

CHAPTER III

Folk-lore and Superstitions of Fishermen

MANY and strange are the customs connected with the daily life of fishermen in all parts of the world. They begin at birth, ending only with death.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD. In Scotland one finds an almost universal belief that fairies and evil spirits can be kept away from a child at the time of birth by placing over the bed of the expectant mother a pine-branch or torch and a basket containing bread and cheese. A pair of old trousers hung near the head of the bed is also supposed to possess the same virtue.¹ In some villages on the coast of Scotland it is believed that women who claim second sight can foretell a child's future by looking at the shape of its forehead.²

There are innumerable superstitions connected with childbirth among the Breton fishermen, of which I can mention only a few. For instance, if a male child is born when his father is at sea and the tide is rising he will grow up into a good fisherman. On the other hand, if the tide is on the ebb he is sure to perish by shipwreck.³ In Brittany fishermen's babies are often placed in fish-baskets instead of cradles, since it is supposed that this will bring them good luck later on in life when they go to sea.⁴ Necklaces of shells are put round their necks for similar reasons. Greenland fishermen believe that

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 5.

² W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 184.

³ P. Sébillot, *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni*, vol. v, p. 515.

⁴ Sébillot, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. i, p. 5.

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to make a good sailor of a baby boy it is necessary for the father to take off one of his boots and put it underneath the bowl that contains his food.¹ Similar ideas, varying in details, are found in other parts of Europe. At Hull and Hartlepool it was formerly customary when a fisherman's child was first taken



FISHERMEN AT HASTINGS

to visit a neighbour to give it a piece of bread and an egg.²

GAMES. No matter where one goes in any part of the world one finds the children of fishermen playing much the same sort of games. In the far-off Andaman Islands you will discover the native boys making little boats of sago-palm, and having miniature regattas with them. They are taken on board their fathers' boats at an early age, and are taught to shoot fish with bows and arrows.³ Returning to Europe and making your way to any fishing village on the coast of Brittany or Scotland you will find the boys being taught to bait lines, make nets, and so on.

¹ Eggede, *Description et histoire naturelle du Groënland*, p. 147.

² Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 11.

³ E. H. Mann, *Andaman Islanders*, p. 167.

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The young fisher-lad, of no matter what country, loves to get hold of a knife and, from a bit of wood or a piece of cuttlefish bone, carve out a model boat. Into this he sticks another bit of wood to form a mast; a piece of paper does for a sail, and here is a boat all ready for launching.

In some countries the children love to get hold of crabs and pull off their claws. In Sicily they look for sea-urchins, sprinkle them with salt, and when they start to move cry out, "*Vocami, vocami, centu rami.*"¹ Seaweed provides the children of every fishing village with material for endless games and amusement, and the game of "Ducks and Drakes," played by throwing stones over the surface of the water, seems to



FRENCH FISHER FAMILY,
PORT-EN-BESSIN

have been played by children on the seashore as far back as the time of the ancient Greeks, and was known by the name of *epostracismus*.²

MARRIAGE. The fisher-lad grows into a man, and soon begins to think about taking a wife, while his sister begins to dream of her future husband. Many were the superstitions concerned with the important matter of discovering who the wife or the husband was to be and when the marriage would take place. At Le Pollet, Dieppe, the fisher-lassies would look about on the shore for a certain white stone which they called the 'stone of happiness,' and which, they believed, possessed the

¹ De Gubernatis, *Mythologie zoologique*, vol. ii, p. 265.

² A. B. Gomme, *Traditional Games*, p. 114.

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power of securing them good husbands.¹ The girls in the fishing villages on the coast near Plougasnou and Tregastel, in Brittany, used to drop a hair in the holy-water stoup of a little oratory at Saint-Jean-du-doigt if they wanted to get married before the year was out.²

The maidens around Perros-Guirec still stick pins into the wooden statue of St Guirec that stands in a chapel near the edge of the sea at Ploumanach to induce the saint to find them a partner.

It is very rare for a fisherman to marry a country girl, for a fisherman's wife must be able to help her husband with his craft.

At Chioggia, near Venice, it was at one time the custom for a young fisherman who wished to marry, not to propose to a girl himself, but to leave his mother to find a suitable wife for him while he was away at sea. The mother would look around for

a *fiancée* for her son, make the necessary arrangements, buy the ring, and on the return of the future bridegroom from fishing present him to his bride. The two would be wedded before the young man went to sea again.³

The 'penny weddings' (so called because each guest had to contribute a certain sum toward the entertainment) were a great feature in almost every fishing village on the east coast of Scotland. In many places seven or eight weddings would be celebrated on the same day, generally on a Thursday or Saturday, so as to have the week-end for keeping up the celebrations until the boats

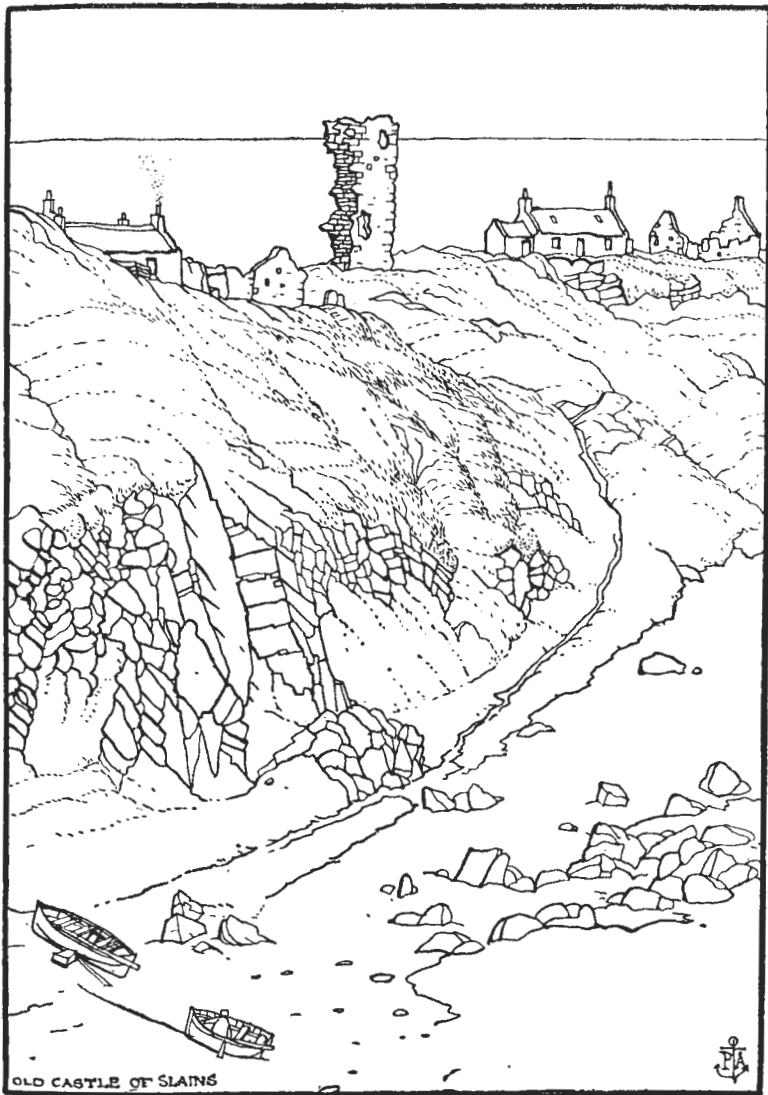


FISHER-LAD AT
RAMSGATE

¹ A. Bosquet, *La Normandie romanesque*, p. 177.

