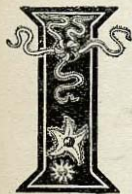


## AMONG THE KELPERS.



IN the end of March and the beginning of April, when the isles rise brown from a steel-gray, wind-ruffled sea, their bare unloveliness is veiled by pale blue smoke-drifts, which cast over the low, sloping shores a certain charm of remoteness and of mystery. Later in the year, when the summer seas are only less blue than the skies above them, and every island shines like an emerald, white jets and spirals as from many altars rise round all the shores. For spring and summer are the kelper's seasons, and long, dry days, which scorch and wither the young crops, are welcome to the crofter who has secured a good stock of "tangles" in winter and a big share in a "brook of ware," now that "burning weather" has come.

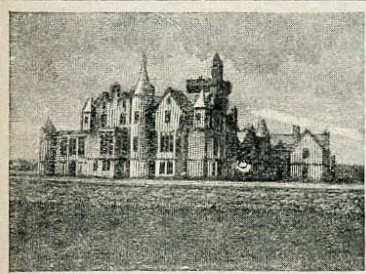
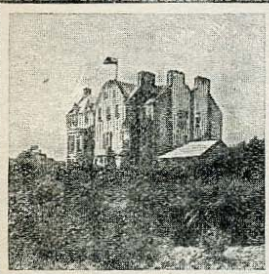
Until recently no kelp was burned after Lammas—that is, August 2—but of late years, when the season has been dry, the fires have been burned even so late as October.

The kelper's year may be reckoned from mid-November. Then he is paid for his work in the year that is ended. Then the gales sweep up from north or west, tearing from its deep sea-bed the red-ware, of which the long supple stems are known

to the islesmen as "tangles." Should the wind freshen to a gale during the night, the diligent kelper is up and out before the first glimmer of dawn. Buffeted by the wind and lashed by the stinging spray, he peers through the darkness, watching for those shadows against the white surf of the breaking waves which he knows to be rolling masses of seaweed and wrack. He is armed with a "pick," an implement resembling a very strong hayfork, but with the prongs set, like those of a rake, at right angles to the handle. With this pick, struggling often mid-thigh deep in the rushing waters, he grapples the tumbling seaweed and drags it up the beach, out of reach of the waves. For the wind may change, and the "brook," as he calls a drift of weed, if not secured at once, may be carried out to sea again, or even worse, to some other strand where it will be lost to him. Of course, the winds and waves often do this work alone, and pile the tangles in huge, glittering rolls along the beaches.

When the brook is fairly on the strand, the work of the kelper is only begun. He has to carry the tangles from the beach to the seabanks above, in carts where that is possible, and where no carts can pass, then laboriously on hand-barrows. I know of one strand on which the great gale of November 1893 landed a brook of tangles which kept the kelpers busy for three months. Once on the banks, the tangles are stacked in great heaps on "steiths," or foundations built of sea-rounded stones arranged in such fashion as to give free ingress to the air. There they lie till spring, when by the action of wind and sun they have become hard, dry, and wrinkled—brands ready for the burning.





*Some "Big Hooses."—11.*

1. Trumbland, Rousay. 2. Graemeshall, Holm. 3. Melsetter. 4. Balfour Castle  
5. Smoogro, Orphir.

Only the tangles can be dried in winter; but the softer parts—the foliage, one may call it—of the red-ware is not lost, but goes to manure the fields, and until a sufficient quantity has been obtained for that purpose none is made into kelp.

Each proprietor in the islands has right, generally under a charter from the Crown, to the weed cast up on his shores. Each ware-strand, or beach where drift-weed comes to land, is set apart for a certain number of tenants on the estate to which it belongs, and each brook of ware as it comes ashore is divided among these tenants, usually in proportion to their rents. The general custom is, that it is decided by lot from which portion of the brook each man shall draw his share. The middle is generally considered the best part, as there the weed is in its greatest bulk, and less rolled and beaten by the sea than at the ends; but it may happen that one end is near the only part of the beach where the ware can be carried up, and then the man who draws his lot there is saved much labour.

The sharing of the ware is a fertile seed of dispute and an inexhaustible source of quarrel. The "kelp-grieve," or overseer who acts for the proprietor, generally settles all disputes; and each kelper, with the aid of his family, carries up his share of the brook, and spreads it on the drying-greens. These are most frequently links that know not cleek or driver, and upon them in the early morning the ware is spread, as thinly as may be, to be dried on the short, crisp grass by sun and wind.

To the man whose daily life is built about with stone and lime, the summer work of the kelpers shines



tempting as the waters to Tantalus. He thinks not of that kelper in winter, plunging and struggling with the slippery tangles amid the turmoil of the surf, but dreams only of quiet summer days and the gray glimmer of sunlit waters seen through a veil of drifting smoke.

