

FISHERMEN AND SUPERSTITION.

[BY CATHEL KERR.]

It is interesting as well as instructive to study the various forms of superstitious beliefs that exists among different classes of people. Those beliefs arise out of affairs, though trivial in themselves, yet in certain circumstances important. Generally they are the practical truths of the more important affairs of life through a chain of causes passed into dim hazy fancies. The study of folk-lore and kindred subjects is a wide one, and has already been ably dealt with in the pages of this Magazine. In this paper we propose to offer a few notes on the forms assumed by such beliefs among the fisher folk of our land.

The fisher people differ from the rest of our population in character, habits, language, and dress. But in no respect is this difference more marked than in the forms of their superstitious beliefs. No class of people is more influenced by such beliefs. They enter into all their relations, mix in all their thoughts and conversations, influence all their actions, and give a most distinctive cast to their general character.

The life and surroundings of the fisherman give body and shape to his beliefs. Filled with that light and airy spirit incidental to life on the ocean, he is always in the mood to be cheered by the bright and happy, to be awed by the grand and sublime, to be terrified by the wild and tremendous. Every incident in his ordinary daily life tends to influence that already fanciful imagination of his. Taking these things into consideration, it is not difficult to notice the transition from the natural and ordinary into the fanciful and superstitious. At sea, after the work of the day has been finished, the crew take to their beds, having previously appointed one of their number to act as watch. As he watches on deck amid the solemn stillness of the night, broken but by the low musical murmur of the water ripples, his mind gets filled with the strangest fancies. Each breath of the wind, as it comes lightly over the main, seems to waft to him

the longing sighs of his fisher lass on shore. He may even see her spectre tripping lightly over the varying wavelets. Such harmless and excusable fancies are not always the ones that occupy his mind. All of a sudden a flesh creeping sense of death may steal over him, and in that convenient state of mind various portents of death or of disaster may present themselves to him. Wilder and more impressive fancies seize the mind when in the storm the mighty engulfings of the ocean threaten to swamp his craft, and when life is in jeopardy in midst of the white-crested water giants that in a threatening manner surround the labouring vessel. There are many other circumstances that influence his beliefs. Success in prosecuting the fishing depends very much on the careful observation of winds, tides, flights of birds, etc. Where birds gather and fly about, and where at night much phosphorescence marks the water trail of the boat, fish is certainly present. Again periods of hardest and most blood-heating work are succeeded by even longer periods of perfect inactivity and indolence. Very often during those idle months, to while away the time, stories of thrilling adventure are related. Thus we see that by accident and by necessity there are circumstances in the life of the fisherman that cause the most extravagant superstitions.

Not only do the forms of their belief differ materially from those of landmen, but amongst different sections of themselves these may, whilst in the main preserving binding links of resemblance, assume very characteristic differences. The nature of the place, the average state of the weather, and the extent to which sea-going is carried on, as also the extent of intercourse with landmen has much to do in explaining this. If the coast be rugged and the sea wild much will be said about unseen powers operating upon the elements. Those unseen powers may all of a sudden blow down the hurricane, and furiously lash up the main, while good spirits, and well affected towards the fishermen, in turn produce a calm, or deliver the fishermen out of imminent danger. Often are the brave fishermen of the Pentland Firth and of the boisterous Minch annoyed by the gambols of these powers. Those fishermen venturing out far to sea experience the wildest and most thrilling incidents, while those whose sphere

of operation is in inland seas or lochs mix with their belief much that properly belongs to landmen. Those coast fishers who move about a great deal and combat the gusty mountain squalls, and the surging headland waves relate encounters with the denizens of the unseen world, and marvellous deliverances either through personal prowess or through the agency of well-affected spirits. Another class who live along mild and sheltered coasts, and whose mode of prosecuting their calling never brings them into contact either with the dangerous or the awful, have their beliefs running rather in the direction of codes of superstitious observations, and in studying the trivial matters in their daily life, which they think can reveal to them the events of the impending future.

On shore the daily life of the fisherman is one continuous atmosphere of the superstitious. Every occurrence is ominous of something. He may not understand its import, but he feels he is moving among objects that only need interpretation in order to reveal the future. Not merely the most important coming events but even the most trivial may be in this way predicted. If he find a hair on his tongue he is about to get a glass of whisky or a scolding. If there be an itching sensation in the palm of his left hand he will soon have money counted thereon, but if it be in the right hand he is to have a shake of the hand from some stranger. An itching sensation in the left nostril betokens the presence, or approach, of a friend or perhaps a member of the family. Sometimes it may merely mean that the friend is thinking much of him. An itch in the right nostril generally means that some stranger is soon to make his appearance. Some well versed in the art can tell for whom the sensation is felt, probably from the degree of the acuteness of the sensation. The ears also by suddenly heating up indicate that he is made the subject of praise or of abuse by some one.