² W. Gregor, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. xiv, p. 349.

³ *Revista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*, vol. i, p. 308.



OLD CASTLE OF SLAINS

ABERDEENSHIRE FISHING VILLAGE



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went to sea again on the following Monday morning.¹ In the neighbourhood of Aberdeen immediately after a wedding it was once the custom for the youngest two members of the crew of the boat to which the bridegroom belonged to carry a large flag into the room, envelop the bride in it, and give her a kiss !

At Roseheart, near Fraserburgh, part of the bride's trousseau consisted of her chest, or 'kist.' It was always the first object to be removed from her father's house to her new home, and was never locked until it had been outside the door. As a general rule it was carried outside without being allowed to touch the ground, placed in a cart, and then locked. This same curious custom was observed by fishermen when they left home to fish in another district. At Macduff, for instance, the 'kist' of a fisherman going off for the summer herring fishery was never locked until it had been removed from his house.²

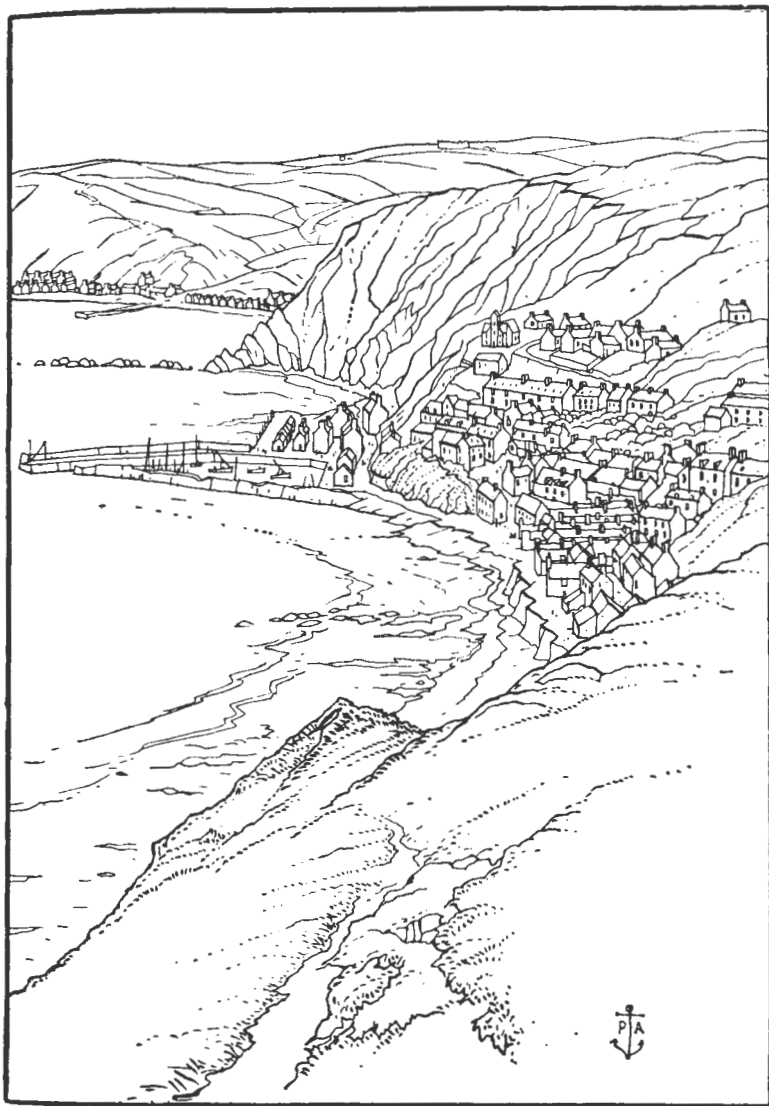
There was a superstition that a bride's trousseau must never be taken away on a Saturday ; it would bring her bad luck. It is related at Crovie, an out-of-the-way village on the borders of Aberdeen and Banff, that on one occasion a cart came and removed a bride's 'kist' on a Saturday. When it was discovered the kist was put into a boat and rowed back to Crovie.³

On the day after a wedding it was formerly the custom in many Scottish villages for the wives and mothers of those who were to go to sea with the bridegroom to present each other with a basin of flour. When a bride goes to live in another village her friends come the evening before the wedding, bringing her little presents,

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 180.

² W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. ii, p. 353 ; vol. iii, p. 310.

³ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 100.



CROVIE AND GARDENSTOWN

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such as fish, flour, and other domestic articles.¹ The future bride offers them tea in return, and before they leave there is music and dancing. At Roseheartly it was supposed that after a fisherman had been married a bad storm would take place.¹ In many of the Scottish east coast fishing villages the bridegroom used always to slip a piece of silver into his boot as a charm against bad luck.²

At Boulogne boats, houses, and often whole streets are decorated in honour of a fisherman's wedding. Here the wives exercise a great influence and control over their fishermen husbands. They are usually in charge of all domestic expenditure. If a Boulogne fisherwife was specially pleased with her husband she would take him to a pastry-cook and buy him a cake or give him a drink. On the contrary, when angry with their menfolk the Boulogne ladies would remove their elaborate head-dresses (known as *beaux soleils*); seeing this, fishermen would keep at a safe distance, knowing that their wives were annoyed with them.³

MARRIED LIFE. In most primitive fishing communities the work of the men is limited to catching fish. Once a fisherman has stepped ashore from his boat he has nothing more to do until he goes to sea again, except to mend his nets. On the Île de Sein, Brittany, the women may still be seen working in the fields, carting agricultural produce, building walls, collecting seaweed, and doing many other jobs while the men sit around smoking their pipes with their hands in their pockets. It is said that the fishermen are often ignorant of the exact locality of the land owned by their family on this tiny island.⁴

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 100.

² W. Gregor, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. x, p. 500.

³ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 56.

⁴ P. F. Anson, *Mariners of Brittany*, p. 150.

