mouth wide open showing its long, sharp teeth, much to the horror of the onlookers who were standing by the riverbank. When it reached out its neck to bite the man Columba raised his hand and commanded it to stop, in the name of God, and to leave this place in peace. He made the sign of the cross in the air as he spoke. The monster stopped dead in the water and then turned and fled, like his life depended on it. Columba's man reached the other side and returned with the boat, much to the amazement of the people who had been watching the whole thing. Columba made converts of them all, and after that they were no longer troubled by the monster in the River Ness.

ST MAGNUS

St Magnus Erlendsson was the son of the Earl of Orkney and expected to rule over part of the islands after his father's death. His father, Erlend, ruled Orkney with his brother Paul, and the two men were great friends and shared the islands between them. Paul's son, Hakon, was a greedy and violent man who quarrelled with Magnus and even brought about strife between their fathers, the two earls. They divided the islands between them so that they held their own territory separate from each other. Hakon was sent to Norway, then travelled to Sweden to visit relatives. In Sweden he consulted a sooth-sayer who told him that he and his descendants would rule Orkney, but that during his lifetime he would commit a great crime that he might never be forgiven for, both in this life and in the next. Hakon persuaded King Magnus Bare-legs to lead a great expedition to the west, which he did in 1198, but he sent the two Earls of Orkney to Norway as exiles and set his own son over the islands in their place.

He took the young St Magnus on his raid through the Hebrides and as far south as Anglesey, where St Magnus refused to fight, but sat and sang from his Psalter while the battle raged around him. He fled from the king's wrath, but returned to Orkney after the king was killed while raiding in Ireland in 1103.

For a while Magnus and Hakon ruled their own half of the islands in peace, but troublemakers persuaded Hakon to try to seize the half that Magnus held and so the islands were plunged into civil war. Men of peace went between the warring cousins and they held talks at a ting on a large mound at present day Tingwall in the West Mainland parish of Rendall. It was agreed that they would hold peace talks on the island of Egilsay the following Easter, around the year 1116, and that both sides would each take two longships and a certain number of men. When the time came Magnus got his two ships ready and they sailed towards Egilsay. The weather was fine and the water calm, when suddenly a wave rose from the tranquil waters and broke over Magnus where he sat steering the vessel in the stern of the longship. Magnus declared that this was an evil omen, and that he felt that treachery was afoot and that his death was near. He refused to turn back but sailed to the small green island of Egilsay to await his fate.

Hakon arrived on the island later that day, but instead of the two longships that was agreed he had brought eight ships fully armed with warriors. He seized St Magnus and had him brought before him. Magnus gave him three choices, in order to save Hakon's soul from the stain of oath breaking and murder. His first offer was to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and never to return, but this was rejected. The second offer was to be sent south to Hakon's territory in Scotland and imprisoned in a castle, but this was also rejected. His third offer was to be blinded or maimed and to be cast into a dungeon for the rest of his days. This offer was accepted by Hakon, but the chieftains who were there said that they would no longer suffer having two earls and that one of them had to die. Hakon said that he was not yet tired of living, so St Magnus was doomed to be executed. Magnus prayed for the souls of his killers, and for his own. None of Hakon's men would carry out the killing, so he ordered his cook, Lifolf, to carry out the execution. Lifolf cried, but St Magnus comforted him, saying that he was doing this deed against his will and so no blame was attached to him. Then St Magnus asked him to strike a great wound on his head with his axe, as it was not right to behead an earl like a common thief. St Magnus prayed once more and then stooped his head to receive the blow. The axe fell and Magnus's soul was set free.

St Magnus's blood splattered body was taken to the cathedral church that once stood in the West Mainland parish of Birsay and there it was buried. Miracles were said to have taken place at his tomb, until Bishop William had him canonised as a saint. His nephew, Rognvald Kali Kolsson, claimed the half of the earldom of Orkney that had belonged to his uncle and vowed to build a fine stone minster in Kirkwall in honour of St Magnus. He was successful in his claim, and work started on St Magnus Cathedral in 1137. During restoration work in 1919 a box was found buried inside a pillar in the cathedral, and inside were the bones of a man who had a large wound to the side of his skull. St Magnus's bones were reburied in the pillar, and there they remain to this day.

THOMAS THE RHYMER



Thomas of Ercildoune lived in Berwickshire in the Border in the 13th century. He was well known as a poet, but he was also called True Thomas and was renowned for his gift of prophesy. All this came about one fine May day as he sat under a tree by the banks of the Huntly Burn enjoying the sweet scent of flowers on the warm breeze; at one with the nature that surrounded him.

Suddenly he heard the sound of tinkling bells and a horse's hooves on the soft ground and a rustling among the ferns. Hounds danced around in excitement as a white horse with fifty nine tiny silver bells hanging from its mane pushed its way through the bushes and undergrowth and walked over to where Thomas sat in amazement. While the horse was beautiful to behold, the woman that rode it was like a vision of loveliness that made Thomas's head spin. She wore a silk dress of emerald green and around her shoulders hung a green velvet mantle over which her long, golden hair cascaded like sunbeams. A golden hunting horn was around her neck and a quiver of arrows hung by her side.

Thomas thought that this must be the Blessed Virgin Mary and he knelt down on one knee and bowed his head before her.

'Greetings to thee, oh Queen of Heaven,' said Thomas.

The lady smiled and said, 'I am not the Queen of Heaven, as you think Thomas, but they do call me Queen. I am the Queen of Elfland.'

Thomas looked into those two deep pools of sparkling blue that were her eyes, and at her lips that were as red as ripe strawberries, and he couldn't help but long to taste them to see if they were as sweet as they looked.

'I know what you desire Thomas,' said the Elf Queen, 'you want to kiss me.'

'That I do,' said Thomas, 'if I could be so bold.'

'You may kiss me if you like,' she said, 'but it comes at a price.'

'I would pay any price to kiss those lips,' said Thomas.

'If you kiss me, then you will be in my power, and you will have to come with me to Elfland where you will be my servant for seven years.'

'I gladly accept those terms,' said Thomas.

The Queen of Elfland got down off her horse and Thomas embraced her and their lips met. That kiss was sweeter than strawberries to Thomas, sweeter even than the honey from the wild bees' nests. Once the kiss was over, he fell completely under her spell. He mounted the white horse behind the Queen of Elfland, and they rode off on their long journey to Elfland.

Long they rode, onwards and on, until they seemed to ride down into the ground. They came to a river and the horse waded through it, although the water rose to Thomas's thigh. Through rivers of water and through rivers of blood they rode until eventually they came to a green garden where the trees hung heavy with fruit. Thomas was hungry and he reached out to pluck some of this delicious looking fruit, but the Queen of Elfland stopped him, saying, 'This fruit is cursed and carries the plagues of Hell. To eat it would spell your doom.'

She took a loaf of bread and a flask of blood-red wine from a bag and invited Thomas to get down off the horse and eat it with her. They ate and drank, and then she told Thomas to lie down with his head in her lap so that she could grant him the power to see what was hidden from mortal eyes. He saw three roads lying head of them. The first road was broad and flat with pretty flowers growing by the sides of it. The second was steep and rocky and covered on both sides by high hedges of brambles and thorn bushes that thrust cruel barbs across the road. The third was a green road banked by ferns that ran up the hillside and through the heather and the broom. The Queen pointed to the first road, saying, 'That road which is flat and fair to look at is the path of wickedness and sin and it leads to Hell. The second road that is steep and covered with thorns is the path of righteousness that leads to Heaven. The third road leads through the hills is the road to Elfland, and that is the way that we must go.'

The Queen of Elfland gave Thomas a lovely red apple to eat, and told him, 'This apple will give you the gift of truth. Eat it and a lie will never again pass your lips.' Thomas ate the apple, and after that he was incapable of telling a lie. That was why they called him True Thomas, because they knew that what he spoke was the truth.

After riding a long time, they arrived at a large castle and the Queen blew her golden hunting horn to announce her arrival. She turned to Thomas and said: 'Now you must wait here as my servant, but whatever you do you must not speak to anyone but me. If you ever want to return to your home again, then talk to no one and don't eat or drink anything you are offered. If you have but one mouthful of food in this land, then you can never go back home.'

Inside the castle the Queen was warmly greeted by her husband and her subjects. Two large thrones sat at the end of the great hall and the King and Queen of Elfland sat there as the feasting started. There was music and dancing, but Thomas kept himself at the back of the room and spoke to no one. Huntsmen carried in the carcasses of deer for the cooks to prepare for the dancers, and fruit was piled high on golden plates on the tables for all to enjoy. Three days passed like this until the Queen rose from her throne and walked over to where Thomas stood.

'It is time to ride home, Thomas,' said the Queen.

'But it has only been three days,' said Thomas, 'not seven years like you said.'

'The time passes quickly in Elfland Thomas,' said the Queen, 'and seven of your years have passed since you left Ercildoune. You must leave, because every seven years we folk of Elfland must pay a tribute to the Lord of Darkness who has us in his power. An evil spirit will choose the one whose fate it is to be carried away to Hell, and as you are a fine-looking young man, I fear that it will be you.'

With that Thomas mounted the white horse behind the Queen of Elfland and they rode away from the castle. After a while Thomas found himself by the banks of the Huntly burn once more and had to say goodbye to the Queen of Elfland.

'Lady,' said Thomas, 'can you give me a gift to show that I was in Elfland?'

'I have already given you the gift of truth,' said the Queen, 'but I will give you the gift of prophesy and of poetry, which will make you a rich man. I will also give you this harp that was made in Elfland, as something that mortal eyes can see to be real.'

With that the lady left Thomas, who returned to his old home. Thomas used his gift of prophesy to foretell many great events in Scotland, like the death of King Alexander III, the Battle of Bannockburn and the union of Scotland and England under a king born of a French queen. These prophesies were given in verse, which led to him being called Thomas the Rhymer. It was said that one night, word was brought to Thomas that a strange sight was to be seen outside the walls of his tower; a snow-white hart and hind were walking along the village street and showed no sign of fear.

Thomas knew that this was a message from the Queen of Elfland and he went to where the deer stood and they turned and walked towards the forest followed by Thomas the Rhymer, who was never seen again.

Tom Muir, Orkney

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS



King Conchobar MacNessa, the King of Ulster, smiled as he entered the hall where the feast was ready for him. With him were his noblemen and warriors, Cathbad his chief druid, plus many other warriors and bards who were visiting the king. The feast was given by Feidlimid MacDall; the king's most gifted bard and storyteller whose skills were so great that he could charm the birds out of the trees with his tales and verses. His wife was a beautiful woman, and although she was heavily pregnant, she saw to it that the servants poured wine from silver jugs into the goblets of their guests and made sure that everyone has whatever they wanted, especially King Conchobar.

Feidlimid smiled to himself; he was the only bard in the land that was important enough to hold a feast for the king, and soon his hall would ring with the laughter of his own child. But that was not meant to be.

As the evening wore on the sound of merriment in the hall was suddenly broken by a terrible, piercing scream. Everyone who heard it felt an icy cold shiver pass down their spine, because this scream seemed to herald a great sadness that would engulf their land. All eyes looked at Feidlimid's wife who stood motionless in the middle of the room. The scream had come from her, and the women in the hall rushed over to her side, thinking that her time had come to bring this new life into the world. A second scream, more awful than the first, rent the air in the hall. The women recoiled in horror, for that terrible scream had not come from the lips of the trembling woman, but from the unborn child that she carried in her womb. All now were silent, frozen in horror as the source of that terrible scream became apparent. The king turned to Cathbad, his chief druid, and said,

'What can this mean? What awful thing does this herald?'

'My king,' said Cathbad, 'I foretell that this scream, from a child yet unborn, will spell danger for Ulster. I see that the unborn child will be the cause of great sadness to this land. She will be a beautiful girl; more beautiful than any now in Ireland, and her beauty will be the cause of great strife. Warrior will kill warrior, oaths will be broken and three of the noblest sons of Ulster will be exiled because of her. War will be the result of her beauty and this kingdom will be torn to pieces. I will give her a name; she will be called Deirdre, but later in her life she will be known as Deirdre of the Sorrows.'

A terrible silence descended on the company as the druid's words faded away on the air. A terrible war was to come; the end of the kingdom. Death stood watching the king and his followers from the shadows, and if his bony face still possessed lips, you would swear that they would have curled up into a smile.

A short time later Feidlimid's wife had the baby girl whose arrival had been so publically and terrifyingly announced. The Red Branch warriors, King Conchobar's most loyal bodyguards, counselled the king that this baby girl should be destroyed in order to save Ulster from the fate predicted by Cathbad the druid. But the king had given it a lot of thought and he had other plans.

'I have given this much thought, and I see a way that this oncoming storm can be weathered. I will have this child sent away to be fostered on my behalf. She will be kept away from the eyes of men, and when she reaches marriageable age she will be my wife. In this way the druid's prophesy cannot come to pass.'

The Red Branch warriors were not happy at this proposal, but they could see that King Conchobar had made up his mind on the matter and it was useless to try to argue with him. Deirdre was given to a nurse called Levarcham who would raise her, and they were sent to a castle that lay far away in the middle of a forest. Here Deirdre grew up in isolation, with just her nurse and some servants to look after her. King Conchobar used to visit, and his eyes grew wide as he watched the beautiful little girl grow up to become the most beautiful young woman in the whole of Ireland. Her flaxen hair, grey/green eyes and rose-red lips set his blood boiling with lust and he started to plan their wedding. Deirdre had no idea what was going on or who this old man was who came to visit, and why he looked at her in that way. He was kind enough to her, but his grey hair and beard and his wrinkled face could never set her pulse racing with passion.

One winter's day Deirdre stood on the castle's battlements with Levarcham her nurse by her side, and she saw that a servant had killed a calf which lay on the ground before the castle. Suddenly, a raven with blue/black feathers landed on the snow where the calf had been killed and started to peck at the blood that stained the snow that blanketed the land. Deirdre sighed as she watched the hungry bird, and said to Levarcham, 'Oh, dear Levarcham! How I wish there were men in the world who had hair as black as that raven, skin as smooth and white as the snow and cheeks and lips as red as that blood.'