As he sits musing at the fireside the future may be disclosed by the shapes assumed by the ascending flame, or by the grotesque figures that form in the live coals. In the Highlands a peat standing out alone from its fellow peats on the hearth indicates not merely the coming of a stranger, but his appearance, whether long or short, lank or stout, his nature, whether talkative or not ;

if the former, the peat will smoke very much. If the stranger is to be kindly received the observer will tenderly take up the peat and lay it on the brightest part of the fire. Should he, however, throw it down or cover it with ashes the stranger will not receive a hospitable welcome. In certain places the greatest carefulness is observed in treating such indicators, and that not without reason (?) as the following shows:—A company one night seeing a fine large peat stand out from the rest, for their amusement, took it and dipped it in a tub of water, then placed it in the heart of the fire. Before the company dispersed a respected stranger made his appearance, and reported that he had had a narrow escape from drowning on the way that evening. He was made as comfortable as possible by the conscience-stricken inmates of the house.

It is strange that there should be so many things to indicate the coming of strangers. What can be the reason of this? Is it in order to be the better prepared to entertain them hospitably? We remember hearing an old man say on the occasion of a potato falling to the floor out of the hand of a man at a dinner table (at which Nature's knives and forks were used), that a needier person than he was about to come in. And sure enough, in a few minutes, a beggar man made his appearance, and need it be added, was helped to a share of the good things going at the time.

More serious and important events are predicted by the shapes into which the clouds form themselves against the vault of heaven. Strong is the influence the sight of strangely figured clouds in the western sky on a calm summer evening wields in the breasts of the seafaring people.

They have also got their own way of curing diseases, and they affirm those always succeed better than doctors' drugs. Some of the cures are at times droll enough. Where their knowledge of herbs and waters fail they are never at a loss to prescribe forms of incantations. Some old toothless dame is usually the prescriber. A young fellow has stye on his eye (*leamhnuid*). He is requested to go into the sea, and to stand on his head until nine successive waves pass over him, and he shall be at once cured. Should he doubt his own ability to undergo this ordeal

there is yet one more way of effecting a cure. He is to repeat the following without once drawing breath :—

Thainig Cailleach a Loch Abair
'Shireadh scadain a Loch Bhraoin.
Cha d'iarr i air peighinn
Ach 'n a chunntadh i gun anail.

Scidear scadan aon, scidear, scadan dha, scidear scadan tri scidear scadan ceud.

Should this be done as requested, it was supposed to be very effective. A wart is removed by rubbing on it some earth from the sole of the foot when the new moon is first noticed, which will cause it to disappear before next new moon. A straw cut short, but preserving the knot, wetted in the mouth and rubbed on the wart, then hid away where no eye can see it, causes the wart to disappear just as it rots in its secret place. The most effective way to remove a wart is to contrive all unknown to rub it against some article of apparel belonging to an adulterous person. Evil eye may injure any person, vessel, or thing. "Sgoiltidh droch shuile clach, etc." The eye of some is so bad that nothing can cure the effects of it but by the person in some way or other proving his utter disrespect or contempt for the thing affected. The possessor of this troublesome member often on its account finds himself placed in the most ludicrous positions imaginable. The common way of undoing the harm caused by the evil eye is to sprinkle the affected person with water off silver and gold. Jaundice is cured by pouring melted lead through the finger holes of a pair of shears into water while some rhyme is recited. If the cure be effected the lead in the water forms itself into the shape of a heart. The cure of king's evil by the spittle of the doctor seventh son is well known. The seventh son of a seventh son can cure all diseases under the sun. A person born legs foremost can cure all spine diseases by merely walking on the back of the person affected. There are many more cures equally strange. Imagination is the strongest and most effective cure of them all. There are many ways of getting and of losing luck. Good or bad luck may follow the giving of presents. For instance, no lass would ever receive from her lad a pin, nor would a knife be allowed to pass between them, as these would be sure to "cut their love." Should a present be returned after it was

once accepted, which in change of friendly relations not infrequently happens, very bad luck will ensue to the donor. On certain days of the year nothing belonging to one man may be removed from his premises to that of another without greatly endangering his luck, if not altogether transferring it to the other.