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At Saint-Jacut, Brittany, if it were discovered that a man had been so weak as to allow himself to be beaten by his wife, his neighbours would seize him by force, attach a basket to his back and make him walk from *auberge* to *auberge*. If he could afford to treat the crowd of spectators to drinks his penance would be cut short. Sometimes the ceremony was more elaborate: a pair of trousers was hung up on a pole in a cart, in which the woman who had beaten her husband would ride, the onlookers crying out as she went past: "*Par ma foi mon fu', est elle qui porte les brées.*" The unfortunate husband would be put into another cart decorated with a petticoat, thus indicating that the normal rôle of husband and wife had been inverted! ¹

In many Scottish fishing villages it was formerly the custom for a woman to throw a broom after men who were leaving for the herring-fishing for the first time. This was also done when a new net was removed from a house to a boat.² It was always regarded as unlucky for a woman who had friends or relations at sea to comb her hair after nightfall.

When the men are away at the whale-fishing the Madagascan women remain shut up at home, speaking to nobody, observing a strict fast, and keeping the doors of their huts closed.³

SICKNESS AND DEATH. Among Breton fisherfolk the most unexpected and strange beliefs connected with sickness and death are to be found. All round the coast of Brittany it is held almost universally that if a man dies at sea his wife will be warned of the fact in some supernatural manner—*e.g.*, by a bird knocking at the

¹ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 57.

² W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 308.

³ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 60.

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window, by a drop of blood appearing on her hand, or by the sound of water dripping near her bed at night. Very often a woman will refuse to believe in the death of her son or husband unless she has received an *avènement*, or warning.¹

At Saint-Cast, on the north coast of Brittany, if a fisherman dies on shore when his boat is at sea it is



OLD YARMOUTH FISHERMAN

supposed that one of the crew will be 'warned' at the exact moment at which he breathes his last. Another version of the same superstition is found among Scandinavian seafarers, who believe that if a fisherman is dying on shore the oars of his boat will be turned round at night by invisible hands.²

In *David Copperfield* Dickens refers to a curious belief among the Yarmouth fisherfolk: "People," said Mr Peggotty, the fisherman,

"can't die along the coast except when the tide's pretty nigh out. They can't be born unless it's pretty nigh in—not properly born, till flood. He's a-going out with the tide—he's a-going out with the tide. It's ebb at half-arter three, slack water half-an-hour. If he lives till it turns, he'll hold his own till past the flood, and go out with the next tide."

When a death had taken place in a fisherman's family on the east coast of Scotland butter and onions were always removed from the house, and for some mysterious

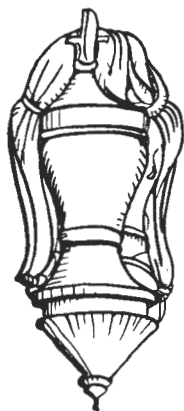
¹ Sébillot, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. xiv, p. 345.

² O. Nicolaisen, *Sagen og eventyr fra Nordland*, p. 8.

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reason no soil was allowed to be taken away from a village until the dead fisherman had been buried.¹

Perhaps one of the most curious customs connected with death is that known as *la proella*, which is still practised on the isle of Ushant, off Brittany, where most of the male inhabitants are fishermen. As soon as the news of a sailor's death has been received by the civil authorities on the island his oldest male relative is informed. It is this man's duty to go round to all the houses on the island where relations are living to announce the sad news. He generally does so with a definite formula, such as, "You are informed that this evening there will be the ceremony of *la proella*." Not until after dark does he dare to approach the house of the widow, and



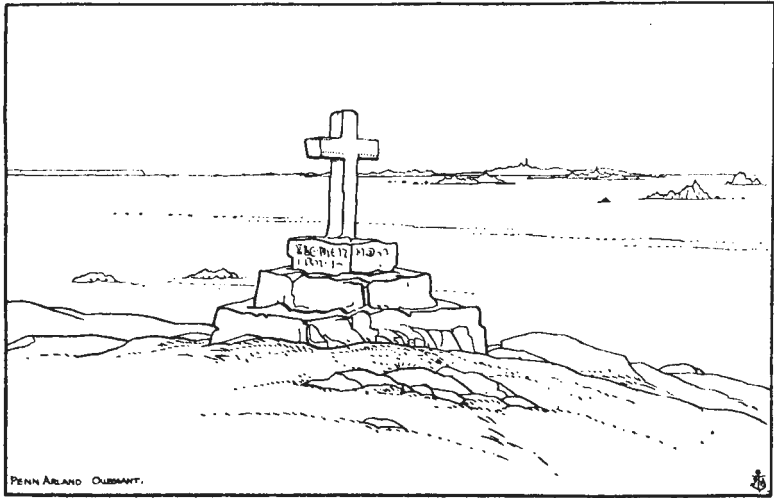
"LA PROELLA"

then he does so by stealth, knocking three times very gently at the window. He then enters the door and tells his tragic story: "To-night, my poor child, *la proella* will take place in your house." The women of the neighbourhood who have already heard the news have now come in, and mingle their groans and cries with those of the widow and the mourning of the family. This is called *mener le deuil*. While the lamentation is going on the room is cleared out, a white cloth is laid on the table, upon which are put two napkins folded in the shape of a cross, in the centre of which is placed a wax cross formed out of bits of the blessed candles distributed on Candlemas Day, February 2. This cross is supposed to represent the body of the dead sailor.

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, pp. 206-207.

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Crowds of mourners begin to arrive from every corner of the island, while a professional mourner, known as a *prieuse*, recites all the usual prayers for the departed, sometimes even preaching a funeral oration. The following morning the 'corpse'—*i.e.*, the little wax cross—is solemnly taken in procession to the church as in an

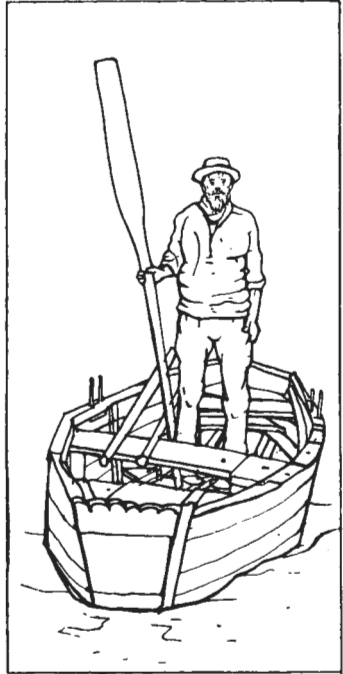


ON THE ISLE OF USHANT

ordinary funeral. The crowd of mourners follow, the men bareheaded, the women with their black shawls drawn close over their faces. The wax cross is then laid on a catafalque erected in the middle of the church. After a requiem Mass has been celebrated the priest places the wax cross in a kind of urn-shaped box or casket fixed to the wall at the side of the chancel. Here it remains until the following All Souls' Day, or till some other solemn occasion, such as a parochial mission, when all the crosses in the casket, representing the bodies of fishermen and others who have been lost at sea, are removed to a special tomb which serves as a common 'grave'

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for them in the middle of the cemetery.¹ A similar ceremony also takes place on the Île de Sein when one of the fishermen inhabitants dies at sea or away from the island.² At one time it was said that whenever a fisherman of Whitby was buried a mysterious coach appeared on the day after the funeral. It must have been a terrifying sight, for it was drawn by six black horses, and accompanied by two outriders in black bearing lighted torches, whose trail of flaming sparks was borne far behind by the wind. The black-robed driver hid his face as he drove at a furious speed to the churchyard. Here a group of mourners walked round the grave waiting until the dead man appeared from the tomb and followed them into church. Here they remained until just after midnight, when they appeared again, jumped into the coach, and were driven off at a mad rate down the narrow streets, until at last they disappeared over the edge of the cliffs.³



USHANT FISHERMAN IN A "PLAT"

FISHERMEN'S CEMETERIES. In many a Breton churchyard you find corners of the cemeteries set apart in memory of those whose bodies have been buried at sea.