Levarcham looked at the beautiful young girl, and her heart sank at the thought of her soon having to be held in the embrace of the aged king; a withered old man in his twilight years. She knew that she should say nothing, but she couldn't stop the words from coming.

'Oh, Deirdre, my beloved girl. There is such a man in Ulster who has hair as black as that raven, skin as smooth and white as the snow and cheeks and lips as red as that blood. His name is Naoise, the bravest warrior in all of Ulster. He and his two brothers are known as the Sons of Usna, and they are the finest flowers of all the men in Ireland.'

As soon as Deirdre heard about Naoise she begged and pleaded with Levarcham to take her to see him. At first the old nurse refused, but in her heart, she knew that it was wrong to give this beautiful young maiden to that old, dried up man, and so she eventually agreed. She took Deirdre in secret to the castle where Naoise lived, and there she saw him. He was even more beautiful to Deirdre than she had ever dreamed, and her pulse started to race at the sight of him. She saw him stride from the castle and she quickly followed him along the road until she managed to slip past him unseen. She stepped out onto the road in front of Naoise and walked by him. He stared at her in wonderment; she was so beautiful. He thought that this had to be the Deirdre that he had heard talk of, as no other woman could be more beautiful than she was.

As Deirdre passed he said, 'Fair is the heifer that passes me.'

'Heifers grow large where there are no bulls,' she replied.

'But you have the best bull in the land,' said Naoise, 'the king himself!'

'I would rather have a young bull like you!'

Naoise knew that he was in danger, as this girl was betrothed to the king that he was duty bound to serve. He stepped back, remembering the druid's prophesy that foretold death and ruin for Ulster, but Deirdre stepped forward and, grabbing him by the ears said, 'Ears of sorrow and shame shall these be unless you go off with me.'

Deirdre's words were a spell, as she was much more than just a pretty face; she was also gifted with magic and the second sight. Naoise knew that he was doomed to run away with her and that he would fulfil the druid's terrible prophesy.

Naoise, along with his brothers Ardán and Ainnle, planned how they could carry Deirdre out of Ulster without getting caught. One night they took Deirdre and hid her in a group of fifty men, fifty women and fifty cattle and by that means they escaped from Ulster. It was some time before King Conchobar found out that Naoise and Deirdre had eloped and when he did his anger was terrible to behold. He set off with an army after the Sons of Usna and chased them the length and breadth of Ireland.

Seeing that there would be no peace for them in Ireland they took a boat and sailed for Scotland, which was called Alba in those far off days.

It turned out that Deirdre's beauty was as great a danger to them in Scotland as it was in Ireland, for the Scottish king saw her and burned with desire for her. He had greeted the Sons of Usna as honoured guests, knowing of their exploits in Ireland and the recent war with King Conchobar. But the more he saw Deirdre the more he wanted her for his wife. He started to give tasks to Naoise and his brothers to perform that became more and more dangerous until they understood that he was trying to get them killed. They took Deirdre and fled from the court of the Scottish king, making their home in a glen that provided both shelter and food for them. They build a fortress there that was easy to defend, and they settled down to enjoy a life without trouble. But it would not last.

Back in Ireland King Conchobar brooded over his lost prize, and the hatred that burned through his veins turned cold and bitter. His whole life was consumed by the desire for revenge on Naoise and his brothers and on that ungrateful girl who had humiliated him in front of his entire kingdom. Cold anger is much more deadly than hot anger, and so the poison grew within him. His warriors and noblemen had started to grumble about the loss of such fine men as the Sons of Usna, and that the king should come to terms with them. His evil, twisted mind started to turn over a plan that would bring him the revenge that he so desired, and so one day he called a meeting. He addressed his most trusted men and said that he saw now how Ulster was suffering from the loss of such fine warriors as Naoise and his brothers, and that despite the wrongs that had been done to him at the hands of Naoise he was prepared to forgive him and have him back to stay in Ulster. There was much rejoicing among the men when they heard that and it was agreed that the most honourable nobleman in all of Ulster, Fergus MacRoich of the Red Branch, would be sent to fetch the sons of Usna back home. King Conchobar had no intention of forgiving Naoise, but now the trap was set.

Fergus, with his sons Illann the Fair and Buinne the Ruthless Red, set off for Scotland and travelled to the glen where the Sons of Usna were living. When they met, Fergus made the king's offer to them; to return to Ulster and be honoured as they once had been. Deirdre, who had the second sight, warned them that King Conchobar could not be trusted and that death awaited them if they returned, but the Sons of Usna were tired of living in exile from the land that they loved, and they trusted Fergus, a man renowned for his honesty. They packed their things and returned to Ulster with Fergus and his sons.

Now Conchobar's trap began to tighten around the necks of the Sons of Usna, for he had bribed some of his less trustworthy noblemen to help him to destroy Naoise and his brothers. In those days it was the custom that whenever a nobleman rode through another chieftain's lands that he had to accept the offer of hospitality or bring dishonour on himself. Fergus rode fast to avoid such offers, but one of the noblemen in Conchobar's pay managed to stop him on his road and offered him a feast. Fergus was reluctant to delay his journey, but his honour was at stake if he refused. King Conchobar had set his traps well, for he had set the condition that the first food that the Sons of Usna ate when back in Ulster had to come from his own table. Fearing a trick, Naoise refused to attend the feast but told Fergus that they would ride on without him. Fergus sent his two sons to accompany the Sons of Usna, promising them that he would soon join them.

As they rode on the final part of their journey Deirdre became more and more worried. She told Naoise that she had had a dream the previous night where three birds flew towards them with honey dripping from their beaks, but when the honey dropped onto the Sons of Usna it turned to blood. This, she interpreted, represented treachery by King Conchobar, and that the honey dripping from the birds' beaks were his honeyed words that would end in bloodshed. As they got nearer to Emain Macha, the king's castle, Deirdre was upset to see a halo of blood surrounding Naoise's head. Despite all the omens Naoise still refused to believe that the king would bring dishonour on himself by breaking an oath or be foolish enough to put lies into the mouth of such an honourable man as Fergus MacRoich.

When they arrived at Emain Macha the Sons of Usna were greeted by their former Red Branch comrades and were given good quarters for the night. King Conchobar did not appear but remained in his throne room drinking. His hatred of Naoise was as strong as ever, but he knew that he had to be careful of how he acted until his trap could be sprung. As he drank, he thought of Deirdre and of her great beauty. But was she still as beautiful as she had been before her enforced exile? King Conchobar called Levarcham, the old nurse who had raised Deirdre, and told her to go and see her former charge and to come back and tell her if she was still as beautiful as she was. Levarcham wept as she embraced Deirdre, who was every bit as beautiful as she ever was, and the two talked for a short time before the old nurse had to return to the king. The old nurse knew what evil was in the king's mind and she thought that she'd try to delay his plans by lying to him about Deirdre.

'Well?' demanded the king, 'how does she look?'

'Oh, your majesty,' said the old nurse, 'her looks have faded with worry and hardship. All those nights sleeping outdoors, smoky campfires, hunger and a thousand hardships have taken their toll on her face and form. Why, she's nothing special to look at anymore!'

The king was happy with this report; maybe Naoise could be forgiven after all, if Deirdre had lost her beauty. But as he sat there drinking and brooding over events, he grew more and more suspicious until he called a servant to him and ordered him to spy on Deirdre and to bring back news of how she looked. Trendhorn, the king's spy, was of Norse blood, and he headed for the house where Deirdre and the Sons of Usna were staying. He climbed up onto the roof and looked down through a skylight at where Deirdre sat next to Naoise, who was playing chess. Deirdre saw his face at the window and screamed, pointing up at him. Naoise picked up a silver chess piece and threw it at Trendhorn with such force that it put out one of his eyes. He returned to the king with the blood streaming down his cheek and said to Conchobar, 'Your majesty, Deirdre is still so very beautiful that I think it was worth losing an eye just to see her for a moment.'

King Conchobar was furious when he heard this and his desire for revenge grew stronger than ever. The next morning the Sons of Usna went out into a great courtyard that was surrounded by earth ramparts where all of the king's warriors were gathered. Women of noble birth as well as peasants stood along the ramparts watching the events as they unfolded before them. Naoise looked hopefully for any sign of Fergus's return from the feast, but he was nowhere to be seen. King Conchobar, wearing a small golden crown on his head, came out and stared at his enemies who stood before him, but then instead of welcoming them he read the ancient oaths of loyalty to the king that the Red Branch warriors had all taken. He then ordered them to seize Deirdre and to attack the Sons of Usna.

Deirdre was roughly grabbed by warriors who bound her hands before her with rope and dragged her away to witness what was to come. The sons of Fergus MacRoich fought hard alongside the Sons of Usna, which caused some confusion in the ranks of the Red Branch.

Eogan, the leader of the king's army, called for a halt to the fighting while they decided what to do. King Conchobar sent messengers to the sons of Fergus to offer them land if they would stop fighting for the Sons of Usna. Illann the Fair refused to sell his honour for the sake of some land, but his brother, Buinne the Ruthless Red, accepted the gift of land and left the field of battle. It was said that from that very night the land that he was given turned from being rich fertile earth to poor, sour, barren soil, and that he never benefitted from it or his loss of honour.

The attack was again launched against Illann and the Sons of Usna, and many warriors fell at their hands, but there were just too many for them to overcome. Eogan struck Naoise in the back with his spear, and the crack of his spine as it broke could be heard by all who had gathered there. At the sight of that Deirdre screamed, a piercing, unearthly scream that reminded those who were present of the scream that she had let out from inside her mother's womb. As Naoise lay on the ground dying he saw his brothers being overpowered and disarmed and then butchered like pigs and their heads struck off. Illann died too, proud and honourable to the end.

As Naoise breathed his last breath the sound of hooves could be heard coming over the hill; Fergus and his men had arrived just too late. When he saw the bodies of his son and his friends lying there on the ground in front of the castle he screamed with rage and grief. He had been tricked by the king, his honour besmirched by a king who possessed none. An oath-breaker is not worthy of the title of king, and he had made Fergus his mortal enemy. He rode into Conchobar's warriors, hacking on either side of him. Fergus and his men killed a great many warriors before he was forced to flee from the overwhelming numbers. Among the dead that Fergus had killed was King Conchobar's son. Fergus and his men rode to Connacht where they were made welcome by King Ailill and Queen Madb, who were mortal enemies of King Conchobar. From here Fergus led attacks against King Conchobar of Ulster, whose kingdom was torn apart by fighting; his reputation in tatters. It was said that Cathbad the druid laid a curse on King Conchobar, saying that his kin would never again rule in Emain Macha, and so it came to pass.

King Conchobar still had his prize; Deirdre was his prisoner. But despite this he never enjoyed her company; no lovemaking or laughter from the beautiful daughter of the bard. Instead she sat there, day after day, for a year and a day, with her head bent forward and her tears dripping into her lap. And so the druid's prophesy came true, as she was now known as Deirdre of the Sorrows. One day King Conchobar said to her,

'What do you hate most in the world?'

Without looking up she replied: 'I hate you, and that animal Eogan who killed my beloved Naoise.'

The king was furious, and said, 'If you hate me and Eogan so much, then I will send you to him for a year. We will pass you between us like an ewe between two rams!'

The king ordered a chariot to be sent to take Deirdre to Eogan, and she was brought out and placed beside the charioteer. As they passed through the gateway and along the side of the ramparts of Emain Macha Deirdre let out a terrible scream; just like the one that she screamed from inside her mother's womb, and she flung herself from the chariot. Her head struck a rock, and she died instantly.

Then the ground opened and claimed her poor, broken body. It closed softly over her once more and left not a trace of where she had been. A great yew tree grew from the grave of Deirdre and it spread its branches far over the land until it reached the branches of another tree which grew over the grave of Naoise, which lay outside the ramparts of Emain Macha.

It is said that the branches of the two trees mingled together in a tender embrace, and so they remain to this very day.

Tom Muir, Orkney

THE WEE BANNOCK

There was once an old man and an old woman who lived in a nice wee house by the side of a burn. They didn't have very much, but they had two cows that gave them milk, five hens who gave them lovely brown eggs to eat, a cock who crowed in the morning and told them when it was time to get up, a cat who kept the house free from mice and two kittens who played rough-and-tumble by the side of the fire. The old man looked after the cows and the hens and grew vegetables in the garden while his wife cooked, cleaned and spun wool on a spindle and distaff. One day, after their morning porridge, the old woman thought that she'd like a nice wee oatmeal bannock for their supper, so she took down her mixing bowl and she made two fine wee bannocks and she set them over the fire to cook. When they were ready, and lying toasting by the fireside, the old man came in and sniffed the air.

'Mmmm, bannocks,' he said, 'they smell grand!'

He picked up one of the bannocks and snapped it in two and started to eat it. The other wee bannock sat up, rubbed its eyes in horror as it saw its friend being eaten, and then it jumped down onto the floor and ran out of the house as fast as its wee bannock legs would carry it. The old woman ran after it, still carrying the spindle and distaff in her hand, but she was an old woman and it was a very young bannock and it soon disappeared out of sight.

It ran and it ran until it saw a fine house with a thatched roof and it ran through the door and headed for the fireplace. In the room were three tailors, who were sitting crossed legged on a big table, but as soon as they saw the wee bannock they gave a scream of terror and ran and hid behind the tailor's wife, like chicks behind a mother hen.

'Och, you bunch of scardy-cats,' said the tailor's wife, 'it's only a wee bannock come to warm its wee nose by our fireside. Quick, catch it and we can have it along with a glass of milk.'

The tailor and his two apprentices tried to catch the wee bannock, but it was too fast for them. The tailor threw an iron at it, while his wife, who had been carding flax, threw her cards at it, but they both missed. The one apprentice tried to hit it with his lap-board while the other one ran after it with his shears, going Snip! Snip! Snip! trying to cut the wee bannock into two. But the wee bannock ran outside and was away.

By the side of the road stood a wee house, and the bannock ran in there to hide. There sat a weaver at his loom, weaving cloth, while his wife was winding a hank of yarn.

'Tibby, my love,' said the weaver, 'what was that?'

'Why Willie, my dear,' said his wife, 'it's a fine wee bannock.'

'Then be quick, and grab it,' said the weaver, 'for that porridge we had for breakfast was very thin and watery.'