The links roll down in long, green billows from



*Kelp-burning.*

the ruins of an old feudal castle, where the brown rabbit is the door-ward, and in whose towers the starling nests unscared—roll down to a little bay, where the long waves of the Atlantic come up unceasingly, curving in great, green arches, before they break in thunder of white foam on the brown rocks and yellow sand. Where the grass is thin and scant the sand shines through, and this makes a bad dry-

ing-green, as kelp is of less value when mixed with sand. But here is a short, close turf, nibbled upon by rabbits, a racing-ground for lambs, where the thrift or sea-pink meets the meadow-clover, and thyme and crowfoot break in ripples of purple and gold to sweeten all the summer air.

Than this a better drying-green cannot be found. On one side of the bay a long stretch of flat rocks runs down from the grass to the sea, and they too are utilized, when tides allow, to dry the seaweed. Here, in May and June, the whole air tingles with the song of larks innumerable. Long before sunrise, before the last stars have faded in the west, they are up, weaving a magical garment of song over all the green land. All day and far into the dim twilight that is our northern night they sing without ceasing. Larks are everywhere. In that tuft of grass at our feet is a nest with four of the dusky-brown eggs which hold next year's music. There, in the ditch by the roadside, is another nest, from which the featherless young raise feeble necks to gape for food, showing their yellow tongues with the three black spots, which children here are told will appear on the tongue of that child who takes the laverock's nest. Again, a fledgeling, speckled like a toad, rises suddenly from the clover and flies a few yards, while its anxious parents circle close overhead with little tremulous bursts of song, or flutter with trailing wing along the grass.

That pretence of a broken wing, which now seems to be an instinct, must surely at first have been arrived at by a process of reasoning. There must have been long since a broken wing, and a boy, or a dog, or a snake to chase the fluttering sufferer, and some



wise observer among the mother-birds of that forgotten day to see and make a note of the chase, and with the heart-leap of a happy inspiration to find in it a new method of protecting her eggs and tender young, and to hand down the lesson she learned to our blithesome bird of the wilderness.

But this summer world, so thrilled with lark music, is not held by the lark alone in fee. From every dry-stone wall young starlings are calling, "Chirr! chirr! chirr!" and the old birds hurry to and fro between their nests and the brown fields, soon to wave with oats and bere, where they gather the insects and grubs their younglings love. Their bronze feathers gleam in the sunshine as they pass, and at their harsh note of warning as they see strangers near their homes the tumult of the young birds among the stones is instantly hushed. The farmer owes these cheerful and busy birds a heavy debt of gratitude, as the number of his insect enemies which they destroy is incalculable.

On the smooth turf the dried ware is piled in conical heaps, like giant molehills, to preserve it from the heavy night dews and from possible rain, and among the brown hillocks the wheatear bobs up and down, flirting his tail and repeating his cheerful "Tchk! tchk! chek-o! chek-o!" At times the rapture of summer and of his love inspire him with a vain desire of song. Up he goes, as if he were in very deed the skylark he takes as his model, uttering harsh and unmelodious notes—a feeble travesty of the golden rain of song that falls from the blue above him. But his flight extends upwards only a yard or two, and he sinks down again, chuckling to himself, as pleased with his song as any minor poet.

As the day wears down to afternoon the corncrakes begin to call from the young grass, and all night long they answer each other from field to field. Speak of them to the kelpers, and everywhere one hears the same story of their hibernation in old walls. That landrails migrate has been proved beyond question, but equally beyond question does it seem that some few sleep out the winter here. Any kelper will tell how he, or if not he himself then some one of his neighbours, once in winter found a corncrake in some old dyke, to all appearance dead. He carried it home, and, laying it before the fire, watched the death-like trance slowly melt into life and motion.

As to the winter sleep I can only speak at second-hand; but I have seen the birds in summer run like rats into the dry-stone dykes with which our crofters so love to encumber and adorn their land. That these dykes can be meant only for ornament is evident to the most casual observer in this land where ponies, cows, sheep, ay, and the very geese, are oftentimes tethered by the leg.

Yet if the dykes serve no other purpose, they provide nesting-places for the starling and the wheatear, for the rock-pipit and the sparrow, which save the crops of the crofter from destruction by grub and fly. Mice also shelter in them, and rats in those islands where rats are found. In the happy isle of which I write no rat can live. They come ashore time and again from vessels touching at the little pier near the village, but where they go or what fate awaits them none can tell—only this, that they are seen no more on the green lap of the world.

But we have left the ware too long in the sun.