¹ P. F. Anson, *Mariners of Brittany*, p. 56.

² Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 65.

³ Cf. H. S. Gee, *The Romance of the Yorkshire Coast*.

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For each man there is a grave with an empty space beneath, for, according to the old Breton belief, the body of a drowned man does not always remain under the water, but comes ashore once a year, on All Souls' Day, and takes possession of his grave in the churchyard. One of the most pathetic of all these Breton *cimetières des naufrages* is described by Pierre Loti in his famous novel *Pêcheur d'Islande*. It is situated at Perros-Hamon, near Paimpol, outside a little grey granite church whose walls are mellowed and corroded by age and the salt-laden air.¹ In many parts of the world you find tombs of fishermen surmounted by nets or decorated with shells, not only in Christian countries, but among the Red Indians of North America and among the ancient Greeks.²

In Scotland the wives and female relatives of fishermen are never present at the graveside. Only the men go with the minister to the cemetery. In French fishing villages the women wear an elaborate mourning differing in each locality. At Tréport, for instance, the mothers and daughters of a deceased fisherman wear a black headdress of wool, made without a brim. At Berville-sur-mer, near Honfleur, the older generation of fishwives always surmounted their white *coiffe* with a black ribbon at a funeral. At Saint-Cast, near Saint-Malo, the old women wore a black fur cape, while the young ones let down the ribbons of their *coiffes*. On the more remote isle of Ushant the women cover up their flowing locks (always worn hanging in a natural manner down to their waists) with a handkerchief arranged in a curious fashion.³

¹ Le Goffic, *Sur la côte*, p. 228.

² Mackenzie, *Voyages*, vol. ii, p. 32.

³ Dieudonné-Dergny, *Croyances et usages*, pp. 70, 77, and 156.

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FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS UNDERLYING SUPERSTITIONS. In all parts of the world the superstitions of fishermen are based on the two main ideas¹:

(1) The necessity of calming the fury of the sea, which is regarded as being either a divinity in itself or else inhabited by good and evil spirits.

(2) The need of taking the greatest number of fish with the minimum of effort, this being best achieved by securing the co-operation of the supernatural beings which live in the sea and control its movements.

Nearly all primitive races have an innate fear of the sea, despite which many of them become excellent sailors—for instance, the Bretons. Certain savage races regard the sea itself as sacred. It must not be injured or treated disrespectfully, otherwise it will be offended. And in the same way the sea is regarded as the friend of mankind, and can be propitiated in various ways. It will find husbands for girls and send them children, and will heal the sick. But, on the other hand, it can do an equal amount of harm if certain precautions are not taken. The sea is a fickle creature. So it must be kept in a good humour by regular offerings and sacrifices. Before the annual fishing season starts in Senegal there are ritual offerings of milk and fruit to the deities of the ocean; in other places sugar is offered.² In some of the Pacific islands animals are sacrificed and their blood sprinkled over the water before the boats start for the fishing. In certain villages on the coast of Morocco when the fishing is bad and storms are prevalent a goat will be slain, its blood poured over the waves, the carcass being afterward thrown into the sea. No matter whether it is the sea itself which is

¹ A. Gruvel, *La Pêche dans la préhistoire*, p. 207.

² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

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regarded as a god or whether it is merely peopled by good and evil spirits, the whole object of these rites is to pacify the elements so that fishermen may pursue their craft without danger and with the greatest profit.¹

HOME LIFE OF FISHERMEN. The superstitious temperament of the average fisherman, no matter where one goes, in whatever part of the world, may be understood better by studying certain precautions taken by him to ward off evil spirits from his home on shore.

He has a firm belief in the efficacy of charms and amulets. For instance, in Cornwall the older generation of fisherfolk used always to hang up a bunch of a certain kind of seaweed as a charm.² Around Tréguier, in Brittany, in many of the fishermen's homes may still be seen an image of the Blessed Virgin surmounted by a bunch of laurel, or box, or a piece of dry seaweed of a rare species.³ On the east coast of Scotland it was an almost universal custom for the fishermen to go down to the shore on New Year's Day, fill a small flagon with salt water, pick up some seaweed, and take them home. The salt water was sprinkled over the house and the seaweed put on the top of the doors, on the hearth, and roof-beams.⁴

At Plouër and Binic, near Paimpol, in Brittany, a bunch of leeks would be gathered before a man left home for the year's fishing off the Newfoundland banks. The leeks were hung upside down from the roof-joists. If they sprouted it was taken as a favourable omen. If, on the contrary, they withered and died

¹ A. Gruvel, *La Pêche dans la préhistoire*, p. 209.

² F. S. Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, p. 462.

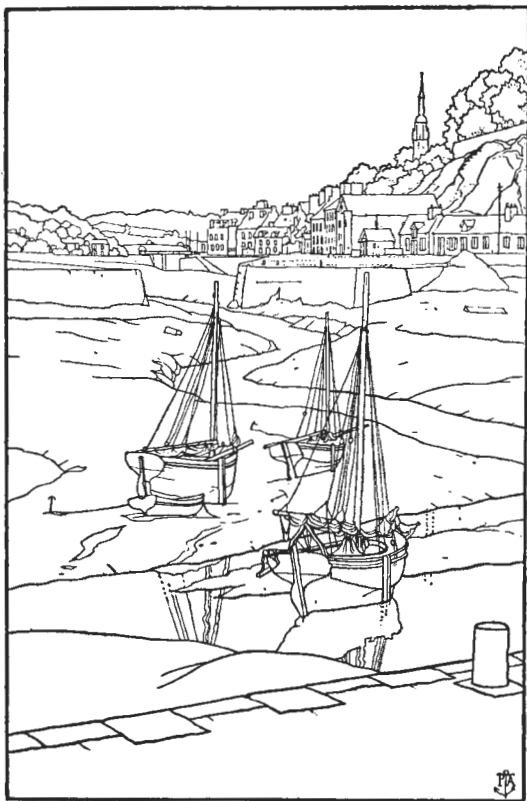
³ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 71.

⁴ G. Hutcheson, *Days of Yore*, p. 42.

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then it was a certain sign that the fisherman would perish.¹

Both in Scotland and in Germany to spit on the hearth was supposed to assure a good catch of fish,



BINIC, NEAR PAIMPOL

especially if one mentioned the devil by name when so doing!² Another superstitious belief was that fire should never be taken out of a house, especially on New Year's Day. It is equally unlucky if a man gives

¹ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 76.

² Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, p. 434.

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another a light from his pipe, for by so doing the luck will be taken away from his house,¹ though if salt be thrown into the fire it may take away the spell. A similar belief is found among the natives of parts of Siberia.² In Ireland it was supposed to bring bad luck to a house if the first person to enter the door on New Year's Day was a woman.³ Among Baltic fisher-folk if some one sneezed on the first day of the New Year it was said to be a sign that the fishing would be good that season.

There are lucky as well as unlucky ways of eating fish, although few people realize it! In Cornwall I am told that one should never start eating pilchards, or any other species of fish for that matter, by the head, for if so other fish will be turned away. One should always start with the tail.⁴ In New Zealand the Maori fishermen, on returning home from sea, cook their fish on three separate fires: one for the gods, one for the priest, one for all the world.⁵ Even to-day many Scottish fishermen will not burn fish-bones or the shells of bait for fear of affecting their luck,⁶ whereas in Sweden it seems to be regarded as lucky to burn the teeth of any species of big fish that may have been caught.⁷

The Cornish fisherfolk supposed that their chances at sea could be foretold from certain noises heard in their houses. Salt fish stored in a cellar are said to emit a curious sound, and if this were very loud and continuous

¹ W. Gregor, *Folk-love Journal*, vol. iv, p. 309.

² W. Gregor, *Further Report on Folk-love in Scotland*, p. 458.

³ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 108.

⁴ W. Hunt, *Popular Romances of Cornwall*, p. 368.

⁵ E. Shortland, *Maori Religion in Mythology*, p. 202.

⁶ W. Gregor, *Folk-love Journal*, vol. iii, p. 146; vol. iv, p. 16.

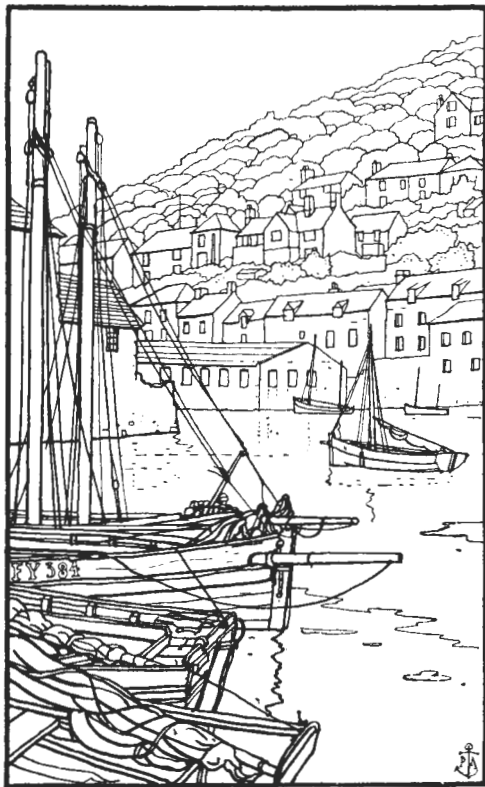
⁷ Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, vol. ii, p. 111.

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it was said that other fish at sea were anxious to join their companions. In the same way, if the stones used for pressing pilchards made a certain sound it was taken that there were large shoals of pilchards near the coast.¹ I am told that there was a superstition in the west of Scotland that if a fly fell into a glass from which some one had just drunk or was about to drink it was a sure sign of good luck.² Irish fishermen would never disturb a spider in a web, but call out: "Come down if you mean fine weather, go up if there will be a storm."³

FISHING GEAR. Great importance has always been attached to the manner in which nets, lines, etc., are

made, for fishermen are convinced that much of their luck depends on this, and that nets and lines can be easily bewitched both on land and at sea.



POLPERRO, A CORNISH FISHING VILLAGE

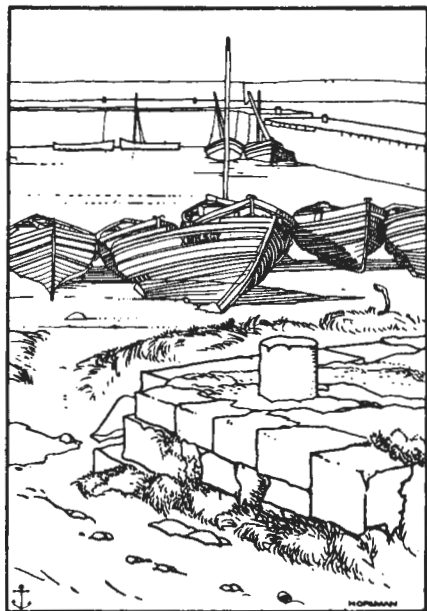
¹ W. Hunt, *Popular Romances of Cornwall*, pp. 368 and 369.

² W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 115.

³ F. S. Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, p. 430.

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In Scotland it seems always to have been the custom to begin to make new nets or lines when the tide was rising. The work had to be carried on without interruption, and when it was done whisky would be drunk to assure good luck. If anyone should come in while



A MORAYSHIRE HARBOUR

nets or lines were being made it was his duty to give money for the purpose of buying whisky. At Portessie a libation was made by pouring whisky over the new nets or lines.¹ Strange to say, a similar rite is found among the savages of New Caledonia, where a magic potion prepared by one of the priests is poured over a new fishing-net.²

The Banffshire and Morayshire fishermen of the last century lived in terror of 'ill-fitted' persons (*i.e.*, people who were supposed to have an evil foot).³ If one of these were to enter a house while nets or lines were being made the nets or lines would have to be destroyed, unless some one who had the power of exorcizing the spell cast by the 'ill-fitted' visitor could be found. At St Combs, and no doubt in other places besides, it was

¹ W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iv, p. 12; vol. vi, p. 307.

² Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 82.

³ P. F. Anson, *Fishing-boats and Fisherfolk on the East Coast of Scotland*, p. 38.

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the custom to lock the door when baiting lines lest any unwanted visitor should enter. To avert any possible chance of bad luck the lines were passed through the fire or round the chimney before being taken out of the house.¹

Should anyone happen to call while baiting was in progress he was generally asked to sit down and bait one or two hooks. Before leaving it was his duty always to wish good luck to the fishing, although, strange to say, it was supposed to produce just the opposite effect if one ventured to wish a Scottish fisherman good luck.²

Iceland fishermen had a superstition that it was unlucky for lines to be baited when dogs were present in the room.³ At Boddam, Aberdeenshire, when the lines were baited the first time after a marriage it was the custom to begin with one hook only, then turn the 'scull,' or flat basket, in which they are laid, upside down, draw the lines across the floor, put them all back again into the basket, and start the work over again.⁴ To walk over nets or to count them was always regarded as a risky thing to do by the fisherfolk on the Moray Firth, especially if done by people having certain physical peculiarities. A Broadsea fisherman one day noticed a man from the neighbouring village of Pittulie counting his nets. He knew that the only way to neutralize the evil that had been done was to draw blood from near the eyes or from the chest of the offender. So he gave him a sharp blow on the forehead, and blood flowed! In Greece should one happen to walk over a

¹ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 84.