The woman threw her hank of wool at the bannock, while the weaver lunged at it, but it was too fast for them. It was out the door and over the hill like a freshly tarred sheep!

It ran into another house where a woman was standing churning cream into butter. She smiled when she saw it enter and said: 'Come away in, wee bannock! I have some cream left over and you'll be very tasty mixed with that.' She chased the wee bannock around and around the churn, until she nearly knocked the churn over and only just managed to steady it to stop it from falling. By the time she had saved the churn she was just able to see its wee bannock backside disappearing through the door.

Down the hillside the wee bannock ran until it saw a mill and ran inside. The miller saw the wee bannock come puffing through the door, and he smiled a big smile.

'My, what a great country this is,' said the miller, 'that there is so much food that wee bannocks are running around wild. Why don't you come here while I introduce you to my friend, Mr Cheese! I am very fond of cheese and bannocks, and will be happy to give you a nice, warm place to spend the night.' As he spoke, he rubbed his big belly and licked his lips. The wee bannock knew that cheese was a dangerous thing to be around, and he didn't trust the miller, so he turned tail and ran out of the mill and away.

The next place that the wee bannock came to was a smiddy, and there inside was a huge blacksmith standing by his anvil hammering away at some iron to make it into horseshoe nails. The forge was burning brightly alongside of him, so the wee bannock toddled towards it for a warm. They seem to like the fireside, wee bannocks, maybe it's because that are made over a fire, or maybe they are related to cats. Anyway, the blacksmith laughed when he saw the wee bannock, and he picked up an iron rod and put it into the forge and pumped the bellows until the sparks flew and the fire blazed. 'I'll heat this rod until its red hot and then thrust it into a cog of strong ale to heat it up and make it tasty. Then I'll toast you over the forge and eat you up with the ale.'

The poor wee bannock was frightened by the blacksmith, and he knew that ale was as dangerous to a wee bannock as cheese was, so he ran towards the door. The blacksmith picked up his heavy hammer and threw it at the wee bannock, but it ducked out of the way and escaped.

On and on the wee bannock ran until it reached a farmhouse that had a large stack of peats by the end of it. It ran in and up to the fire to warm its wee toes and nose. By the fire a man was busy beating lint on the floor with an iron bar while his wife was combing the flax that had been split by her husband.

'Look, Janet,' said the man, 'a wee bannock! I'll have half of it.'

'And I'll have the other half,' said his wife, 'hurry up John, and hit it over the back with the rod.'

The man swung the iron rod at the wee bannock, while his wife threw her flax comb at it, but it was too quick for either of them. They chased it around and around the room, but the wee bannock ducked and weaved around them. Why, if only they could have taught that wee bannock to play rugby then Scotland would never lose a match again! It slipped between the man's legs, was out the door and away. It ran up a stream to the next house, where a woman was stirring a porridge pot with a stick.

'Jock! Jock!' she shouted to her husband, 'You're always crying that you would like a wee bannock, well, one has just walked through the door! Come here and help me to catch it.'

Jock came lumbering into the room and they both tried to grab the wee bannock, but it was far too clever for them. The woman threw her porridge stick at the wee bannock, while the man tried to catch it with the rope that he had been plaiting from rushes, but he didn't know how to make a lasso, and so after leading them a merry dance the wee bannock slipped out of the door and away into the evening.

The next house that the wee bannock came to was up on the hillside. It ran through the door and right up to the fire where the woman of the house was dishing up the supper porridge with a big spoon.

'Well, well! Will you look at that; a wee bannock is warming itself by our fire.'

'Quick,' said her husband, 'bar the door. We'll have that wee bannock to eat after our porridge. There is never enough to eat around here.'

As soon as the wee bannock heard that it was off through the house, being chased by the man and his wife, both with spoons in their hand. The man threw his bonnet at the wee bannock, but despite its size it was as fast on its feet as a pancake and the bonnet skimmed over the top of its head and landed on the floor in front of it. The wee bannock jumped over the bonnet and was out the door in a flash. By the time it reached the next house the sun was setting, and the old man and the old woman were getting ready to go to bed. The old man had just taken off his trousers and was standing by the bed in his long, woolly drawers, when the wee bannock ran past him. 'What was that?' he asked his wife.

'Why, it's a wee bannock,' she replied.

'I could do with a bite of that bannock,' the old man said, 'for the supper porridge tonight wouldn't have stuck much flesh to my ribs.'

Catch it,' cried the old woman, 'for I could do with a piece of it too.'

The two of them scrambled around after it, but it was too fast for them.

'Throw your trousers over it,' shouted the old woman. The old man grabbed his trousers and threw them over the top of the wee bannock. The wee bannock lay there on the floor, almost smothered by the old man's trousers. They smelt of old string and Pan Drops mint sweeties, but eventually the wee bannock struggled free and ran out of the door and into the night. The old man ran after it too, but after a while he gave up and had the embarrassment of walking home wearing just his long woolly drawers and matching woolly simmet.

By this time it was getting dark, and the wee bannock thought that it would have to find a safe place to sleep for the night. There was a big clump of whin bushes up ahead, so the wee bannock slipped into them to find a soft spot to rest. There, under the whin bushes, was a big hole, so the wee bannock went inside to see what was there. Mr Fox sat and watched the wee bannock as it walked towards him; for this was the fox's home. He hadn't eaten for two days and he was very hungry. He smiled, a big, toothy smile, and said, 'Welcome, welcome!' and then with one snap of his sharp teeth he bit the wee bannock in two; and that was the end of the wee bannock.

Tom Muir, Orkney

RASHIE COAT



There was once a king who had a bonny daughter who was called Rashie Coat. When Rashie Coat had grown up to be a young woman her father called her to see him and told her that it was about time that she got married, and that he had chosen a husband for her. Being a princess meant that she couldn't marry for love but had to marry a prince whose kingdom would be bound to her father's own kingdom with bonds of kinship. When Rashie Coat was told that she was to be married to a stranger, and was shown a small portrait of him, she recoiled in horror. Not only was he rather ugly, but he had a bad reputation for being mean and cruel. She refused to marry him, but the king said that she had no say in the matter, and she went off weeping.

Rashie Coat slipped out of the castle and went to see the hen-wife, who it was said knew magic and was very wise. When she went into the small, tumbled-down cottage she told the hen-wife about her proposed marriage to a man that she did not love. The hen-wife looked serious, thought for a while and then said, 'Tell your father, the king, that you'll only marry that man if you are given a coat that is made of beaten gold.'

So, Rashie Coat went back to the king and told him that she would only marry that man if she was given a coat that was made of beaten gold, and the king agreed. After a few days Rashie Coat was called to see the king, who gave her a coat made of beaten gold. It shone like the sun and was so finely made that it moved like it was silk. But still Rashie Coat didn't want to marry the man that had been chosen for her.

Rashie Coat went back to the hen-wife and told her that the coat of beaten gold was now hanging in her wardrobe, but she still didn't want to marry that horrible man. The old hen-wife thought for a while and said: 'Tell your father, the king, that you'll only marry that man if you are given a coat that is made from the feathers of all the birds of the air.'

So Rashie Coat went back to the king and told him that she would only marry that man if she was given a coat that was made from the feathers of all the birds of the air, and the king agreed. The king sent out his messengers with sacks of corn, which they poured onto the ground. Then, after blowing a fanfare on the horn, the royal messenger read out this proclamation: 'Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! Every bird of the air is ordered by the king to give one of their feathers in return for one grain of corn. One feather for one grain of corn.'

The air whirred with the sound of birds' wings, as thousands and thousands of birds flew to the centre of the town and plucked out one of their feathers and placed it on the ground, then they picked up a grain of corn in their beaks and flew away. Soon there was a heap of feathers from every bird of the air and the court tailor was given the task of making them into a coat. The king called Rashie Coat to see him and gave her the coat made from the feathers of every bird of the air. But still Rashie Coat didn't want to marry the man that had been chosen for her.

Rashie Coat went back to the hen-wife and told her that the coat made from the feathers of all the birds of the air was hanging in her wardrobe, but she still didn't want to marry that horrible man. The hen-wife thought long and hard for a while, then said, 'Tell your father, the king, that you'll only marry that man if you are given a coat and a pair of slippers that is made from woven rushes.'

So, once again Rashie Coat went to the king and told him that she would only marry that man if she was given a coat and slippers that was made from woven rushes, and the king agreed. He sent his servants to pull rushes, clean them, polish them and weave them into a fine coat and a pair of dainty little slippers. The king called Rashie Coat to see him and he gave her the coat and slippers made from rushes. But still Rashie Coat didn't want to marry the man that had been chosen for her.

Rashie Coat went back to the hen-wife and told her that the coat and slippers made from the woven rushes were hanging in her wardrobe, but she still didn't want to marry that horrible man. The old hen-wife looked sadly at Rashie Coat and then shook her head, saying, 'I'm sorry my dear, but I can't help you anymore.'

So, Rashie Coat returned to the castle and put her three coats and the slippers into a sack and then slipped out of her father's castle and ran away. She walked and walked, mile after mile, far, far away

from her father's castle and from his kingdom. On and on she went, for such a long time. Eventually she saw another castle and she went up to it and knocked on the door.

'What do you want?' snapped a voice from inside.

'I am just a poor girl looking for work,' said Rashie Coat.

'Well,' said the voice, a bit kinder now, 'I think they need a helper in the kitchen. Come in.'

Rashie coat was taken to the kitchen and set to work, peeling vegetables and sweeping the floor. When it was the Sabbath Day the king, his son, the noblemen, knights and all the servants went to the kirk, leaving Rashie Coat behind to cook the dinner ready for their return. As she sat sadly by the fire there was a brilliant flash of golden light and a fairy appeared before her.

'Greetings, Rashie Coat. Why are you sitting by the fire when everyone else is at the Kirk?'

'Oh, I have to cook the dinner,' said Rashie Coat.

'Nonsense,' said the fairy, 'put on your coat made of beaten gold and go to the kirk as well.'

'But what about the dinner?'

'I'll look after the dinner for you,' said the fairy, 'and when you get back it will all be ready for you to eat.'

Now, maybe Rashie Coat had learnt a bit of magic from the hen-wife, but she stood over the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and spoke this rhyme:

*'One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashie Coat go to the kirk today.'*

Rashie Coat ran to her sack and brought out the coat that was made from beaten gold and she put it on and went to the kirk. When she walked through the door of the kirk dressed in her fine golden coat everyone turned their heads and stared at her. The prince stared harder than anyone else, because Rashie Coat was such a beautiful girl, and his heart melted when he saw her. But she slipped away quietly before the sermon ended, and the prince didn't see her again. When she got home the fairy was as good as her word and the dinner was ready. All the talk in the kitchen that evening was about the beautiful girl who had been seen in the kirk that day. Rashie Coat smiled to herself but said nothing. No one knew that she had ever left the castle.

The next Sabbath Day saw great excitement in the castle; would the beautiful girl be back at the kirk today? Everyone left, leaving Rashie Coat behind to cook the dinner for their return. The fairy appeared, just the same as the previous week, telling Rashie Coat to put on her coat made of feathers from all the birds of the air and go to the kirk. Rashie Coat ran to her sack and put on the coat of feathers. She stood over the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and said:

*'One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashie Coat go to the kirk today.'*

When Rashie Coat entered the kirk wearing her coat that was made from the feathers of every bird of the air the crowd gave a gasp of wonder. The prince gasped louder than any of them, and his love for this strange girl grew deeper and deeper. He seldom took his eyes off her throughout the whole sermon, and he was determined to speak to her before she left. But the prince was too slow, for before the sermon ended Rashie Coat got to her feet and ran out of the door, followed by the prince. But by the time the prince reached the door she was gone.

The next Sabbath Day saw even more excitement than ever, and the prince was in such a hurry to go to the kirk that he paced the floor until the king and queen were ready to leave. The same thing happened this Sabbath Day as the previous two; the fairy came to Rashie Coat and told her to dress in her coat made of woven rushes and to put the small, dainty slippers on her feet. Rashie Coat stood over the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and said:

*'One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashie Coat go to the kirk today.'*

When Rashie Coat entered the kirk wearing the coat and slippers of rushes there was a cry of astonishment from all the crowd who were gathered within. The prince cried out louder than the rest, as she seemed even more beautiful every time that he saw her. The green rushes made her look like summertime was walking among them, and some thought that she must be the queen of the fairies herself. The prince sat near to the door and watched his chance, and as soon as Rashie Coat stood up to leave he ran after her. Rashie Coat ran too, but as she ran one of the tiny, dainty slippers slipped off her foot and was left behind. The prince couldn't catch her, but he saw the slipper lying there and he picked it up and examined it carefully. He had never seen such a small slipper, so beautifully made, for such a tiny and beautiful foot.

Back at the castle there was such a buzz of excitement in the air as the prince held up the slipper and decreed, 'Whoever this slipper fits I will marry!'

All the noble ladies tried it on, but it was far too small for them. Then the ladies-in-waiting tried, but without any luck. The proclamation was read throughout the kingdom, that the prince would marry the girl whose foot fitted the slipper. Rich merchants sent their daughters; farmers, craftsmen, servants and labourers all sent their daughters, but they all had to return home disappointed.

Now this kingdom had a hen-wife too, who tended the king's hens and practiced a bit of witchcraft on the side. She had a daughter, who was very ugly, and had big horrible looking feet. This girl nipped off her heel and clipped off her toes so that her foot was small enough to fit the slipper. The prince had ridden throughout the kingdom with the slipper, letting every girl try it on, but without any luck.

He now arrived at the hen-wife's house and he stood and watched in horror as the hen-wife's daughter quickly tried on the slipper and it fitted. In the darkness of their small tumbled-down cottage he never

saw the awful sight of that foot. But, he had made a promise to marry the girl whose foot fitted the slipper and so he took the hen-wife's daughter up behind him on his horse and he rode home with her.

As they were passing a wood the prince could hear a bird singing, and to his surprise he could understand its speech. It was singing this rhyme:

*'Nipped foot and clipped foot
Behind the King's son rides;
But bonny foot and true foot
Behind the cauldron hides.'*

The king's son stopped and looked at the hen-wife's daughter's foot, and when he saw the mess that it was in, he threw her off his horse and rode back to the castle as fast as he could. He ran down the stairs and burst into the kitchen and headed over to the big cauldron, and there he saw Rashie Coat.