Should rain come, the kelper sees much of his profit melt away, for the salt which it causes to crystallize on the dried weed wastes, and what is left makes inferior kelp. All along the edges of the drying-greens are the burning pits or kilns—hollows for all the world like huge plovers' nests in shape, lined with flat blue stones from the beach. They are about two feet deep and some five feet in diameter.

When the ware is ready to be burned a smouldering peat or a handful of lighted straw is laid in the bottom of the pit. Over this dry ware is piled, slowly at first till the fire catches, and ever more rapidly as the red core of smouldering flame waxes.

Sometimes ware and tangles are burned separately, but more frequently the kelper burns them together. The tangles make the stronger and better kelp. The pit is filled, and the ware or tangles are piled on till the mass rises two feet or more above the level of the earth. Then for six or eight hours it must be carefully watched and tended, and ever new fuel piled on to prevent a burst of flame. When tangles are being burnt alone, the kelper finishes off his pit with dried ware, as otherwise the tougher knots and lumps of the latest burned tangles would not be thoroughly consumed.

Each pit holds about half a ton, and takes the best part of a summer day to burn, the actual time depending on the state of the wind and the condition of the weed. When at last it smoulders low, it is "raked" before being left to cool. One man takes a spade with a very small blade and a handle fully seven feet long, the lower half being of iron; two other workers, as often women as men, have "rakes,"

implements not unlike a rough caricature of a golfer's iron, but with handles as long as that of the spade. With these rakes the kelp is mixed and smoothed, while the spademan turns it up from the bottom of the pit. Hard work it is and hot, great jets of flame shooting out under the spade from what looks like gray crumbling earth mingled with black ashes and white quartz; for the kelp assumes so many colours and forms that to describe it accurately were impossible. As the kelper turns and tosses the glowing mass on a warm June evening, he knows he has come near the end of that labour which began in the gray winter dawn, when the rolls of red-weed lashed about him amid the roaring backwash of the waves.

When the kelp has been sufficiently mixed, the pit is levelled and smoothed over, all the outlying ashes are swept in with a handful of dry ware, and it is left to cool and harden. Then, as the kelpers turn homewards, the white sea fog creeps up by the rocks where all day long the kelp smoke drifted.

Such is the work of the kelper, and such the places of his toil. An easy and a pleasant life it is compared to that of the men who labour in the bowels of the earth or in the great manufactories of smoke-darkened cities. He has the green turf under his foot and the clear sky over him, the sea makes music for him unceasingly, and the salt winds bring him health and strength. The furred and feathered folks share his land with him, and gather their harvest on the same shores. As he goes to his work in the morning, through the silver mists of dawn, a flock of blue rock-doves with great clatter of wings flash off through the



clear air. The redshank pipes shrilly at him from the copestone of the nearest wall, and over the ploughed fields where their precious eggs are lying the pewits wheel and scream. "Pewit-weet! pee-weet!"—their note has in it for the isles folk, to whom the cuckoo is but a name, the very voice of spring and hope and love. The ringed plover stands motionless on his three-toed yellow feet, calling with his sweet, low note, and invisible save to the keenest eye until he makes a little run and betrays himself. Linnets swing and sing on the swaying thistles and among the heather. On the blue waters of the bay a little fleet of eider ducks is afloat, and their curious, hoarse, barking chuckle rolls up over the waters. Perhaps a seal raises his round head, shiring like a bottle, and gazes with mild eyes at the men upon the beaches; while overhead gulls and terns swing past, cleaving the strong air with careless wing. Far out to sea the white gannets hawk to and fro. Suddenly one poises in mid-air for a moment, then drops like a stone into the water, a fountain of white spray flashing up in the sunlight as he disappears. Your kelper will tell you how in his younger days he caught the solan geese by means of a herring fastened to a board and sunk a few inches below the surface of the water. The bird sees the fish, poises, and swoops down only to drive his mighty bill through the board and break his neck.

Nearer shore than the gannets the kittiwakes are fishing, when suddenly there glides among them a dusky skua, who forces the luckiest fisher to drop his spoil, which the ravager catches in mid-air and bears off. A true pirate of the air is the skua, and reminds

me always of those low, dark feluccas so dreadful and so dear to the sailor on the high seas of romance. Far up in the blue ether a peregrine falcon sweeps round, circling wide on motionless, outspread wings, or a raven goes croaking from the cliffs to seek a prey, as he may have done for years unnumbered. If the tradition of his longevity may be believed, that dark corbie who flies croaking over the kelpers toiling in the morning sunlight, and sees the white smoke rise from their harmless kilns—what fires may he not have seen upon these beaches, and what strange smoke of sacrifice go up from forgotten altars to the unchanging heavens? Give him even a shorter lease of life than that which tradition assigns him, and still he may remember the blazing beacons leap up to carry from isle to isle a warning of the coming of Norse invaders. Allow him only two short centuries, and yet he must have watched the smoke of many a burning homestead in the days when the followers of the "Wee, wee German Lairdie" avenged their private wrongs in the name of their king. The older men among the kelpers still tell tales of the Jacobite lairds who lay hid like conies in the clefts of the rocks till these calamities were overpast.