² W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 181, etc.

³ F. S. Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, pp. 279 and 430.

⁴ W. Gregor, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. iv, p. 663.

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net one steps back again lest bad luck should follow.¹ In the Marquesas Isles no woman is allowed to touch the fishing-nets.²

BOAT-BUILDING. Turning now to superstitions connected with the building of boats, we find an amazing number in all parts of the world.

In Scotland there was an idea that a boat's keel should always be laid down on a Friday,³ and the choice of the wood to be used was a matter of great importance. Some shipwrights maintained that they could tell if a boat would be lucky at fishing by the feel of the first blow of their axe on the wood of the keel.⁴ Boulogne fisherfolk believed that bad luck was sure to follow if the work went slowly or if many alterations were made in the design of a vessel after the keel was once laid down.⁵ In Scotland it was always the business of the owner himself to put on the first coat of tar.⁶

LAUNCH OF FISHING-BOATS. The day and time of launching a fishing-boat are of even greater importance than when she is laid down. The older generation of Rosehearty fishermen preferred a Thursday for performing this ceremony. In Lower Brittany one hour before high tide was the ritual hour for launching a fishing-vessel, while in Higher Brittany low water was preferred, and a boat was always launched bows first, the belief being that if launched stern first she would not be able to turn in the water. In Scotland a fishing-boat had always to be turned round in the way of the sun after

¹ *Mélusine*, vol. ii, col. 39.

² P. Matthias, *Les Marquises*, p. 70.

³ W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 180.

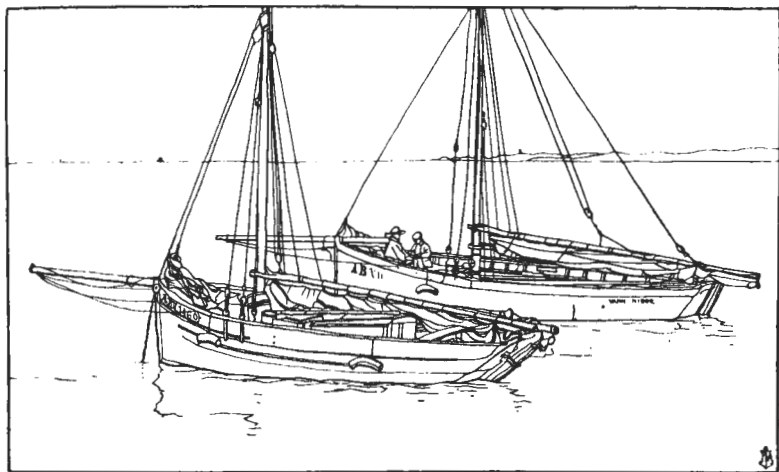
⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 10.

⁵ E. Deseille, *Glossaire boulonnais*.

⁶ W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iv, p. 10.

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she had taken the water.¹ On the west coast of Ireland if other boats were passing by while a launch was taking place the men would always stop rowing and pray for a few moments, as if they were in church.² At Yport, in Normandy, as soon as a vessel had been launched those on board were careful to turn her bow round, so



BRETON BOATS AT BELLE ÎLE

that she could salute a certain statue of the Blessed Virgin on the shore.³ In Scotland a fishing-boat was always launched on a rising tide, and after she had been towed round to her own port, should she have been built elsewhere, she was met on the quay by a crowd of villagers laden with whisky, ale, bread, and cheese. A glass of whisky was thrown over the bows, and all the onlookers wished that the new boat might have a long and prosperous career and take plenty of fish.⁴ In many

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 197.

² T. Doherty, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. viii, p. 14.

³ *France maritime*, vol. i, p. 246.

⁴ W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, pp. 180 and 197.

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places the boat was given her name on this occasion, but in Presbyterian Scotland, unlike Catholic Brittany, the minister was not asked to bless her.

In Catholic countries it is generally held that a vessel which has not been blessed by a priest is bound to be unlucky. In Catalonia, also in Brittany until quite recent times, it was almost impossible to get a crew for a fishing-boat which had not been properly blessed, and even anti-clerical owners are sometimes obliged to call in the priest to bless their boats lest they may find a difficulty in procuring a crew.

At Boulogne it was formerly the general custom for the priest to go down to the harbour to bless every new fishing-vessel after she had been launched. Accompanied by the 'godfather' and 'godmother' of the new vessel, the priest, vested in cotta and stole, would recite the ritual prayers and sprinkle every part of the boat, beginning with the stern, the crew watching carefully to see that no part was forgotten, otherwise some accident might occur later on, or the boat spring a leak. The blessing over, a repast was served on deck, wine and cakes being given to all present. Meanwhile one of the crew went on shore with a bottle of wine and offered a drink to everybody on the quay. To refuse this was looked upon as a bad omen for the new boat. Before leaving the vessel the 'godfather' and 'godmother' made an offering to the priest for his services, and gave a small present to each of the crew.¹

Very similar ceremonies take place even to-day in most Catholic countries, and are occasions of great rejoicing for all the friends and relations of those who are in any way connected with the new boat. However,

¹ E. Deseille, *Glossaire boulonnais*. Cf. Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, pp. 144 and 145.

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in Protestant lands it is rare to find any Christian ceremony being performed in connexion with the launch of a boat, the function being limited to the semi-pagan breaking of a bottle of whisky over the ship's side and the recitation of some doggerel verse by the skipper or some one else present.¹

There are several curious superstitions regarding the immediate preparations to be made when a new boat goes to sea for the first time—*e.g.*, in Scotland it was looked upon as most unlucky for a new boat to take on the ballast which had been removed from an old boat. Great care was observed to include among the ballast certain red and white stones supposed to possess a magical property. I have heard that in some villages on the east coast of Scotland when a new boat returned for the first time from fishing the wife of the owner had to offer bread and cheese to the crews of all the vessels which arrived later. It was said that a new boat always came in so slowly that almost all the others were sure to be back before her, hence very little bread and cheese would have to be distributed.²

If a boat had been wrecked and lives lost, and was afterward thrown up on the shore, no fishermen belonging to her own port would dare to set foot on her, neither would any of the inhabitants risk breaking her up for firewood. In the end the boat was generally sold to another village, and when repaired was sent to sea again; the bad luck not being supposed to affect the fishermen of any other locality.³

TIMES AND SEASONS FOR FISHING. As a general rule it is considered to be a very bad omen for any fisherman

¹ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 197.

² W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iv, p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 198.