He held the slipper out to her, and she smiled and slipped it onto her tiny, beautiful foot. Then she took the matching slipper and put that one on too. The prince took her in his arms and asked her to marry him, and this time Rashie Coat had no problems about saying yes.

They were married soon after and lived long and happily together, and never drank from a dry cup.

Tom Muir, Orkney

WHUPPITY STOORIE



The wee cottage of Kittlerumpit stood on the slope of a brae and was sheltered by a fir-wood that lay behind it. The Goodwife of Kittlerumpit didn't have far to look for troubles and sorrow. Her husband had been a useless, lazy and unfaithful scoundrel who had got up one fine morning, said that he was just popping out to go to the fair, kissed his wife goodbye, and was never seen again. He left her there as poor as a church mouse and with a baby boy to look after. Her neighbours felt sorry for her, but not one of them ever offered to help her in her struggle to survive. Life could not get any worse than it was, or so she thought.

One day she got up and went out to the sty to feed the pig. It was a sow, which was due to have a litter of piglets at any time, and these piglets could be sold and would raise enough money to keep her and her baby in food for a while. Her whole future depended on this one animal. When she arrived at the sty she poured the slops into the pig's trough, but there was no sign of the pig. She looked around and saw to her horror that the pig was lying on its back with its legs in the air, making a pitifully feeble grunting sound. The pig was dying. The goodwife sat down on the old knocking stone with her baby

boy on her knee and she wept bitter tears for the loss of the pig and the piglets that it was carrying. She cried and she cried, and she better cried, as she saw nothing but a terrible fate for her and her baby.

Suddenly, the goodwife saw someone coming striding up the brae at a great speed. It was an old woman all dressed in green, apart from a white apron, a black velvet hood and a tall black hat on her head, like Welsh ladies used to wear, and she had a long staff in her hand. The old woman walked over to the goodwife of Kittlerumpit, who stood up, wiped away the tears and made a small curtsy to the stranger.

'Good morning to you,' said the goodwife, 'though you see before you the most miserable woman who ever walked the earth.'

'Save your sob story,' snapped the old woman, 'for I know all about your husband abandoning you and your dying pig.'

The goodwife was rather shocked by the old woman's unfeeling attitude, as well as her knowledge about her situation.

'I can make your pig better again,' said the old woman, 'but what will you give me in return?'

'Anything,' said the goodwife, foolishly, 'I'll give you anything that I have if you can make my pig better.'

'Then it's a deal,' shrieked the old woman, 'let's wet thumbs on it!'

So, the goodwife licked her thumb and so did the old woman and they pressed them together and the deal was sealed and binding. The old woman went over to the pig and looked at her lying there, and then she took out a small bottle of oil and poured some of it into her fingers and she rubbed the oil above the pig's snout, behind its ears and above its tail and then she muttered something that sounded like:

*'Pitter patter,
Haly watter.'*

Then the old woman said, 'Get up pig!'

To the great joy and delight of the goodwife the pig stood up, grunted happily and then waddled over to the trough and began to eat. The goodwife of Kittlerumpit was as happy as a lark, and turned to the old woman and said, 'Now that you've cured my poor pig I am ready to carry out my part of the bargain. I don't have very much, but you have saved us from hunger, so name your price.'

The old woman looked at the goodwife and smiled an evil smile.

'I always like to help out where I am needed, but I'm not a greedy person, so I'll only ask a small price from you.'

'Name it and it's yours,' said the goodwife. The old woman pointed at the baby boy that the woman was carrying in her arms and said, 'I'll take that wee son of yours. That is my price.'

The goodwife's face went as white as a swan's wing, and she let out a scream, as she clutched the child to her breast.

'No, please, have mercy!' begged the goodwife of Kittlerumpit, 'don't take my wee boy.'

The tears ran down her cheeks as the awful truth dawned on her. This old woman was a fairy, and a bad fairy at that. She begged and she pleaded, but the old fairy woman was unmoved.

'Quit your wailing woman,' she snapped, 'for I don't care a hoot about your suffering. But, by the laws of my land, I have to make you this offer. I will come for your wee son in three days, but if you can tell me what my name is when I come back, then the child is yours to keep.'

The old woman turned on her heels and set off down the brae again and out of sight.

What could the poor woman do? How could she get out of the terrible bargain that she had made? She didn't sleep much that night, and the next day she decided to take the wee boy out for a walk in the fir-woods, to clear her head and to spend some time with her baby boy, for she wouldn't have many days left to enjoy his company.

The cool, greenness of the fir-woods was soothing to the goodwife, and the sunlight filtering through the trees almost made her forget her sorrows. Deep in the woods was an old abandoned quarry where long ago people had levered up big slabs of stone with which to make their houses. It was deep, and was now overgrown with moss and ferns, and right in the middle of it was a clear, clean, fresh water spring.

As the Goodwife of Kittlerumpit drew near to this quarry she could hear a voice singing something strange, and the whir of a spinning-wheel. She carefully placed the sleeping baby in a clump of ferns, and she crawled on her belly to the edge of the quarry and looked in. There sat the old fairy woman, dressed in green, and she was spinning and singing this rhyme repeatedly:

*'Little kens our goodwife at hame,
That WHUPPITY STOORIE is my name,'*

The goodwife was overjoyed; she now knew the fairy's name. She crept back to where her baby was lying sleeping and she set off home. Now the goodwife thought that this old fairy needed to be taught some manners, and she decided to have a bit of fun with her.

On the appointed day the goodwife set the baby behind the knocking stone, and she sat down on it to wait for the old fairy woman. She pulled her bonnet down over her left ear, and she screwed her mouth up under her right ear and she pretended to weep and to wail, like a newly injured cat. The old fairy woman came striding up, her mouth twisted into an evil grin. 'I've come for your baby son,' she screeched, 'hand him over. There's no point wasting my time with your wailing.'

The woman fell to her knees and begged the old fairy woman. 'Spare me my child! Take the pig instead.' 'Do you think that I came here for a slice of pork?' said the old woman. 'The devil takes your pig, lady!' 'Then spare the child and take me instead.'

'You,' the old fairy screeched, 'what would I want you for? You have a face like the far end of a fiddle and a voice like one too, if it's played badly!'

Now, the goodwife of Kittlerumpit was no great beauty; she had rather bleary eyes and a long, pointed nose that erupted from her red face, but she thought herself to be not that bad looking, and the fairy had insulted her for the last time. She fixed the fairy in the eyes with a cold, angry stare, and then she stood up and stretched herself to her full height.

She straightened the bonnet on her head, made a sarcastic bobbing curtsey and in an angry voice said, 'I might have known that the likes of me would not be good enough to tie the shoe laces of the high and mighty fairy, WHUPPITY STOORIE!'

When the old fairy woman heard her name being uttered, she screamed a loud, piercing scream, like a pig with its tail caught in a barn door, and she jumped a great height into the air. Down she came with a thump, and then she spun around on her heels and ran off down the brae like a hare with a hound after it.

The goodwife picked up her wee boy and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks at the sight of the old fairy running away like her backside was on fire. Then she walked back to the house, jogging her baby boy in her arms and singing:

*'Coo and gurgle, my bonny wee tyke,
You'll now have your four-houries.
Since we've gien Nick a bone to pick,
With his wheels and his WHUPPITY STOORIES.'*

Tom Muir, Orkney

AULD CROOVIE



There was once a young man called Jack who worked as a shepherd for a wicked and greedy laird who lived in a fine castle on top of a hill. While Jack was only paid a few copper coins every year for his services, he was a happy young man, and he loved to lead an outdoor life protecting his flock from the foxes and wild dogs who roamed the countryside. What money he had he shared with his old mother, who was a very industrious woman who knitted jumpers and sock made from the bits of wool that Jack gathered from the fields and picked from the bushes around where the flock grazed. She would wash and card these bits of wool and spin it into thread and then she made dye from plants in order to knit the brightly coloured garment that she sold at the market.

Jack loved nature, and he treated every living thing with kindness, except for the foxes and wild dogs that he chased away from the sheep. But there was one place that Jack loved more than any other, and that was a great ring of old oak trees that grew on top of a hill. From that hill he could see the river than ran through the meadows and the greedy laird's big castle on the hill opposite. He would sit there for hours at a time, listening to the little birds that lived among the branches of the trees as they twittered and sang to each other.

So long had Jack listened to those birds that he became accustomed to their language and he was able to talk to them. He lived mostly among the great oak trees, as he was hardly ever able to leave his flock and go home to the wee cottage that his mother rented from the greedy laird. His mother would call on him every day and give him a bite to eat, and sometimes she would bring him a thick woollen jumper or socks to keep him warm in the winter. When the wind blew Jack would shelter under the great trees, and despite his poverty he was happy enough.

One bright summer's day Jack noticed a great commotion among the little birds who lived in the branches of the trees. They were urging their young fledglings to get up out of their nests and to fly off for the day.

Jack called to them, asking, 'What is going on with you birds today? Why are you all flying away?'

'Why, it's Midsummer's Day, Jack,' said one of the little birds, 'and tonight is the night that the trees dance, so we must go and find another home for the night. We will be back tomorrow though, to sleep among the branches as usual.'

Jack scratched his head and looked puzzled.

'What do you mean, the trees dance?'

'Tonight the trees will pull up their roots and go to dance between the hill and the river,' said the bird, 'for this huge tree is King Oak, and his name is Auld Croovie, and the other trees are his royal attendants. After they have danced, they will go into the woods where the young trees grow, and they will take the young maiden trees in their strong branches and they will mate with them.'

'Well, I never,' said Jack.

The thought of seeing these mighty oaks dancing filled Jack with wonderment and excitement, and he decided that he would hide himself and watch them in secret. But the birds' commotion had not gone unnoticed in the castle either, for the greedy laird had seen it and was curious to know what was going on. He knew that Jack could understand the birds' language, so he set off to find him.

When he found Jack he said, 'Hello there Jack.'

'Why, hello Sir.'

'Tell me,' said the greedy laird, pointing at the birds, 'what has got into those birds today?'

'Well, Sir,' said Jack, 'they say that tonight the great oak trees will walk from their hilltop and dance by the river.'

'Is that so?' said the greedy laird.

'Yes, Sir, and I intend to hide myself here and watch it.'

'Well, you now Jack, I think I'd like to see that myself,' said the laird. 'I'll join you here tonight.'

Now the greedy laird was a lot older than Jack, and he had heard a lot more stories than Jack had, so he knew that that Auld Croovie and his followers only walked once every fifty years. He had an evil plan, but Jack was kept in the dark about what he intended to do.

Later than evening Jack's mother paid him a visit.

'I know that something is going on tonight, Jack,' she said, 'and I know that there is danger in the air for you. So, I have made you this to protect you.'

She handed Jack a rope made from knitted wool. It had ten great loops in it and was very strong.

'Put this rope in your pocket, for your life may depend on it. You see, I remember my old mother telling me stories about these great oaks here, and that they can dance at certain times, and I have the strangest feeling that tonight is going to be the night. It is said that these trees stand on top of a great treasure, and if you can go and jump into their birth-spot, where their acorn first sprouted, you can gather some of the gems that they possess. But I must warn you Jack, don't be too greedy, for these trees will know if you take too much, but if you take only a few gems then they will overlook it. Take too many and they will pound you into mince!'

So Jack took the woollen rope and thanked his mother for her help and advice, promising to try to get something from the treasure pit to help them out of their poverty.

Next there came the young lass who worked as a skivvy at the castle. She was a bonny girl, all apple red cheeks and smiles, and she loved Jack. She had been listening to the laird, and his talk had filled her with dread.

'Jack,' she said, 'that old hungry-gutted laird is up to no good tonight. I heard him say that he was coming down to see you, but I don't like the way that he was talking. You know that he is on close terms with the devil, and he would stick a dagger between your ribs without the slightest care. You just watch him close, my darling Jack.'

Jack thanked the lass and promised that he would be on his guard.

That night Jack hid himself in a spot where he could watch the great oak trees. His heart was beating hard in his breast as the night grew darker and the moon started to rise in the sky. Suddenly, he noticed someone standing beside him; it was the greedy laird. He gave Jack a cold, hard stare, and Jack saw in the moonlight that the greedy laird had a large dagger strapped to his belt.

Then it started to happen. As the moonlight grew brighter and brighter Jack saw the largest of the trees starting to sway. A strange music seemed to fill the air; a mysterious, enchanting melody that held Jack spellbound. Auld Croovie stretched his mighty trunk upwards and with a creaking sound he started to pull up his roots from out of the ground. The massive roots tore a large hole in the earth as the mighty tree began to walk slowly down the hill, followed by his attendants. Then, when they were beside the river, they started to sway and dance, slowly at first, but getting faster and faster until they were dancing a jig. Jack stood there, rooted to the spot, as if he was a tree himself. Suddenly, he remembered what he was to do, and he became aware that the greedy laird was talking to him.

'If you take so much as a gem from Auld Croovie's treasure, I'll gut you like a fish!'

Jack remembered that dagger, and he thought it wise not to argue with the greedy laird. He followed the laird up the hill to where the trees had been standing, and each one had left a large hole in the ground. When Jack looked into the holes, he saw that they were all filled with gold and silver and with precious gems that were all the colours of the rainbow. The greatest treasure of all was in the largest hole, and that was the birth-spot of Auld Croovie. The greedy laird jumped down into Auld Croovie's birth-spot and started to gather up all the treasure into a large sack. Jack jumped into a smaller hole and gathered up a few of the jewels, but to his horror he found the hole was sinking deeper and deeper into the ground, until it was so deep that he could not reach the top.

He remembered about the rope that his mother had given him, but it was too late to tie it to anything on the surface now. He was stuck! Suddenly, he saw a face peering down at him from the top of the hole. Although it was dark the moon was so bright that he recognised the apple red cheeks and smile. 'Are you down there, Jack?' whispered the skivvy lass.

'Yes, I'm here,' he replied. 'Here, catch the end of this rope and fasten it to something solid up there.'