As the fisherman moves about and scans the ocean, there are many things about it that may indicate to him what is in store for him. He may be driven to sea, in full hopes of success, if he merely smells as if fish were about him. Sea birds occupy a very important place in his observations. At sea by their flights they can direct him to places where fish is likely to be got, while at other times their shoreward flights indicate the coming storm. Their perching on the rigging of the vessel is invariably indicative of something mysterious. At times the sailors catching the bird and confining it in some place where escape would be impossible, find afterwards on opening the place of confinement that no bird is there. This vanished bird was the foreteller of certain death to one or other of the crew. Usually the pigeon is this grim and mysterious messenger. Birds by their calls may point out morals, or may encourage the faint-hearted, or indeed at any juncture supply the needed advice or direction. A common sea-bird is always seen hobbling about on the wildest headlands of the coast, apparently never going in search of food, but depending upon the stray particles that the lashing billows may cast at its feet. There it sits making an incessant noise, giving vent to its expectations that a ship with grain will be wrecked there. The expectant notes are "Long eorna, long eorna." One day an old woman was going along the shore in a most dejected mood, for matters had not thrived well with her. She had all her days lived in the hopes of receiving some unknown legacy, but now, after her patience had been tried for nigh sixty years, she was prepared to let her hopes go to the winds. Just at that point a common sea bird screamed out in its shrill notes, "Tri fich't," (fichead.) The old dame was heard to reply, "Tha thu breugach 's e th'ann tri cheud." Her old hopes were revived in her breast, though we are sorry to have to relate that she departed this life without even the three score. The seal has at all times occupied

a prominent place in the stories of the fisher people. Sometimes indeed its relations with some of their number were of a most intimate nature. Very few fisher communities are without some family or other whose descent can be traced to some noted seal or selchie. Strange theories of the origin and habits of fishes are related. God created all the fishes except the mackerel, if I remember well. The devil wished to try his hand at fish creating, and so formed the mackerel, but he had after all to apply to God to put life into it. All fishes at first had the power of speech. And many stories are related of the ready use they made of it. The black spots on the haddock are well-known to have been caused by Christ having taken a haddock in his hand. Those inhabitants of the deep about which most stories are told are—

“ An giomach, an rònach 's an ròn
Tri seoid a chuain.”

[The lobster, the mackerel, and the seal, the three heroes of the sea.]

PREPARATION FOR SEA-GOING.

The greatest carefulness is necessary on the part of the fisherman as every step of his may influence for good or for bad his future luck. As the boat is moved from its winter quarters luck must be drunk to it in full bumpers, and any niggardliness on the part of the owner in supplying the necessary drink is sure to be followed with corresponding bad returns from the harvest of the sea. In preparing the nets or the lines a small bit of worsted thread or of a garment belonging to a female relative is twisted into the baulk rope. Some of the female relatives are very lucky, and, consequently, their friendship is eagerly sought after and retained. The ill-will of these is always to be avoided, as then success is out of the question. After the nets are laid in the boat the females walk up and down on them; in Buckie and elsewhere they even go further. An old piece or article of clothing is also usually put into the bread kit. New things are always unlucky. In certain places a woman arrived at maturity must not step across a line while it is being baited for no fish would then come near it. The whole burden of work, and all pertaining to it, it would seem lies on the shoulders of the fisherman's female relatives. They mend the nets, stretch the lines, procure bait, carry, clean, and sell the fish. They often run shares in the boats and

nets. The men have merely to work at sea, and even there sometimes you find the ever active female prepared to take her share should it be necessary.

To render a boat fully prepared for the sea, not merely must it be seaworthy and thoroughly seagoing, but all luck and wind, etc. charms, must be present. The horse-shoe is invariably present as a preventive against any possible harm from witchcraft. A Fifeshire fisherman, after a very prosperous career in his old fishing boat, presented it to his son, and built a new one for himself. His former good luck did not follow him into this one. After a time, in the dead of night, he went to his son's boat and carried away its anchor, leaving instead of it his own new anchor. This had the desired effect, and the old man was still to the front with his success, though the son could not be expected to be.

Choosing a suitable crew involves great responsibility. Not merely must the men be able-bodied and expert at their work, but they must be men known to be lucky. Some unfortunates there are whom bad luck sticks to year after year, until latterly they get hunted away from every respectable skipper about.

The skipper, let us suppose, has now got his crew completed, and has got everything fully prepared, and that under the most favourable auspices. He leaves his home with some luck token in his pocket, knowing well, though supposed not to know, that he carries another luck charm in his bread kit on his shoulder, and under a shower of old slippers he wends his way to the place where his boat is. For a hare to cross his path should be most ill-omened. A foal seen for the first time that season, or sheep grazing on the hillside, all with their faces turned towards him, would lighten his step and his heart, for goodwill towards him was seen on all sides. A snail, the first seen that season on grassy ground, or meeting a disreputable woman, or even a bad man, who, if he did not of his own accord, wish good luck, did it by request, are good omens. The opposites of these, in all cases, indicate bad fortune. A man with a squint eye, or with a known "bad eye," or a reputedly mean and selfish person, is, by all means, to be shunned. Should he, forgetting anything, have occasion to return, he must not come back by the same route but must go in some other direction.