The old stories—the folk-tales of the isles—linger fragmentary among the kelping people. One may hear from them how all the fairies were seen to leave some island riding on tangles, and how they all went down in the windy firth, never to be seen again of mortals. Here is a man, bowed and crippled by rheumatism, who will tell how he was shot in the back by a "hill-ane" when ploughing. He saw not his assailant, but only the shadow of him on the



earth. Another old man remembers having his side hurt as a boy, and going to a "wise woman" to be cured. She told him he had been "forespoken"—that is, bewitched—by a woman then dead, and made him drink water mixed with earth from the "fore-speaker's" grave. She then put a hoop covered with a sheep's skin on his head, a basin of water on that, and poured melted lead through the head of a key into the water, giving the patient a piece of the lead in the form of a heart as a charm. The cure wrought by this modern Norna was not, however, effectual.

There are many quaint and even beautiful turns of speech among these hard-working crofters. Their faces shine on my memory red like setting suns through the white reek of the kelp pits. Here is one whose fathers fled from Perthshire after "the '45," and who thinks that some day he would like to go back to see the old place again—the "old place" which none of his have looked upon for one hundred and forty years! He toils night and day in summer cultivating his croft, fishing for lobsters, and making kelp. His rent is perhaps seven or eight pounds. Books, you would think, must be unknown to him; yet he will tell you he has "always been a great reader of Sir Walter Scott's works," and under the spell of that mighty wizard his hard life has budded and wreathed itself with romance.

At the next pit is a man of a very different type. Quiet and slow, this man has led an honest life, with an eye ever to the main chance. Pressed once for an answer to some question important to the settling of a kelp dispute, after vain attempts at evasion, he burst out, "Gie me time, Mr. Blank, to wind up me mind."

Across the bay the pits are watched by an old bachelor—a *rara avis* among the kelpers—a little, clean-shaven, mouse-like man, who has “money in the bank.” He holds a croft where his ancestors have dwelt longer than the memory of man extends. The peat fire smouldering on his hearth has, to his certain knowledge, burned unquenched for two hundred years. How much longer ago it was kindled tradition recordeth not. Every night his last work is to “rest” that precious fire, and every morning it claims his earliest care. All his life he has toiled, gathering a harvest both from land and sea, and a harvest of content and happiness as well, such as few crofters know how to reap. “When I come oot on a fine simmer morning at four o’clock wi’ never anither reek but me ain, I’m laird o’ a’ the land as far as I can see.” He has the secret of the lordship of the eye, which can give to a penniless man more profit of the pleasant earth than to the greatest lord of land among them all.

Look at this fellow, gaunt, black, and shaggy; he might be one of *Punch’s* Scotch elders. Asked if he remembered some event of thirty years ago—“No, sir,” he said. “Ye see, I wasna at hame then; I was divin’ in the face o’ the sea for a livin’.” He had been a fisherman, and quite naturally chose to say so in this poetic phrase.

These are only a few from among the many typical kelpers whose friendship I am proud to own. But if the types among them are many and various, in one thing they are all alike—their capacity for hard work. That work does not cease with the smoothing over of the smouldering pits. When the kelp has cooled it is



broken up and lifted out of the pit in great lumps which look like gray slag, with streaks of white, blue, and brown running through it. Should it be exposed to rain its quality is much deteriorated, and to avoid this danger storehouses are built by the lairds, to which the kelp is carted. The kelp grieve weighs each man's quantity as it is brought in, and he is paid a fixed sum per ton. When a sufficient quantity is gathered in the store a vessel is chartered, and where there is a pier the kelp is carted alongside. In islands where there is no pier it must be taken off in small boats. The kelpers themselves provide the carriage. Then the sails are spread, and the produce of the year's work is carried off to chemical works far over sea, where, by processes unknown to me, iodine is extracted from it. The kelper receives about two pounds ten shillings for each ton of kelp he manufactures, and the importance and benefit of the industry to these crofters cannot be overestimated. I have known a man paying a rent of eight pounds receive thirty-four pounds for his kelp in one year. Nor is the actual price he receives the only benefit the crofter derives from kelp. Were it not for the share of the profit falling to the laird, he too often could not, in these days, afford to assist his tenants in improving either their houses or their land. On the whole, then, the kelper's lot is not an unhappy one. His work lies in pleasant places, and it is eminently healthy, and his days, as a rule, are long in the land and on the sea.

DUNCAN J. ROBERTSON.

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