The skivvy lass tied the rope around a large stone and Jack climbed out of the hole. He kissed the skivvy lass and thanked her for saving his life. Then they went over to Auld Croovie's hole, where the greedy laird was still filling the large sack. He was so obsessed with stealing Auld Croovie's treasure that he seemed unaware that the hole in which he stood had sunk down so far into the ground that Jack could hardly see him anymore. Jack lowered the woollen rope down to him, but the hole was now so deep that it didn't reach.

Jack tried to warn him, saying, 'The trees have finished their dancing and their mating, and they are heading back to their birth-spots again, with Auld Croovie leading the way.'

But the laird was frantically scooping up gems and he paid no heed.

'Sir,' said Jack, 'Auld Croovie is almost on you! Quick, get out of there.'

But the laird ignored Jack and carried on scooping up the treasure into his sack, which was by this time was far too heavy for him to carry anyway. Jack and the skivvy lass fled from the hilltop before the trees saw them, and they hid to watch what would happen next. The laird was still in Auld Croovie's birth-spot when the king of the oaks returned to the hole. He slid into his birth-spot; his roots thrusting their way into the ground and then the earth closed over the top of them leaving not a sign that it had ever been disturbed. And that was the last that anyone ever saw of the greedy laird.

Now Jack hadn't carried away a fortune, but he had a few gems that he sold and was able to live comfortably after that. He bought a wee cottage for his mother, which was a mansion compared to the one that she had rented from the greedy laird, and she spent the rest of her days there in happiness. The castle and all the greedy laird's land was inherited by his nephew, who was a good and kind man. He gave Jack the job of looking after all his estate, and he paid him well for his work. Jack married the wee skivvy lass who had saved his life, and their days were many and merry.

So remember, if you take something from nature, always give something back in return. Only take what you need, and don't be too greedy like the laird was, or one of these days you might get a visit from Auld Croovie and his attendants, and I'm sure that you wouldn't want that.

Tom Muir, Orkney

THE SELKIE HUNTER



The Pentland Firth is a wild and unforgiving stretch of water. It lies between the North Highland county of Caithness and the Orkney Islands, and each day sees the cold grey waters of the North Sea do battle against the might of the Atlantic Ocean as the two tides meet in the Firth. Whirlpools, powerful enough to sink ships or to draw them towards the rocks, form as these waters meet. It is not a place that you can make an easy living, but many generations of fishermen had to do just that.

A long, long time ago there was a man whose small cottage lay by the shores of the Pentland Firth, not far from where John O' Groats House now stands. He had a wife and bairns who depended on him and he had to reap a cold and dangerous harvest from these treacherous waters. He fished and he set creels to catch lobsters and crabs and he gathered shellfish in times of hunger to keep his family fed. He was also a selkie hunter (as seals are called in the north), and the skins that he stripped from these animals could fetch a good price at market. People treated the selkies with caution and respect, because it was believed that they had the power to take off their skins and become human at certain times of the tide. Some said that they were the souls of people who had drowned, and they would not harm them, but

the selkie hunter just laughed at these 'old wives tales' and ignored the warnings of his neighbours. One fine morning the selkie hunter went down to the rocks where the selkies liked to lie and bask in the sunshine. He saw a few selkies lying there, including a big bull selkie with a lovely silvery grey coloured coat. The selkie hunter thought that this skin would bring him a lot of money, so he decided that he would use all his skill to kill him. He lay down on his belly and slowly crawled along the rocks. The selkies were quietly dozing in the warmth of the morning sun and they never saw him coming. The man got closer and closer to the big bull selkie, and he slipped his big knife from the sheath that was fastened to his belt. He was almost right up at the animal when it heard him coming, and it turned its huge body to jump back into the water. The hunter thrust his knife into the selkie as hard as he could, and it cried out as the blade ripped into its side. Then, with a loud splash, the selkie escaped into the sea; the water was dyed red with its blood as it slowly swam away from the shore.

The selkie hunter returned home with a heavy heart, for not only had he lost the big selkie but he had lost his knife too. It was still sticking in the great wound that he had inflicted in the side of the beast. But he thought that maybe he would see his knife again, as the wound was so deep that it would surely cost the animal its life. Then the sea might be kind for once and cast the body of the selkie ashore with the knife still in it, and he would get that fine, silvery grey skin after all.

Later that day, as the evening was closing in and the sun hung low in the sky, there was a loud knock at the selkie hunter's door. He opened it to find a stranger standing before him. He was tall, and well dressed, and had large brown eyes whose expression betrayed a great sadness.

'I hear that you are a selkie hunter?' said the stranger.

'Yes, I am, and what of it?'

'I have a business proposition for you,' said the stranger. 'I have a customer who is interested in buying your selkie skins, but he is in a great hurry for them, so you must come with me if you are interested. He insists that the deal must be struck this very evening.'

The selkie hunter stared at the stranger, but eventually said, 'Alright then; I'll just get my coat and I'll come with you.'

When the selkie hunter left his house, he saw that the man had a large horse that he had ridden on. The stranger told the selkie hunter to get up on the horse and to sit behind him and they would soon be there. The man did as he was told, and the stranger shook the reins and the horse set off at a gallop. They ran past the houses that clung to the edge of the coast and away at a terrific speed. The hunter held on tight to the stranger, until eventually the horse slowed down and stopped. The stranger turned around to the hunter and said, 'Here we are. You can get off the horse now.'

The hunter clambered down from the back of the great horse, but to his amazement there was no one there but the two of them. They stood at the top of a high cliff, and the stranger pointed towards the edge and said, 'Look down there.'

The selkie hunter stepped towards the edge and peered over to see what it was that the stranger was pointing at; but he could see nothing. The cold, grey sea churned below them, but there was no sign of a ship or land or anything, just the deep, cold sea. Suddenly, the hunter felt two strong arms grasped him as the stranger leant forward and pushed him over the edge of the cliff.

They fell, the stranger still holding him firmly in his grasp as the air rushed past them. The selkie hunter was terrified; he was sure that he was going to die. The two of them plunged deep into the water, which closed over their heads far above them. The hunter tried to struggle, panicking as he expected the water to choke him at any moment, but to his amazement he found himself able to breathe as easily as if he had been on land. Down and down they went, every bit as fast as when they had fallen from the cliff top, down to the bottom of the sea. The selkie hunter saw a great door appear from out of the depths and it opened to allow them to enter a great hall.

There inside, the terrified hunter saw that it was full of selkies, all weeping and sorrowing like the end of the world had come. The hunter turned to the stranger to ask him what all this meant, but to his horror he no longer saw a tall handsome stranger, but a selkie staring back at him. He walked forward, through the great hall and past all the grieving selkies, and he knew that these must be the selkie folk that he had heard of in the old stories. He turned his head and saw that there was a large mirror hanging on the wall, but it wasn't his own reflection that looked back at him, but the face of a selkie. He looked at his hands, but they were gone; in their place was a pair of flippers with long nails. This was almost too much for the poor man to bear, but the stranger patted him on the shoulder, as if to comfort the poor man. All the selkie folk had such sad eyes, but there was compassion in them for the poor man who stood transformed amongst them.

Then the stranger stepped forward and held out a great knife for the hunter to look at.

'Do you recognise this knife?'

The selkie hunter felt his blood run cold, for there before him was his lost knife. He could no longer look the selkie man in the eye, and he turned his gaze to the floor.

'Yes,' he said, in nothing more than a whisper, 'that is my knife.'

'And how did you come to lose it?' asked the selkie man.

'I lost it when I stuck it into a big bull selkie this morning,' said the selkie hunter.

The poor hunter wept, thinking that he was about to meet his end, and he begged the selkie man for mercy, but the selkie man said: 'You have no need to fear us, for we bear you no malice. That selkie that you wounded this morning was my father. I am sorry that I had to lure you here with lies, but you are the only one that can help him. You must wash and tend his wound for me.'

'But I'm not a healer,' said the hunter.

'You are healer enough to save my father,' said the selkie man.

The selkie man then led the hunter into another room where a large selkie lay with a gaping wound in his side. It was breathing heavily and was obviously in a great deal of pain. The selkie man motioned towards a basin, and the selkie hunter washed the wound.

'Push the two sides of the wound together,' said the selkie man, and the hunter did as he was instructed.

As soon as his hands pushed the wound together the two sides seemed to melt into each other, and the wound was healed. The old selkie sat up, without the slightest pain or sign of injury. The rejoicing in the hall was great, as the selkie folk rushed towards him to hug him. Everyone was overjoyed; everyone that is except the selkie hunter.

He stood in the corner of the room and thought that this must be his punishment for killing so many selkies; to be stranded here beneath the waves in the form of a selkie until his dying day. Never more would he see his wife and bairns or his friends. The selkie man came over to him and said, 'Thank you, for the kind act that you have done here this night. I shall return you now to your own home and family, but first I want you to make me a solemn vow. You must swear an oath that you will never injure or kill another selkie for the rest of your days. Will you do that for me?'

'Why, yes,' said the hunter, 'I would gladly do that in order to return to my own wife and bairns.'

So, the hunter made his vow and after that the selkie man led him out of the hall and took him back up through the sea and they broke the surface of the water right beneath the cliff where they had fallen from. Then, to the hunter's astonishment, they shot out of the sea like an arrow and landed right at the top of the cliff where the selkie man's horse was still waiting patiently. The hunter was scared, because he was still in the form of a selkie, and how could he return home like that? But the selkie man leant forward and breathed on him, and as his warm breath swept over the hunter, he saw that the selkie skin faded away and he was back to his usual appearance. The selkie man's own skin had also disappeared, and he was once more the handsome stranger that had first appeared at the hunter's door. They both mounted the horse and rode back to the hunter's house at great speed.

As the selkie hunter clambered off the horse by his own door the selkie man said to him, 'Now remember your vow. You must never injure or kill another selkie for as long as you will live.'

The selkie hunter remembered the vow alright, and his heart grew heavy at the thought of it. It wasn't that he enjoyed killing selkies, but how else was he going to make any money to feed his family?

'Yes,' he said, 'I remember my vow, and I'm a man of honour, so I will be faithful to it.'

'Good man,' said the selkie with a smile. 'Here; take this. Never let it be said that the selkie folk ever deprived an honest man of his livelihood without paying him any compensation.'

He handed the selkie hunter a large bag of gold coins; more than enough to keep him and his family in comfort for the rest of their days. Then the selkie man turned his horse and galloped off into the gathering darkness and was never seen again.

The selkie hunter was as good as his word and he never injured or killed another selkie for as long as he lived. He would sometimes sit down by the shore and watch the selkies swimming or basking in the sunshine, and he never again laughed at the 'old wives tales' about the selkie folk who could take off their skins and dance in the moonlight.

Tom Muir, Orkney

ASSIPATTLE AND THE STOOR WORM



There was once, a long, long time ago, a farmer who lived in a fine farm called Leegarth. It lay in a lovely green valley surrounded by hills, and a crystal-clear stream danced for joy as it ran past the house. The farmer was not a wealthy man, and he and his wife and seven sons worked hard to put bread on the table. Well, that's not strictly true, you see the man and his wife and the six oldest sons worked hard, but the youngest son did nothing but lie by the side of the fire raking through the ashes. His clothes were covered with ashes, and when he did venture outside the ash blew from him like smoke from a bonfire. His family called him Assipattle, the ash raker, and his mother and father would look on him with sad eyes and shake their heads, but his older brothers hated him for his laziness, and they would kick him as they went out the door to their work. But Assipattle didn't mind, because he was a dreamer and he had the heart of a poet. He told great stories in which he was the hero who killed dragons and carried off fair maidens, but this only made his brothers hate him even more.

One day a terrible thing happened – the Stoor Worm arrived at the coast of the land where Assipattle lived. This was the most evil of all the monsters that plagued mankind; a huge sea serpent that was so big that he had curled himself right around the world. Whenever he moved, he caused tidal waves and earthquakes, and his foul breath was poisonous, killing every living thing that it touched. He could sweep whole towns into his great mouth with his huge forked tongue and eat all the people that were in them just as easily as it is for us to blink an eye. What was worse, the Stoor Worm had started to yawn, which did not mean that he was tired; it meant that he was hungry and needed to be fed.

The king who lived in the great castle on top of the hill gathered together all his wisest advisers to try to find out what could be done to save the kingdom from destruction. Not one of them had any idea as to what could be done, but one of them suggested that they seek the advice of the old wizard who lived on the slopes of the mountain. The king sent his heralds to fetch the old wizard, who eventually arrived to offer the king his help. He was a very old man, yet he was still tall for his years. He wore a long robe of powder blue cloth and in his hand, he held a staff. His long hair was as white as a snowdrift,

and his beard hung down to his knees. The king asked him what should be done to save his kingdom from the destruction of the Stoor Worm, and the wizard thought for a long time, stroking his great white whiskers as he pondered the situation. He then spoke in a deep, clear voice:

'Your majesty, the Stoor Worm has grown old, and he has in his time been all around the world eating all sorts of exotic people, but now in his old age he has developed a... sweet tooth. I believe that if you were to feed him seven young maidens for his breakfast every Saturday morning, then the Stoor Worm would spare your kingdom.'

It was agreed that this should be done, and every Saturday morning seven young maidens were bound hand and foot and placed on a flat rock in front of the Stoor Worm's head. When the first rays of the morning sun touched the Stoor Worm's eyes it yawned seven great yawns, then it thrust out its long tongue and ate the first thing it touched. It picked up the seven maidens one-by-one between the forks of its tongue and popped them into its mouth like juicy sweet berries.

One Saturday morning Assipattle and his family went to see the Stoor Worm eat his terrible breakfast. The old man went grey with horror as he watched the kingdom's finest girls being eaten.

'There will soon be no more girls left in the kingdom,' he wailed, 'and who will be left to marry my sons? If they don't find wives and have children, then who will look after us in our old age?'

'Don't worry father,' said Assipattle, 'I will fight and kill the Stoor Worm.'

His brothers laughed when they heard this, and they drove him away by throwing stones and earth at him.

Later that evening Assipattle's mother sent him to the barn to tell his brothers that their supper was ready. They were threshing corn on the barn floor when Assipattle appeared, and they set on him and held him down while they piled straw on top of him. They sat on his head and would have smothered him if their father had not caught them in the act and stopped them. He was annoyed, and as they ate their supper, he was still scolding his sons for their behaviour. Assipattle, still with straw in his hair, calmly said,

'Oh, it's alright father, I would have given them a good thrashing if you had not stopped them when you did.'