All things are now ready for sea, and the onlookers inwardly or audibly mutter "Gu 'm beannaich Sealbh i," if the boat be a fine one. If the boat be rowed it must on no account be turned by the left, because that is the way in which it is always done by the Devil, who, by-the-way, does everything the contrary way. For example, he cannot turn a screw in the ordinary way, but in the contrary way. Good sailing depends upon various causes, which must be well attended to. A fisherman was engaged to ferry some gentlemen across a wide arm of the sea. As he had an early intimation of this he set to and mended his sail by putting on a patch of new canvas. After putting to sea, though the boat was under full sail, and a very favourable breeze of wind blowing, it yet laboured heavily in the sea, and seemingly made little progress. Getting out of patience he pulled the boat up into the wind, and tore off the patch, putting in instead part of his own shirt. His boat, which he boasted had no equal for sailing, now regained its usual speed.

When a crew are setting out for a distant port the duty of attending to the wind charms devolves upon the friends at home. Charms may be put under the thwarts of the vessel, but one way remarkable for its cruelty must be mentioned. In Lewis, when the boats used to leave for the East Coast fishing, a cat was put into a bag and kept there, without food or drink, until word was received announcing the safe arrival of the boats at their destination. In these days of telegraphs it might not be so much cruelty to puss, but, in former days, when Donald was certainly no scribe, and in no hurry to procure one, and add to that the time a letter would take to reach Lewis, no one need wonder that few cats survived the ordeal. Yet another cat story is come to hand. In summer the East Coast fishermen move, with their whole families, from one place to another. Puss is very often locked up in the untenanted house in order to ensure a safe passage to its masters. In old stories puss occupies a prominent place, and would seem in this case to be confined as a hostage from the demon of storms.

A party of ladies and gentlemen lately spending their holidays in Skye one evening went out to sea for a sail. It got so calm that the boat made no progress. One of the gentlemen, in fun,

said that they should whistle for wind. An old fisherman on board, with the greatest earnestness of gesture, interposed, saying that it was not "canny" to whistle for wind. He had before then experienced the worst consequence of such. Laughing him to scorn, they whistled away, but ere long a tremendous hurricane of wind came on, so that it was with difficulty they reached the shore. The man having got ashore with his life, was more convinced than ever that whistling for wind is a dangerous thing.

A merman appearing at the helm of a boat when sailing is always dreaded. Neither his name nor anything about his being there must be mentioned, for he may then sink the boat. The thing to do is to put ashore at once.

In proceeding to fish, nothing about fish they do not expect to catch may be mentioned. On no account must the word "salmon" be uttered, nor may the birds that indicate the presence of fish be pointed at by the finger. To count the fish as they are being caught is equally fatal to good luck.

The death of the whole crew, or of part of it, or of a future crew in that boat, is known by one or more of the crew seeing the boat suddenly get minutely small, or by seeing the boat lurch in some direction, as if borne down by some tremendous weight. The face of a person about to be drowned may be seen in the water trail of the boat. To see a spectral boat, either at sea or on a fresh water loch, is a sign of drowning. Rats in a body deserting a boat, or a dog accustomed to go to sea in a boat, refusing to go, is always a sign of coming disaster.

A man between his contract and his marriage must on no account go to sea. Lately, a man, a week or so before his marriage, was going with his boat from one port to another. It was a fine summer day, and all things went well until they came in sight of his mother-in-law's house. A bee came whirring past the boat, and immediately thereafter a squall of wind almost threw the boat on its beam ends. Although they were two-thirds of the way home they turned back to the port from which they started, afraid that his mother-in-law, who was known to be opposed to the marriage, and an uncanny person to boot, might sink the boat. He again attempted to go by sea on the day before his marriage. The crew did their utmost to prevent him

going, but he would hear no reason. As soon as the boat started, it was driven by the waves on a sandbank, where it had to remain for a whole fortnight. He was literally thrown overboard, and had to make the best of his way ashore.

Many stirring stories might be told, but these are given to show how superstition enters into every circumstance of the fisherman's life. A good collection of myths could be made from those related by them as they while away the time at sea, or while at home, around the blazing fire in winter, mending the nets, and thinking of the sailors of yore.