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to catch the "king of the herring"—i.e., a mythical fish of large size which is supposed to guide and pilot every shoal of herring. The old fishermen of Brighton and Folkestone had a firm belief in the "king of fishes," and if they had the misfortune to catch him they would always put him back into the sea at once, otherwise they were sure their vessels would be lost in a storm.¹



ON THE LOOK-OUT

Among the fishermen of the Channel coast to catch an exceptionally large whiting was always held to foretell the death of one of the crew by drowning. In some parts of the world there exists a

belief that there is some mysterious connexion between fish and the harvest—e.g., on the isle of Noirmoutier, in the Bay of Biscay, they say that if cuttlefish are not seen off the coast in the early summer the harvest will be a bad one, and in other places it is believed that if the harvest is late so, too, the herring will be late.²

There is a tradition among the old fishermen at Tenby, South Wales, that fish once disappeared entirely from the coast of Pembrokeshire because a great crime had been committed³; Norman fisherfolk maintained that herring left the coast of France after the fall of Napoleon; in Scandinavia it is said that herring returned in great numbers to the Baltic in 1774 because they were pleased at the change of Government in Sweden.⁴

¹ Sawyer, *Sussex Natural History, Folk-lore*, p. 12.

² E. Rolland, *Faune*, vol. iii, p. 187.

³ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 113.

⁴ Laharpe, *Voyages*, vol. v, p. 261.

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Among the natives of some of the islands in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific we find some of the most interesting customs connected with immediate preparations for fishing, all of which are based on the belief that some kind of bodily mortification is necessary for the fisherman before he ventures to go to sea.

DEPARTURE FOR FISHING. In many villages one man has the job of calling the rest of the crew of his boat in the morning. There is an old superstition on the east coast of Scotland that if the fishing has been bad it is desirable to throw a pinch of salt after the skipper and his crew when they leave home. It is also said to be efficacious to throw salt into the boat itself.¹

The natives of the Congo are accustomed to beat their idols before starting for fishing in the hope that they will bring them good luck as the result of this treatment, or, at any rate, keep off evil spirits.² A strange idea is found among the fisherfolk in Esthonia; they believe that nothing is so likely to achieve a good fishing as for one of the men to have a quarrel with a member of his family before starting from home. If the quarrel leads to blows so much the better; for every blow three fish are taken, so it is said.

An old tradition on the west coast of Ireland is that a fisherman should not put out to sea in the evening before the first star has risen.³ A hundred years ago Brighton fishermen used to decorate the masts of their boats with garlands of flowers before starting for the mackerel-fishing in April. Bread and cheese was distributed to the children on the beach, who in return wished the men good luck.⁴

¹ W. Gregor, *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 309.

² Dennett, *Folk-lore of the Fjord*, p. 8.

³ Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, vol. ii, p. 275.

⁴ Sawyer, *Sussex Natural History, Folk-lore*, p. 4.

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In Oceania there is a custom before the beginning of the tunny-fishing for the men to take a palm-branch and rub back the leaves with their hand. If the leaves remain in this position it is taken as a bad sign ; on the contrary, if they fall back again easily good luck may be expected.¹

Many things can bring bad luck to a fisherman on his



WEST OF IRELAND FISHERMEN

way from his house to the harbour. In New Guinea nobody must speak to a man who is seen going to his boat, and the man himself must also keep silence.² The same superstition is also found among Swedish fishermen.³

In many countries, including Brittany and Scotland, one should never ask a fisherman whither he is going when one meets him on his way to his boat. To be asked the question is quite enough to make him stay on shore for the rest of the day. At Portessie, Banffshire, they tell of a certain fisherman who attacked and wounded another man who dared to ask him this apparently harmless question. In Brittany it is regarded as much worse should the interrogator be a woman.⁴

¹ Harcourt, *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. iv, p. 287.

² Turner, *Samoa a Hundred Years Ago*, p. 349.

³ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. III.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

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Likewise, never wish a fisherman good luck in Sweden, Provence, Brittany, or Scotland ; at least, not if he be of the older generation.¹ And if you are in Brittany take care never to stare hard at any of the picturesquely garbed fishermen you will meet in Finistère—they may believe that you have turned away their chance of catching any sardine that day.

UNLUCKY PERSONS AND NAMES. There are quite a number of persons whom a fisherman will try to avoid meeting, if possible, when he is on his way to his boat. The Breton fisherman has a curious dread of tailors,² while those of Scotland, Provence, the Faroe Islands, Japan, and certain other countries are specially afraid of priests and ministers of religion.³ I am told that at Portessie, in Banffshire, cripples are looked upon with great dread. The Aberdonian fisherfolk are nervous of possible harm that may come from encountering anyone with red hair or flat feet, but any charm or spell that may be cast by the former can be averted if one is quick enough to speak to him first.⁴ In the Hebrides red hair is not regarded with quite the same disfavour.⁵

Why certain proper names should be capable of exerting an evil influence is difficult to understand, but such is the conviction of many a Moray Firth seaman. 'Ross' was always a name greatly detested, and when anyone of that name was referred to at sea he was spoken of as "chuff 'em oot." All along the Banffshire coast the name Ross was regarded as unlucky, but the Cullen folk considered that the names of 'Anderson'

¹ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. vii, p. 45.

² Cf. Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 179.

³ *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. iv, p. 660 ; *Folk-lore Record*, vol. iii, p. 280 ; vol. ix, p. 219, and Marmier, *Lettres sur le nord*, p. 434.

⁴ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 308 ; vol. iv, p. 12, and vol. vii, p. 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. x, p. 260.

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and 'Duffus' also brought bad luck if uttered at sea, and spoke of the former as "the man who sells the coals."¹

It is an almost universal superstition that it is unlucky to meet a woman when one is on one's way to embarking, and in some countries women will turn their backs on a fisherman if they meet him on the road to the harbour. At one time it seems to have been common for the Lewis fishermen in the Hebrides to send on ahead one of their number to make sure that there were no women waiting about where the crew were to embark.² Both in New Guinea and in the Faroe Islands no woman was allowed to remain on the shore when the men were setting out for fishing. At Holderness, in Yorkshire, to meet a woman with a white apron was a very bad omen, and many a fisherman would turn back and wait for the next tide rather than put to sea.³ Both in Scotland and in Sweden they say that if a woman steps over a fishing-line no fish will be caught with it.⁴

Cats are not popular animals in fishing communities, taken as a whole. In certain villages on the east coast of Scotland if fishing had been bad the fishermen used to say: "We must have met a cat this morning."⁵ Curiously enough, in Brittany horses and donkeys are supposed to be bearers of good luck to all fishermen who may meet them. In Shetland it is said to be lucky if a cat runs before a fisherman, but just the reverse if it crosses the road.

Hares, foxes, and rabbits are more dreaded even than cats, especially among the fisherfolk of the east

¹ Hutcheson, *Days of Yore*, p. 40.

² Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, p. 427.

³ Max Radiguet, *Les Derniers Sauvages*, p. 162.

⁴ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. i, p. 355; W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 116.

⁵ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii, p. 309.