His brothers laughed, and the oldest one said, 'Then why didn't you then?'

'Oh, I'm saving my strength,' said Assipattle.

'Saving your strength?' said his oldest brother, 'What are you saving your strength for?'

'For when I fight the Stoor Worm,' said Assipattle.

'Boy,' said his father gravely, 'you'll fight the Stoor Worm when I make spoons from the horns of the moon.'

Time passed, and the people grew angry at the loss of their daughters. The king once more called on the wizard to attend the court in order to find a solution to the problem of the Stoor Worm for once and for all.

The wizard grew pale when he heard this, and he said, 'Well, your majesty, there is one way of ridding the land of the Stoor Worm, but it is too great a price to pay.'

'We have no option wizard,' shouted the king, 'what is this price that we have to pay to be rid of this monster for all time?'

'Well,' stuttered the wizard, 'as you insist, it is this. You must give the Stoor Worm the loveliest maiden in the entire kingdom. You must feed the Stoor Worm your daughter, the princess Gem-de-lovely.'

A gasp rose from the king's councillors, then their voices burst forth with angry words of protest. How could he even say such a thing? The princess was the king's only child, and with her the whole race of the old kings would die out forever. No, this could never be done!

'Silence!' shouted the king, 'It is a hard thing that you ask me to do wizard, but it is fitting, in a way. My daughter is indeed the last of the race of kings who are descended from the great god Odin himself; but it is fitting that my daughter should die so that her people can live.'

The king slumped back down on his throne, then he looked up and said, 'But yet, I will crave one last indulgence. Send out a proclamation throughout the kingdom saying that if any brave knight can fight and kill the Stoor Worm, then he can have as his reward my magic sword Sikkersnapper, which was a gift to my ancestors from the god Odin. My kingdom shall also be his, and my daughter's hand in marriage.'

The proclamation went throughout the kingdom like wildfire, and thirty-six brave knights rode into town to fight the Stoor Worm. The first twelve took one look at the Stoor Worm and rode straight through the town and out the other side and ran away home. The second twelve fainted with fright at the sight of the monster and had to be carried home on stretchers. The third twelve just skulked around the king's castle until they found his wine cellar, then drowned their sorrows in the king's finest wine. The old king looked at them with disgust, as the blood of an older and nobler race ran through his veins. He ordered his men to prepare a boat and to bring him his magic sword Sikkersnapper; he would fight the Stoor Worm himself. The news spread throughout the kingdom that the king was to fight the Stoor Worm the next morning at dawn. It even reached Leegarh, where Assipattle was still lying by the fire, raking among the ashes as usual. His parents were in bed talking, and he listened to their conversation with interest.

'So, the king's going to fight the Stoor Worm at dawn,' said his father, 'we should go to see that. We can take my horse Teetgong; he's the fastest horse in the land you know.'

'Yes,' snorted his wife, 'I know that.'

The old man was not always the most sensitive of men, but he knew that something was annoying his wife, and he summoned up his courage to ask her what it was. 'Is there something bothering you, my sweet?'

'Yes, there is!' she replied.

'Well, my dear,' said the old man, his voice trembling, 'what is it?'

'You are keeping secrets from me, that's what the trouble is!' said the old woman scornfully.

'Oh... well... why... I mean... no, I'm not,' said the old man, 'what secrets do I have from you?'

The old woman said, 'Your horse, Teetgong.'

'Fastest horse in the land' said the old man proudly.

'Yes,' said the old woman, 'but what I want to know is what makes it run so fast.'

'Oh, but dear, you don't need to know that.'

'Why?' snorted the old woman.

'Well, because it's, you know... a secret.'

'I thought as much,' snorted the old woman, 'and if you've got one secret from me, then you may have others!'

'Oh, I have no secrets,' protested the old man, 'you're making a fuss out of nothing.'

They argued for a while before the old man finally gave up and told his wife the secret.

'When I want Teetgong to stand as still as a statue I give it a pat on the left shoulder. When I want him to run fast I give him a pat on the right shoulder, but if I want him to run as fast as the wind I blow through a goose's thrapple (windpipe). When he hears that sound, he's off like lightening; I keep a thrapple in my coat pocket in case of emergencies.'

Happy at last, the old couple were soon snoring.

Assipattle had been listening to all of this, and when he was sure that his parents were asleep, he crept over to his father's coat and took the goose's thrapple from the pocket and slipped outside. He headed for the stable and opened the door as quietly as he could. When the horse Teetgong saw him, he knew that this was not his master, and he started to kick and to rear up, but Assipattle gave him a pat on the left shoulder and he stood as still as a statue. He climbed up on the horse's back and gave him a pat on the right shoulder and Teetgong set off with a loud neigh. The noise woke the old man and his sons, and they ran outside and took horses and followed Teetgong, shouting 'Stop! Thief!'

Assipattle's father had no idea it was his son who was the thief, and soon his horse was catching up with him.

The old man shouted as loud as he could, 'Hi, Hi Ho! Teetgong Whoa!'

Teetgong stopped dead in his tracks, but Assipattle pulled the goose's thrapple from his pocket and blew through it. When Teetgong heard the sound, he pricked up his ears, neighed loudly and set off as fast as an arrow from a bow; it was all that Assipattle could do to breathe as the horse ran so fast. When the old man and his sons saw this, they stopped and turned their horses for home, as they knew there was no way they could catch up with Teetgong.

Assipattle rode through the night until he came to the top of the cliffs that slope down to the sandy shore of a large bay. There in the bay was a huge black island, but this was no island at all, it was the Stoor Worm's head. Assipattle rode down to the bay and quietly slipped into an old cottage that stood close to the shore. In it was an old woman asleep in her bed with a great grey cat curled up at her feet. The fire had been rested for the night with damp peats, as it was considered bad luck to let your fire go out, and bad luck to lend fire to a neighbour, in case the luck of the house should leave with it. (It was also before matches were invented!)

The fire smouldered in the damp peats, which had been cut from the hill and dried that summer. Assipattle took a small iron pot from beside the fire and he picked up a glowing peat and put it into the pot before slipping quietly outside and heading for the shore. There he saw the king's boat, ready for him to sail for battle with the Stoor Worm. There was a guard on board, and he was shuffling about and flapping his arms to keep warm.

'Hello,' shouted Assipattle to him, 'I was just going to build a small fire to boil some limpets for my breakfast. Would you like to come and warm yourself by my fire?'

'Better not,' replied the guard, 'because if they find out I've left my post I'll be beaten.'

'You had better stay where you are then,' replied Assipattle as he started to dig a shallow hole in which to light his fire.

Suddenly Assipattle started to jump around wildly shouting; 'Gold! Gold! I've found gold! Look how it shines, like the mid-day sun. Gold!'

As soon as the guard heard this he jumped from the boat and pushed Assipattle away and started to dig in the dirt like a dog. Assipattle picked up his pot with the peat in it and ran to the boat, casting off the rope and hoisting the sail. He looked around in time to see the king and his men arrive, and he saw them dancing with rage on the shore.

Assipattle sailed the boat close to the Stoor Worm's mouth, just as the first rays of the rising sun kissed the monster's eyes and it started to wake up and it yawned the first of its seven great yawns. Assipattle positioned the boat next to the great mouth so that when it yawned again the boat was swept right into the monster's mouth and down its huge throat. Down, down, deeper and deeper into the Stoor Worm went Assipattle and his boat, right down deep inside the Stoor Worm.

Now the inside of the Stoor Worm was like one great huge tunnel, but every now and then there were other smaller tunnels leading this way and that, and some water gurgled down this tunnel, and some down that one, until the water got shallower and shallower and the boat grounded. The inside of the Stoor Worm glowed with a green phosphorescent light, so Assipattle could see what he was doing. He picked up the pot with the burning peat in it and he ran, and he ran until he found what he was looking for; the Stoor Worm's liver! Now, you know how much oil there is in fish livers, so imagine how much oil there would be in the Stoor Worm's liver. Assipattle took out his knife and he cut a hole in the liver, then he dropped the burning peat into the hole. He blew and he blew, and he better blew until he thought his head was going to burst, but eventually the oil in the liver caught fire and started to burn fiercely. Assipattle ran back to the boat as fast as his legs would carry him.

Now the king was having a bad day. Not only did he have to get up really early to fight the Stoor Worm and face certain death, but he arrived at the bay just in time to see some idiot steal his boat and sail off to be swallowed by the Stoor Worm. Things just couldn't get any worse, he thought, as he paced to-and-fro on the beach. Suddenly, one of his men said, 'Your Majesty, I've never seen the Stoor Worm do that before.'

'Do what?' said the king angrily.

'Well,' said the man, 'he's sort of... smoking.'

'Smoking!' bellowed the king.

'Yes, see for yourself,' said the man.

Sure enough, when the king looked, he saw that thick, black smoke was billowing out of the Stoor Worm's mouth and nose. The Stoor Worm was feeling very ill, in fact it felt very sick indeed and it wretched up all the water that was inside of it. A huge tidal wave of water flowed from the Stoor Worm's

mouth, and there on top of it was Assipattle in the boat. The king and his men, the old woman and her cat from the cottage (who had gone out to see what all the noise was about) and all the horses ran up the hillside to safety as the wave crashed on the shore below. Assipattle and the boat was cast up high and dry among them, and they stood together to watch the death of the Stoor Worm.

As it died the Stoor Worm thrust out its huge tongue into the sky so high that it caught hold of the moon. They said that it would have pulled the moon from the sky, but the fork of the Stoor Worm's tongue slipped over the horn of the moon and it fell back to earth with a great crash. The tongue cut a huge hole in the face of the earth, and water flowed into this hole which cut off the lands of Norway and Sweden from Denmark. There it remains to this day, only we now call it the Baltic Sea and the two great bays at either end are the forks of the Stoor Worm's tongue.

As it died the Stoor Worm raised its huge head, and when it fell back to earth with a resounding crash, some of its teeth were knocked out and landed in the sea. These teeth remain there to this day, but now we call them the Orkney Islands. It raised its head again, and once more it fell back to earth, casting more of its teeth into the sea, creating the Shetland Islands. A third time the great head rose, and more teeth were cast into the sea, forming the Faroe Islands. Then the Stoor Worm curled itself up into a tight lump and died, and there it remains to this day, only now we call it Iceland. The hot water that boils out of the ground and the fires that leap from the mountains there are caused by the liver of the Stoor Worm, which is still burning.

The king was delighted, and he took Assipattle in his arms and he called him his son. He strapped the magic sword Sikkersnapper to Assipattle's side, and he said, 'My boy, my sword and my kingdom are yours, as is my daughter's hand in marriage, if she will have you.'

The Princess Gem-de-lovely stepped forward and looked into the eyes of this strange young man who had saved the world from the evil Stoor Worm, and love flowered in her heart. Assipattle also fell in love with the beautiful princess, and they were soon married to the great joy of everyone.

They lived in happiness and prosperity, and if they are not dead then they are living yet.

Tom Muir, Orkney

MALLIE AND THE TROW

Mallie and her husband Robbie lived in a small croft in Shetland with their four young bairns (children). Robbie was a sailor who would work on ships for a few months in the summer but return home for the winter, bringing with him enough money to live on. They would buy enough barley flour to fill the meal giral (a wooden chest used for storing flour) and a barrel of pickled herrings to see them through the cold winter months. But one year, Robbie never returned to Mallie and the bairns and it was feared that he had been lost in a shipwreck or through disease on board his ship. Nobody knew, but Robbie never returned home again. Mallie had four hungry bairns to feed, and no money coming in. She got bits of jobs here and there, making dresses and repairing clothes, but it was scarcely enough to put food on the table, and her bairns were crying with hunger. She could bear it no longer and swallowing her pride, she took a staff in her hand and put a straw basket – called a kishie – on her back and set off with her four bairns to beg for food.

They went to an old woman who lived up the hill, and who was known to have plenty of food and drink for herself. Mallie knocked on the door, which the old woman opened and peered suspiciously outside. 'Who's there?' demanded the old woman.

'It's me, Mallie, and my four bairns. We are hungry; we have no food. Would you be kind enough to spare a mouthful of something for us, as without it I don't know what will happen to us?'

The old woman's face twisted into a look of horror, and she replied, 'I'm an old woman, and I have no food to spare for the likes of you!' Then she slammed the door in Mallie's face.

As they walked back down the hill the oldest boy's blood boiled with rage.

'Did you see that, mother?' he shouted, 'Did you see what was in that old woman's cupboard? It was full of bread, cheese, butter, meat, puddings and all sorts of food, far more than she could ever eat, and yet she wouldn't give us so much as a crumb! How could she do that to us?'

'Well son,' said Mallie calmly, 'that is just her way. Some people share and others do not. But remember this son, we are better than that, for while we may have nothing, we will always share what we have.'

And they walked home sadly to their empty house.

The youngest bairns were crying with hunger, so Mallie tucked them up in their warm bed to sleep. At least sleep would make them forget their misery. Mallie made up the fire and returned to her sewing. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. 'It is late at night, so who could be calling at this hour?' wondered Mallie as she opened the door. There stood a tiny man dressed in grey, and with a grey hat on his head. His whiskers bristled, and his dark eyes sparkled with mischief, and Mallie knew that this must be a hill trow, as the fairy folk are called in Shetland.

'I'm an old man in need of food and shelter,' said the trow, 'can I come in?'

'I'm sorry old man,' said Mallie, 'but I'm afraid that you've picked the wrong house, for I have no food to give you. Maybe you could try another house?'

'I'm an old man,' said the trow, 'and I'm very tired from walking. I'll take my chances here.'

'Come in, come in,' said Mallie, 'and take a seat by the fire and warm yourself.'

She put more peats on the fire and made the trow comfortable.

The trow looked around the tiny house, and he saw the four bairns peering bleary-eyed at him from the foot of the bed.

'Come on woman,' said the trow, 'you must have something to eat in the house.'

'Well, I'll try,' said Mallie.

