

A VANISHING ISLAND.



YNHALLOW—the “holy island”—lies in the middle of the fierce tideway that separates the Orcadian mainland from Rousay, the Hrolfsey of the Sagas.

“Eynhallow frank, Eynhallow free,
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the
sea;

With a roaring roost on every side,
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the tide.”

So runs an old island rhyme, and surely never was there an island so beaten upon and shouted round by the angry tides. It sets a black front of jagged rocks to the Atlantic on the west, and the great billows, rushing on the rocks, send spouts of spray high in the air, to whirl eastward over the gradual slope of the isle. All day long the tide sweeps past on either side, boiling and eddying like a swift and deep river. When the wind is in the north-west and a strong ebb-tide is running, then is the time to see the roosts in all their glory; for the inrolling ocean swell meets the outrushing tide in the narrow channels, and the white waves leap and roar as if some

“wallowing monster spouted
His foam fountains in the sea.”

To see this mad turmoil of the roost on a wild winter day is strange and terrible; but when the white breakers shout and toss themselves in the sunlight of a still June morning there is a paradoxical charm in the sudden outburst of leaping, sparkling foam amid the blue waters, unruffled of any wind, that the wildest storm of winter can never claim.

There is an even stronger fascination in the swift, dark, silent rush of the tides, ceaseless along the shores, sweeping in with the flood and whirling out again with the ebb, and with the little green isle in their midst setting its steep front to the angry ocean, but sheltering with its two long eastward points a quiet sandy bay where no current ever comes.

All along the coast, on either side of Eynhallow Sound, are low green mounds, marking the places where once were the homes of the prehistoric Orcadians, that Celtic or Pictish race which the conquering Norsemen destroyed so completely that there is not in all the place-names of the isles any trace of their forgotten tongue. Amidst such surroundings, one has only to look at Eynhallow to know that it must have gathered legend and tradition in the long years.

In Rousay there still lingers a tale of the breaking of the spell that held Eynhallow sea-bound; for "once upon a time" the isle was enchanted, and visible to human eyes only at rare intervals. It would rise suddenly out of the sea, and vanish as suddenly before any mortal could reach it. And if any one should feel inclined to doubt this tale, can we not point him to the isle of Heather-Bleather, which is still held by the spell of the sea-folk, and appears and disappears even unto this day?

When Eynhallow was still a vanishing island, it became known in Rousay that if any man, seeing the isle, should hold steel in his hand and, taking boat, go out through the tides, never looking at aught but the island, nor ever letting go the steel till he leaped on to its virgin shore, that man should break the spell and win the isle from the sea-folk for his own people. After many failures—and who can tell how many a brave heart went down the tide to the sea-trows in that perilous venture?—there came at last the hour and the man; the vanishing isle was won from the waters, and left standing “in the middle of the tide.”

If there be yet any man brave enough to try the adventure of the vanishing island, Heather-Bleather awaits his coming. I have never met any person who would confess to having seen that mysterious isle, but many of the dwellers by the roosts have spoken to those who saw it rise green out of the waters. This island is the home of the Fin-men or Sea-men (not to be too rashly identified with the sea-trows), a race of beings who play a prominent part in Orcadian folk-lore.

In Rousay they tell of a maiden mysteriously rapt from the hillside over the sea, and sought in vain by her kindred. Long years after, “when grief was calm and hope was dead,” the lost girl’s father and brothers were at sea in their fishing-boat, when there rolled down upon them one of those dense banks of sea-fog so common in the North in summer. The fishermen knew not where they were, but sailed on until their boat grounded on an island which at first they took to be Eynhallow. They soon found, however, that they

were on an island they had never seen before, and on going up to a "white house" they found in the "guid-wife" who admitted them their long lost daughter and sister. She welcomed them, and in a little time her husband and his brother came in from the sea in "wisps" (the local name for great rolls of heather "simmons," or ropes, used in thatching houses). Others say that they came in the guise of seals, and cast off their skins. Be that as it may, they treated their human connections well and hospitably. When the time came for the men to leave for home, the woman refused to accompany them, but she gave her father a knife, and told him that so long as he kept it he could come to the isle of the waters whenever he pleased. Just as the boat put to sea the knife slipped from the old man's hand into the water; in a moment the fog swallowed the island, and no man has set foot on it since.

In summer and autumn evenings, when the sea-fog comes rolling up in great banks from the Atlantic, and the westerling sun fills the hollows between with fantastic lights and shadows—when the islands seem all to shift and change, appearing and disappearing among the huge masses of white vapour, it requires no very strong imagination to see once more the green isle of Heather-Bleather riding the waters, real and solid as its sister of Eynhallow, won so long since from the sea-folk.

Of its old enchantment the isles-folk say that Eynhallow still retains some small part. No steel or iron stake, such as are used for tethering cattle, will remain in its soil after sunset. Of their own motion they leap from the ground at the moment when

the sea swallows the sun. Then, again, no rat or mouse can live upon the island, and it is not long since it was usual to bring boatloads of earth from Eynhallow to lay under the foundations of new houses, and under the corn-stacks in the farmyard. It was firmly believed that through the charmed earth no mouse or rat could pass.

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[Since the preceding article first appeared, a very interesting discovery has been made on Eynhallow, which may help to explain both the name of the island—the “Holy Isle”—and the existence of so many supernatural legends regarding it. References are made in the Sagas to a monastery in Orkney in Norse times, and it is recorded that an abbot from this monastery was appointed to that of Melrose in 1175. Many probable sites were suggested as having been occupied by this monastery, but no remains could be found, and some doubt was felt as to whether it ever really existed in Orkney at all. In the year 1900, however, Professor Dietrichson, a Norwegian, examined the ruins on Eynhallow, and was able to show that they are the long-sought remains of the lost monastery—small in size, but complete in all the details of a Cistercian monastery of the period referred to in the Sagas.]