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coast of Scotland.¹ The superstition is equally rampant in Cornwall, Brittany, and among the Catholic fishermen of the Claddagh. A story is told of a certain butcher who brought a fox every Friday to Galway so as to prevent the Claddagh fishermen from going to sea, with the result that he could sell his meat at any price he liked on Saturday.²

And do not forget pigs! But perhaps I had better not say anything about them, for there is no animal more unlucky to a fisherman, so they tell you in Scotland, Yorkshire, Cornwall, to mention but a few districts round the coast.³

Some of the Scottish fishermen say that even the mooing of cows, if heard when nets are being shot, is a bad omen,⁴ and in the same districts they maintain that much harm may take place if one catches hold of any part of a boat with less than the whole hand when jumping on board (a perfectly obvious counsel when regarded from motives of "Safety first").⁵ In Aberdeenshire it is believed that quite insignificant actions or gestures are enough to bewitch a boat—for instance, to walk round it.⁶ Some Yorkshire and Scottish fishermen of older generations have strange ideas about the magical properties of sea-boots, and say that they must never be carried on the shoulder, but always under the arm, and never put on a table.

These are but a few of the many things which a fisherman has to remember when he is on his way from his home to his boat. Even *on board* he has to be

¹ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. ii, p. 200.

² *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 259.

³ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 115; *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. vii, p. 45.

⁴ Sébillot, *Folk-lore des pêcheurs*, p. 189.

⁵ W. Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*, p. 200.

⁶ *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. iv, p. 660.

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careful of his behaviour, as will be seen from what I am now going to relate.

As a general rule, priests and all ministers of religion, cats, rats, hares, and rabbits are all forbidden on board a fishing-boat. But in regard to the clergy there seem to be certain exceptions allowed, and I know of definite instances where an individual Catholic priest or Protestant minister was held to bring luck to a boat, and his presence on board was eagerly desired by the crew.

Just as the Scottish fishermen nail up a horseshoe in their cabin or on the mast, so the natives of the Harvey Islands stick up a big leaf of coconut-palm to charm away evil spirits and bring luck to their fishing.¹ In Polynesia the natives say that it is unlucky to carry bananas in a boat,² while on the east coast of Scotland it is held that contrary winds are sure to occur if one is so foolish as to go to sea with eggs on board.³

PRAYERS AT SEA. Among primitive fisherfolk it is an almost universal custom when at sea to perform some act of religious worship before shooting the nets or lines, even if it be no more than to make the sign of the Cross, as was the practice of many of the Lutheran fishermen of the Isle of Gothland, in the Baltic,⁴ some years ago, and among the Icelanders in the early nineteenth century.⁵ The Breton seamen until recent years would never start fishing until one of the crew had said a prayer, those of Morbihan observing the following ritual when they were catching sardines. The skipper would take out a bottle of holy water that had been

¹ W. Gill, *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 48.

² P. Lesson, *Les Polynésiens*, p. 388.

³ *Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iv, p. 55.

⁴ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, p. 48; Bassett, *Legends of the Sea*, p. 387.

⁵ Troil, *Lettres sur l'Islande*, p. 98.

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stowed away in the stern of the boat, which, having uncorked, he would pass to the man who was stationed in the bow. The latter would sprinkle his fingers with the water and then pass on the bottle to his neighbour, each member of the crew doing the same, but keeping strict silence. Last of all the skipper received the holy water, which he proceeded to sprinkle over the nets, from stern to bow, then across, reciting some form of prayer, often improvised.¹

On the coast of Asturias, when a fishing-boat passes out of one of the harbours, I am told that one may still see the skipper take off his cap, holding the tiller, and say a prayer that a blessing may be granted on his day's or night's work.²



DANISH FISHERMEN A HUNDRED YEARS AGO
After M. Rorbye.

At Dieppe fifty years ago it seems to have been a general custom for daily prayers to be said on every fishing-vessel, the following rite being observed by the men. First one of the men would go round and call the rest of the crew in some kind of doggerel verse, then the *mousse*, or ship's boy, would light the candle in front of the image of the Blessed Virgin in the tiny cabin or on deck, while the oldest sailor on board, known as the *curé*, would start the prayers, often those which are said in church before the Sunday Mass, or, if it were the afternoon, the psalms of Vespers, most of

¹ G. de la Landelle, *Mœurs maritimes*, p. 138.

² B. Vigon, *Folk-lore del Mar*, p. 15.

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which the men knew by heart, for many of them could not read at that period.¹

In some of the Scottish drifters on which I have sailed it was not uncommon to find the crew holding religious services at sea, with prayers, hymns, and Bible



ON AN OLD SMACK

readings, and one would sometimes see members of the crew reading their Bibles to themselves or hear them singing hymns. The skipper often 'asks a blessing' before meals in the traditional Scots manner, extemporizing prayers with surprising eloquence, while the rest of the crew sit round the table with bowed heads.

I believe it is still the custom in Sardinia when there has been a good catch of fish for the fisherfolk to express their thanks in a sort of litany of the saints, especially those saints who are traditionally supposed to have

¹ A. Bosquet, *La Normandie romanesque*, p. 307.

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an interest in fishing and fishermen—e.g., St Peter, St Michael, St Anthony.¹

Writing about the year 1839, the parish minister of Latheron, Caithness, remarks that

it is not unusual where there are boats having individuals of acknowledged piety for the crew to engage in worship after shooting their nets. On these occasions a portion of a psalm is sung, followed by prayer, and the effect is represented as truly solemn and heart-stirring, as the melodious strains of Gaelic music, carried along the surface of the waters, several boats being sometimes engaged, spread through the whole fleet.²

During the stirring 'Revival times' of 1860 on the east coast of Scotland one would often hear the crews of a drifter burst into a favourite hymn or psalm as they were leaving the harbour for the fishing. When putting out to sea the twenty-third psalm was the favourite, and when returning with a good catch of fish *O God of Bethel, by Whose Hand* was very popular.

Away out to sea could be heard the voices of the men as they were shooting their nets, singing *Jesu, Lover of my Soul*, and *Rock of Ages, cleft for me*, and the custom was started at this time by many skippers of kneeling down in the cabin for prayer together before they would let down a net.³

We find the same spirit of religion animating the Catholic fishermen of the Ile de Sein, on the coast of Brittany, as well as those of Venice or Chioggia, in Italy; the former always cross themselves and devoutly say a prayer whenever they pass by the chapel of Notre-Dame de Bon-Voyage that stands on the edge of the

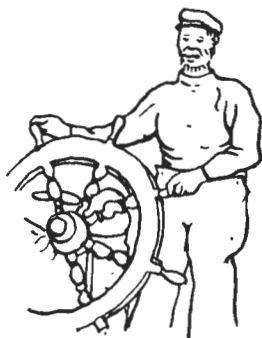
¹ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, pp. 36-37.

² *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. xv, p. 88.

³ J. McGibbon, *The Fisherfolk of Buchan*, p. 76.

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cliffs overlooking the bay of Audierne, near the Pointe du Raz, while the latter pause for a few moments as they row by one of the little shrines of the Madonna that, with their lamps ever burning, stand keeping watch, as it were, over the placid waters of the lagoons and the distant Adriatic.



AT THE WHEEL