She went over to the empty meal giral and she took a knife and scraped the sides of it to remove any flour dust still sticking to it. She gathered together a small pile of flour, dust, cobwebs and wood shavings and she carefully gathered them up into a cup. She took this over to the empty barrel that had contained the brine that the herring had been pickled in, and she poured a small amount of the pickle onto the flour and dust and she mixed it into a paste before carefully dividing it into six equal parts; one for the trow, one each for her four children and one for herself. The trow stared at this disgusting substance, more like wallpaper paste than food, and he said: 'Is this all you have?'

'Yes,' said Mallie sadly, 'this is the only food in this house, and tomorrow we won't even have this much to eat.'

The trow scratched his head, and then he cheered up a bit, saying, 'Ah, but you'll have a fine drop of home brewed ale to wash this stuff down with?'

'No, I'm sorry,' said Mallie, 'I have no barley for malt to make ale, but there is good sweet water from the well.'

'Ugh! No thank you!' said the trow, 'I never touch the stuff.'

'I told you that you had picked the wrong house,' said Mallie, 'but at least you will be warm tonight, as I have plenty of peats to burn, so don't be cold.'

With that she retired to bed with the bairns and left the trow sitting in the chair by the fire. The next morning the trow said his goodbyes and headed for the door. He stopped and turned to Mallie and said; 'Was that truly all the food that you had in the house? That... stuff... you gave me, was that all that you had?'

'Truly it was,' said Mallie.

'Well then,' said the trow, 'it takes a very special kind of person to share the last food they have in the world with a total stranger. You have my blessings.'

And with that the trow left Mallie's house and disappeared from view.

'Well my boy,' said Mallie to her oldest son, 'we may be starving, but we may as well be comfortable while we starve! Go and bring in some peats so that we can be warm.'

The boy brought in a kishie full of peats and set it by the fire. Mallie picked up a large peat and broke it in two so that it would burn easily, and as she did so she heard a 'ching' on the floor. She looked down, and there was a gold coin lying shining by her hearth. She broke another peat, and 'ching', another gold coin fell from it. She broke another, and another, and another peat and every single one had a gold coin inside of it. Mallie realised that this was the blessing that the trow had mentioned, and she gathered up all the money and said to her oldest son, 'Run into town, and buy bread, and cheese and butter, oh and some ham and some tea. Oh, and strawberry jam, do you remember jam? Run!'

And away the boy ran to buy food. Mallie and her four bairns ate like royalty, and every peat that they broke had a gold coin in it.

Now word spread that Mallie had come into money. She had been as poor as a church mouse, but now she had plenty of money. The old woman who lived up the hill grew jealous, muttering to herself 'a beggar woman living like a queen. Who ever heard of such a thing? I'll find out her secret. Why should she have all that money? Why shouldn't I, a poor old woman, share in this good fortune too?'

That night the old woman sneaked silently down the hill, and she spied on Mallie. As she peered through the window, she saw Mallie break open a peat, and a gold coin fall onto the floor.

'So that's her game, is it?' muttered the old woman, and she crept back up the hill to wait until they were asleep.

When she saw that the house was in darkness, she crept back down the hill with a kishie on her back and stole Mallie's peats. All night she carted peats from Mallie's peat stack back to her own house where she piled them by the fire. When dawn broke the old woman was ready to receive her reward. She took hold of a good big peat and she broke it in two, but instead of it containing a gold coin a live mouse fell to the floor and scuttled away into a corner.

'Hmm,' muttered the old woman, 'it must have been a dud. I'll try again.'

She broke another peat, and another live mouse fell to the floor, and then another mouse and another mouse until she had broken all the peats that she had stolen. She had not got one gold coin, but she did have a lot of mice. The mice gathered together in the corner and had a conference.

'Well,' said the head mouse, 'I don't know about you lot, but I'm hungry! What's to eat in this house?' and with that they ran to the old woman's cupboard that was full of food. They ate her bread and her cheese, her butter and her meat and all the puddings. They nibbled holes in her clothes, her curtains, her furniture; they literally ate her out of house and home until she had nothing. The old woman was left with nothing, and she was forced to take her staff in her hand and a kishie on her back (which was patched with dried grass, as the mice had nibbled holes in it), and she set off to Mallie's house to beg.

When the knock came to Mallie's door her oldest boy answered it. There stood the old woman, her clothes full of holes and a sheepish look on her face.

'Please pity a poor, hungry old woman,' she begged. 'My house has been overrun with mice, and they have eaten all my food and nibbled all my things. There is nothing left, and I'm hungry.'

The boy stared at the old woman, and the rage he had felt before when she refused them food rose in his breast. He stared into her eyes and said in a cold voice, 'Old woman, I will give you exactly what you gave us when we were starving. Nothing!'

And with that he slammed the door in the old woman's face. Mallie had been watching this, and she stepped forward, shaking her head and saying, 'No, son. I told you, we are better than that. We share.'

Mallie opened the door and called to the old woman.

'Old woman come back! Here, take as much food as you want, and remember this, as long as I'm living you will never have to go hungry.'

Tom Muir, Orkney

THE LITTLE BROWN CALF



There was once a rather wealthy man living in the South of Scotland, not far from Edinburgh. He was married and he and his good wife were blessed with three of a family – three lovely daughters. Now it was customary for this gentleman to travel far and a field – and often his journeys could be quite lengthy, but he so loved his daughters and their mother that he never forgot them and would bring home fine presents as a sign of his love and yearning for them. And indeed, he was convinced that when his wife dressed in all her finery there was no woman on this earth who could compare with her in beauty and comeliness. Following one trip abroad, he returned with delightful gifts for the children, but it was his wife's present which was the most remarkable. A kist– a large elegant box – and so well designed and constructed that it would have been almost impossible to detect where the carpenters had begun and where they finished.

"It's so gorgeous," she his wife, "Here's where I'll store my very best clothes!"

'You don't have to' he said, 'look inside!'

The gentleman's wife lifted the lid and immediately understood what her husband meant. She put her hand into the chest and found an item of clothing which she pulled out of the chest – a beautiful gown made from birds' plumage.

'I've never seen anything so...' she began.

'There's more' he said, 'Take out more!'

And she did, and she removed from the chest, ever more beautiful splendours. All in all, she found two more dresses – one made of bog cotton and another – stunning one – of starlight. And she discovered a golden shoe and a silver one and an exquisite comb – of a style she'd never laid eyes on in her life – adorned with sparkling gems.

'Comb your hair' her husband said 'And she did, and suddenly, one side of her head was golden and the other had a silver sheen. The young daughters witnessed everything and agreed with their father that you couldn't possibly meet a more beautiful woman than their own mother should you travel the length and breadth of the country. And the family were as happy and content together as the day was long.

But then, the fine lady fell ill and as time passed, she unfortunately became more unwell until eventually she couldn't struggle any longer and succumbed to death's desire. The family were devastated – the gentleman and his three daughters – how were they going to survive without such a warm, kind, beautiful wife and mother? After a good while, the father decided that he needed a wife to look after the children, but he was determined that the woman he married would be as close in nature to his dead wife as was possible. He gave an oath that he would only marry the woman on whose foot the Golden Shoe fitted comfortably.

He sent word out throughout the land that any woman who wished to marry him should attend the house and try on the shoe on her right foot. Many a damsel came too, some rather attractive, but not one of them could place their foot properly in the golden shoe. He sent word again throughout his country and beyond to farther lands but still no woman was successful in claiming her prize of marriage to a respectable wealthy widower. Finally, there were only three women left who had not tried on the shoe – his own three daughters.

The oldest daughter tried the shoe on her right foot, but the tips of her toes were too long for it. When the middle daughter tried it on, her heel was too wide for it. But when the youngest daughter placed her right foot in the shoe, you would have thought it had been made just for her. But oh bhòbh, bhòbh! She was most distressed! The poor girl was in a terrible state. She was so upset that she began to howl and took straight to bed, and she stayed there all night and for a good part of the next day, crying and breaking her heart all the while. Then she heard a noise – a sort of light lowing sound outside. She went to the window and what should she see but a little brown calf.

'What's bothering you, my girl?' asked the calf.

'I have to marry my father, since the golden shoe fitted my foot.'

'Tud, tud' the calf replied, 'No you don't!' he said. 'That's not a proper thing for a young girl to do. Thugainn còmhla riomsa – come with me and you will be freed from that duty.'

'Are you sure?' she asked?

'Absolutely' said the calf.

'Will I take anything with me?'

'Nothing' replied the calf, 'except yourself and your mother's chest.'

The calf told her where the chest had been hidden and it didn't take the youngest daughter long to find it and out the window she went.

'Leum air mo dhruim – jump on my back!' the calf ordered kindly and the girl did as she was asked and placed the chest where it wouldn't fall to the ground. And for three days they journeyed together – the young girl and the little brown calf – through moorland and mountain and town, some rather unusual, and others really quite ordinary, until finally they reached a little hillock on the edge of a town that wasn't too big, though nor was it too small.

'Leum a-nuas far mo dhroma – jump down!' the calf said, and the girl did. 'We're going to bury the chest here and see that big house yonder – it's actually a King's palace. You'll go there now, and any work they offer you, you must accept without question.'

The girl made her way to the palace door, and when it was opened, she asked the foot-man, whether they needed to hire anyone and that she was willing to do anything.

'Well' he said 'It's very strange that you came here on this particular day, because just this very morning, one of the girls left, she was working down in the black kitchen – an cidsin-dubh. Are you good at cleaning pots and such like?'

'I could try' she said, remembering the brown calf's advice, although she had no experience of that kind of toil before, as she was a gentleman's daughter.

She was sent down to the black kitchen immediately. And she almost fainted when she saw the great mound of pots and pans and other dirty dishes waiting to be scoured clean. But she had no choice but to get stuck in. She worked there, in the black kitchen, all afternoon and evening and for many a long day after that until she herself was as black as coal and her fine clothes in shameful tatters.

Now, it was the custom that the King's son – the prince – would hold a ball or a large dance at a particular time each year, and this year wasn't going to be different. Every young woman in the kingdom hoped that the handsome prince would spot her and desire to marry her. Invitations were sent to the noblest of men and the most seemly women to come to the palace on the night of the ball, and they did, in their droves – in dignified carriages with two stately horses leading each. But the youngest daughter, was, as she had been since her arrival, stuck down at the very basement of the palace in the black kitchen – totally exhausted, when she heard a noise – a light lowing outside, and she ran to the window and who did she see but the little brown calf.

'Cha deach thu idir chun a' bhàil – You didn't go to the ball!' the calf said, 'Why ever not?'

'Of course I didn't,' she said, 'How could I possibly go to a prince's dance looking like this. I'm a mess?'

'Give yourself a wee wash' the calf said, 'And jump on my back and I'll take you to the ball, and, by jove, you won't be a mess then!'

Rinn an nighean sin – the girl agreed and in no time, they were at the hummock and the calf began digging with its hind legs until the chest was uncovered.

'Open it, a ghràdhag' the calf said, 'and dress yourself in your mother's fine clothes!' The young woman agreed, and she put on the gown made of birds' feathers – iteagan nan eun – and the golden shoe and the silver shoe and she combed her hair until one side was of gold and the other silver.

'Well, well. What a beautiful lady' he said. 'Hurry now, before you miss any more dances.' The brown calf took the girl to the palace and they agreed that she would leave about midnight, before the ball was over, and that she would return to the black kitchen and that no-one would be aware that she had ever left it.

And what an amazing sight to behold when the girl made her entrance into the ballroom, there wasn't a head that didn't turn in her direction – to see who this beautiful woman could be, who had never been seen before at a dance or any other posh gathering. And if the guests were surprised, it was the King's son – the handsome prince – who was most moved. At the first opportunity, he made straight for her and he asked her to dance with him; and he asked her to dance with him many more times that night. But around midnight, she took her chance when no-one was looking, and she left the ball, and just as he had promised, the little brown calf was there waiting for her at the door and he brought her back on his back to the small hill, and he replaced her elegant clothes and the chest was buried again and she was back in the black kitchen and the dance still going strong.

Well, the prince was smitten with this gorgeous young woman and he believed that he had never seen her match in his father's kingdom or indeed in any other land in which he'd travelled. And the following morning he was still so upset at having lost sight of her, and sure that he wouldn't rest until he found out who she was, that he announced another ball for that very same night – he couldn't possibly wait another year.

Every woman who had attended the previous evening was invited and many suspected that the prince had fallen in love, and some hoped that she was the one. As happened the night before, the same happened that night. Everyone was having fun and dancing upstairs in the ballroom while the young woman was down below in the black kitchen, struggling with pot after pot. And who appeared at the window but the little brown calf and the same gentle call to tell her of its presence.

'DE do chor – How's it going?' she said.

'Fine, a ghradhag. They've left you not a little work tonight – come on, thugainn a dhannsa – let's go a-dancing!'

With that, she tidied herself and climbed out the window and they reached the hillock and the chest was removed with her mother's finery inside and just as she'd done the previous evening, she chose one of the dresses – this time the bog cotton dress – canach an t-slèibhe. And she looked stunning, and the calf told her so with words which warmed her heart and gave her the confidence to walk into the ball. And once again she promised to meet her friend before the dance was over.

The King's son almost leapt out of his skin when he saw her enter, and he approached her immediately and led her to the dance-floor and he hardly let her rest all night long, except when she needed to draw breath. But somehow, she managed to escape when his attention strayed, and the little calf was there waiting to take her back to the hillock and then to the black kitchen in good time.

Now, the prince was even more vexed, the poor soul was at his wit's end to find out who this woman was and whether he would ever win her as his wife.

Another ball had to be called for the third night, and the prince asked two of his most trusted doormen to keep a very close eye on her, and indeed if they let her out of their sight, they could expect big trouble! This time the young woman dressed in the gown of starlight and if she was attractive the two previous evenings, this time, on the third night, she was exquisite. Every single person was aware of her and of how she had thrilled the prince. And many wished him every blessing in his quest.

And they danced and danced and danced together and the doormen were continuously watching her, terrified that she might get past them due to a careless mistake or slip-up. And as she did on the two other occasions, the girl – dressed in stars from head to toe – tried to escape and when she reached the door, the two doormen were there ready and grabbed hold of her. But having been dancing so much and turning and twisting she was soaked with sweat and they couldn't keep her and she slithered through them, just like a fish, and was on the point of running off, when one of them leapt towards her, reached out and managed to grip her ankle and he thought he had her for a second but he was wrong, as her right shoe came away in his hand and she kept going and jumped onto the calf's back in the usual way.

As you'll understand, the King's son wasn't at all happy that his two helpers had failed to detain the girl but, when he saw the golden shoe, he let them be without severe punishment as he had to confess that he hadn't been able to stop her either. The prince sent out word throughout the kingdom, for every woman who had attended the dance, and some who hadn't, to come and try the golden shoe on her right foot. Many came but the shoe fitted none of them. And there was this particular woman – a fierce scary type, called Cailleach nan Cearc – the Hen-wife – and she had a daughter who was just as bad as her mother. And what did she do, this Cailleach nan Cearc, but saw the tops off from her daughter's toes and take a file to the back of her foot, until she had sheared off about two inches of skin, and she sent her up to the King's palace. When the prince tried the shoe on her foot, he had to admit, it fitted her better than any other. And he agreed, very reluctantly that he should accept her!

She was as proud as punch, the daughter of the Hen-wife, heading home behind the prince on his majestic white horse, so that he could ask her mother for her hand in marriage. But just when they were yards from the house, a small bird appeared and it landed and sat between the horse's two ears and it began to chirp and sing, and the more the prince listened, the more he understood the song. This was what the bird was singing:

"Cas a' chriomaidh

Cas a' bhìdidh

Air do chùlaibh air an each

An tè dhan tig a' bhròg òir

Gu dubhach brònach

Sa chidsin-dubh.

Nipped foot,

clipped foot

behind you on the horse.

You'll find the one the gold shoe fits

sad and sorrowful in the black kitchen."

The prince turned around, took hold of the girl's foot and plucked the shoe off her and if you had seen the damaged foot – the blood and fluid that poured out of the shoe – your stomach would have turned just as the King's son's did. When they reached Cailleach nan Cearc's house, the prince threw her daughter off the horse back towards her mother and he gave them until nightfall to gather all their possessions and depart his kingdom for ever. And so, the prince returned to his father's house, the palace, and when he reached the door he asked to be taken down to the black kitchen – a part of the house he had never previously visited. And when he got there, there she was – the gentleman's youngest daughter, immersed in pots and pans and grimy labour.

'Will you try this on.' he said, passing her the golden shoe.

'I shouldn't' she said, 'look how filthy my foot is!'

'Don't worry, it's seen filthier than yours' he assured her.

And when she slipped the golden shoe on her little soiled bare right foot, it fitted her so well that you would have thought she had never once taken it off.

'Will we marry?' he asked – the King's son.

'Why not? I mean definitely!' she said.

The wedding was arranged for the next day. And that night, for the first time in many a long month, the girl slept, not on a hard-stone floor but in a large comfortable bed with three thick mattresses and sheets and blankets of silk on top. She was just drifting off to sleep when she heard an unexpected noise outside – the light lowing of her friend. She leapt out of bed and ran to the window.

'It's you' she said, 'My friend, my little calf. I'm going to marry the King's son tomorrow'

'I know' the calf said 'that's why I've come to see you. I'd like to give you my blessing and say goodbye because you won't need me anymore. But did it ever occur to you who I was?'

'Who you are?' she said. "You are the dearest, kindest little brown calf there ever was.'

'Thank you very much' the calf said 'That might be true; however, I am also someone else. I'm your mother. I came back in the form of a calf when I saw that you had to marry your father, because that wouldn't have been right at all,' she said, 'and also when you almost lost your prince through the wiles of that evil plotter Cailleach nan Cearc, I chose to become a bird and sing a useful song. But from now on, you will make your own way in the world and I can return to where I came from and rest. Because you, my darling daughter, are going to marry the son of the King tomorrow and you will be a beautiful happy princess for as long as you both live and I will be a most proud mother.'

And that's just what happened. The following day the prince and his bride were married with the most wonderful wedding, and fantastic food was served to those who had the honour of attending – but, alas, they never kept a single scrap for me!

A story I tell, sourced from the late Annie Johnnston's contribution to Gairm. Annie was from Barra.

Martin MacIntyre

THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE

Fionn MacCumhail was just a lad when he was sent from home to the poet and great master, Fineagas, for education in many subjects – above all, on how to become a true heroic warrior. The old fellow had been living alone for many years, in a little house he built himself, beside the River Boyne and he enjoyed the company. Fineagas kept a very close eye on the Boyne, day and night, should he spot a unique fish ‘Bradán an Eòlais – The Salmon of Wisdom’. Apparently, the first person ever to taste this fish would become the wisest in all Ireland. Everyone who had so far tried to catch it had been disappointed, and Fineagas dearly hoped that where others had failed, he would be successful.

One day Fineagas and Fionn were sitting on the river bank enjoying a stimulating lesson, when the tutor noticed a glorious big salmon swimming towards them. ‘This surely is The Salmon of Knowledge’ he cried and rushed to get a net – a fine strong one, to haul it in. He knew also that he mustn’t look into the fish’s eyes or he would fall fast asleep, and he was careful not to do this as he struggled to net the beast of a fish. And then, without warning, the salmon leapt out of the water in his direction. The old man panicked and looked straight into the eyes of the fish, and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

Fortunately, young Fionn saw this and shook Fineagas awake. The old teacher commanded Fionn to rip up his dark-coloured shirt and tie it round his eyes so that he could no longer see the fish. Fionn obeyed, and a blind-folded Fineagas and a tenacious salmon quarrelled and fought for the rest of that afternoon until the fish eventually gave up the struggle. Fineagas had caught Bradán an Eòlais. He would be the wisest person in all of Ireland. As you’ll understand, this great effort had exhausted poor Fineagas and he asked Fionn to cook the fish while he took a recuperative snooze. Fionn promised not to taste the salmon. The monster fish was placed on a spit above a good-going peat fire and it wasn’t long until it was ready for eating. Fionn called Fineagas to come and taste it, but as he did so a small drop of burning fish-oil splashed up onto his finger – his thumb actually. Fionn simply stuck his finger in his mouth to quell the pain.

When Fineagas arrived he immediately noticed that Fionn MacCumhail looked really quite different. He could see from the gleam in his eyes and the glow from his cheeks that something had happened to him. ‘Did you have any of the fish flesh?’ he demanded. Fionn had to tell the truth. ‘No’ he said. ‘Did you try any of it at all’ he asked. And with that Fionn remembered that he had actually put his thumb in his mouth when the oil burned it, and he told Fineagas this.

Fineagas understood there and then, that the special knowledge which came only from that cooked salmon on the spit, had been granted to Fionn, and not him. Despite his loss, Fineagas was happy for the lad, since he knew that he would grow up to be a most wise man and a great hero and that, from that day forth, Fionn MacCumhail would be the ablest and most celebrated leader the Fèinn ever served.

A story I tell, sourced from Reg Keating’s version for the series ‘Irish Legends’ published by Tarantula Books

Martin MacIntyre

MACCODRAM AND HIS SEAL-WIFE

Many years ago, there was a king and queen living deep down in the depths below the restless surf. And, by all accounts, both were happy in their ocean kingdom. They were blessed with many healthy children, who were attractive and tall, and these sea princes and princesses also possessed the most beautiful large brown eyes. And, whenever they got the chance, they would play and frolic and create sweet music.

But then, sadness struck the king and his children, because his loving wife – the queen – became very ill and presently died. And, after some time, when the king saw how unhappy his children were, and how unkempt, neglected they appeared, he said to himself that he would have to marry another woman who could look after them, and who would comb out the tangles from their lovely regal hair.

It so happened, that there was, living in a sort of under-water forest, a witch, and the king asked her to marry him so that the children would have a mother. She was delighted and agreed immediately. What an opportunity to reign as Queen over a vast sea kingdom! But she was also aware that it would be her duty to look after the children – as a Step-mother. She cared little for them, nor them for her. In fact, she was intensely envious of them for being so beautiful and tall in their bodies. And finally, when she could bear it no longer, using some special plants and herbs, she distilled a potion, made the children drink it and in doing so cast a binding spell on them.

The beautiful, tall children were immediately turned into little podgy round seals, destined to swim and travel the seas for ever more – except one day of the year, from sunrise until sunset, when they were permitted to come ashore, take off their seal-skins and be children again, who could play and frolic and make music. But at nightfall they had to make ready to return to the sea as seals for yet another year.

As you can imagine, when their father the King found out about this he was enraged, and he banished the witch back to her forest, cursing her all the way. But despite his anger and his great regret, there was nothing he could do to break the evil woman's spell or get his children back as they once were. And, as seals do, they swam off and left their father alone in his palace, longing and grieving for them each day they were gone.

Now, of all the places, which seals like to visit, the shores of the Western Isles are particularly renowned – especially those in and around The Sound of Harris. One day, a fisherman, called Ruairidh – Ruairidh MacCodram from the Island of Beàrnaraigh – was walking on the beach, as people did and still do, to see what the sea might have brought ashore. And what should he hear but singing – glorious singing coming from behind some nearby rocks. He carefully, quietly, climbed up to the top and looked down and the sight before him, he found most pleasing. Because, there, only yards from him, on the beach, was a group of children playing and singing and how beautiful and tall they were, with their gleaming curly hair bobbing delightfully behind them.

Now, Ruairidh MacCodram was a good man, but he had still not married, and the years were beginning to leave him in their wake. He reckoned that if the children saw him, they would flee immediately back into the sea, and so he didn't stay long on the rocks, and he was on the point of heading home when he noticed a pile of pelts – seal skins, a short distance from him. He inspected them closely and saw that some of them were brown or red in colour or some colour in between. He picked up one the seal-skins, of a golden-brown colour, and dashed home as fast as he could. On reaching the house he placed the pelt carefully above the lintel of the door.

At sunset that night, Ruairidh was inside mending his nets at the fire, when he heard a strange noise outside. He went out and their standing on the path was a beautiful tall woman with large warm brown eyes. Ruairidh felt that he had never seen anyone so attractive in his life.

'An cuididh sibh mi – can you help me?' she asked, crying and in deep distress. 'O Bhochain a Mhìn! Oh dear, dear!' she said, 'I don't belong here. I've come from the sea – a sorrowful sea woman am I, because I've lost my beautiful skin and therefore can't return to be with my brothers and sisters. Will you help me?'

Ruairidh knew full well that the seal pelt he had taken earlier was hers and all he had to do was take it down from the lintel and give it to her to reverse her sorry state. But he also considered how lonely he was, by himself all the time, day and night, and how the presence of an attractive good-natured young woman would lift his spirits.

'I'm afraid' he said, 'I can't help you my girl. I suppose someone must have come across your pelt and stole it without your realising. Perhaps the thief's many miles away now. I can't do anything to help your plight; however, if you stay here with me and marry me, I will love and respect you as long as you live.' The seal-woman looked at him with her big brown eyes and said, 'Well, if I can't get my skin back it is impossible for me to go home, and you look like an honest man.'

And with that she promised Ruairidh MacCodram that she'd marry him and that they would have children if that were granted. Although the fisherman was sorry for her, his own heart was filled with joy that such a woman would be willing to spend her life with him. And as a result, he never went near the pelt he had placed in its hidden spot above the lintel.

Her judgement had been correct: Ruairidh was a fine loving husband to his young wife and she never wanted for love or affection, this seal-woman. They had a good few children with beautiful, golden brown hair and wonderfully musical singing voices. And she was indeed a good-natured wife and loyal to her spouse, and she looked after the children properly, and she greeted each neighbour with a genuine smile. But, not surprisingly, she felt a terrible homesickness from time to time as she combed the shores. She would occasionally see other seals out there in the sea and was sure they must be her brothers and sisters and her heart ached at the thought of never seeing them again.

One day, Ruairidh was on his way out fishing as usual, when what should cut across his path but a hare – a very bad sign for a fisherman. He didn't know whether he should keep going or turn home. He looked at the sky and sea and there was nothing very calm about what they forecast. "N dà' he said, "S ioma uair a ghabh na siantan fearg rium – many's the time the elements got angry with me, but they never sunk me yet.'

He hadn't long set sail when he felt the force of the wind blasting against him and his little boat – a short while after that it had grown into a wild tempest without pity or mercy. And the very same gale blew against the house, where his wife was inside with the children – all of them except the oldest who couldn't be kept from the shore, being as keen on sea-life as his father. When his mother realised how dreadful the weather was becoming, she went out to the end of the path and shouted as loudly as she could, 'A Ruairidh, a Ruairidh thig dhachaigh, dean cabhag a Ruairidh! Ruairidh come home, hurry!'

Fortunately, on her third cry, her son heard her voice and ran towards her as best he could. And when she saw him coming, she went back indoors in case any of the other children should be afraid, because, the wind was now bellowing in a way she had never experienced before. But she left the door open for Ruairidh and when he reached the house, you would have thought he had been hurled inside by the might of the storm. And, as the door slammed behind him with a huge bang, the whole house and those within were violently shaken, and what should fall from the lintel but the golden-brown pelt belonging to their mother – the seal-woman.

She said only one word to them – 'soraith', 'farewell' – and holding her beautiful skin in her hand she made her way down to the shore. And there, she took off her human clothes and slipped her stunning golden brown pelt on and moved off into the ocean under its turbulent white horses. She turned to see the children for the last time and their crying and wailing pained her greatly, but the seal-woman kept on swimming, as was her wont, to the rhythm of the roar of the sea.

When Ruairidh returned from the fishing, terrified by the storm, the door of the house was open but there was no welcome or hot fire waiting for him. At once, he put his hand up and above the lintel, and when he found nothing, he understood that his wife had found her pelt and had returned to her world. He also understood that neither he nor his children would see her again.

And they didn't. But, as the children learned that day that their mother was in fact a seal, and although they missed her greatly for years after, they never forgot her or the love she gave them when she was with them.

And from then on, they remained always extremely attentive and kind to the seals who visited their shores and they never willingly did anything to hurt or harm them. And that reputation has followed the MacCodrams and their descendants until this day – MacCodram of the Seals.

A story I tell, sourced from Crisdean Dillon's tri-lingual contribution to The Celtic Congress's publication 'Dualchas Mara – Sea Heritage'. Crisdean was brought up in South Uist.

Martin MacIntyre