

# THE SEAL WOMAN

A Faroese Folktale  
translated by Martin Murrell

The so-called Legend of the Seal Woman (*Kópakonan*) is one of the best-known folktales of the Faroe Islands (*Føroyar*). Collected by the folklorist and linguist Venceslaus Ulicius Hammer-shaimb (1819-1909), it was first published in a journal in Copenhagen around 1850 and in an anthology in 1886. The theme of the man who succeeds in stealing and concealing a woman's animal skin and forcing her to be his wife has a long history and is widespread in the Nordic lands. This Faroese version has also been preserved as a Shetland ballad. My sources, which I've followed closely for this English rendering, are the original Faroese text together with a Danish translation by the famous Faroese writer—novelist, poet; also composer and painter—William Heinesen (1900-1991).

The main room (in the past for most families the sole room) of the typical Faroese dwelling was called 'smoke-room' (*roykstovan*) for the simple reason that it was generally filled with peat-smoke from the fire kept burning in the centre. There would be bunks along the walls, a bench, an earthen floor, a low door and no windows. A rectangular hole in the turf roof served to let some of the smoke out and a little light in.

The Faroes are an autonomous province of Denmark, though the country is not a member of the EU, and Danish is a compulsory second language on the school curriculum. About 49,000 Faroese live on the islands themselves, while a further 12,000 or more live in Denmark. The language has developed from Old Norse, and its closest living relative is Icelandic.

A selection of stories in English translation can be found in John F. West's Faroese Folk-tales and Legends, Shetland Publishing Company, 1980. Incidentally, it is said that the belief that inhabitants with exceptionally short fingers are descendants of seal women—of female selkies—still lingers in the islands...

**S**eals are believed to be former human beings who voluntarily sought death in the ocean. Once a year, on Twelfth-night, they are allowed to come on land, strip off their skins and amuse themselves as human beings, dancing and making merry in the caves of the rocky inlets and on the cliff tops and beaches.

A young farmer from the village of Mikladalur on the island of Kalsoy, wondering if this story was true, went and lay in wait on the beach one Twelfth-night evening. He watched and saw the seals arriving in large numbers, swimming towards the shore. They clambered on to the beach, shed their skins and laid them carefully on the rocks. Divested of their skins they looked just like normal people. The young lad stared at a pretty seal girl placing her skin close to the spot where he was hiding, and when the dance began, he sneaked up and stole it.

The dancing and games went on all night, but as soon as the sun started to peep above the horizon, all the seals came to reclaim their skins to return to the sea. The seal girl was very upset when she couldn't find her skin, though its smell still lingered in the air, and then the man from Mikladalur appeared holding it, but he wouldn't give it back to her, despite her desperate entreaties, so she was obliged to accompany him to his farm.

He kept her with him for many years as his wife, and she bore him several children; but he always had to make sure that she didn't have access to her skin. He kept it locked up in a chest to which he alone had the key, a key which he kept it at all times on a chain attached to his belt.

One day, while he was out at sea fishing with his companions, he realised he had left the key at home. He announced to his companions, 'Today I shall lose my wife!' – and he explained what had happened.

The men pulled in their nets and lines and rowed back to the shore as fast as they could, but when they arrived at the farm, they found the children all alone and their mother gone. Their father knew she wasn't going to come back, as she had put out the fire and put away all the



knives, so that the young ones couldn't do themselves any harm after she'd left. Indeed, once she had reached the shore, she had put on her sealskin and plunged into the water, where a bull seal, who had loved her all those years before and was still waiting for her, popped up beside her. When her children, the ones she had had with the Mikladalur man, later came down to the beach, a seal would emerge and look towards the land; people naturally believed that it was the children's mother.

And so the years passed. Then one day it happened that the Mikladalur men planned to go deep into one of the caverns along the far coast to hunt the seals that lived there. The night before they were due to go, the man's seal wife appeared to him in a dream and said that if he went on the seal hunt in the cavern, he should make sure he didn't kill the great bull seal that would be lying at the entrance, for that was her husband. Nor should he harm the two seal pups deep inside the cave, for they were her two young sons, and she described their skins so he would know them.

But the farmer didn't heed the dream message. He joined the others on the hunt, and they killed all the seals they could lay their hands on. When they got back home, the catch was divided up, and for his share the farmer received the large bull seal and both the front and the hind flippers of the two young pups.

In the evening, when the head of the large seal and the limbs of the small ones had been cooked for dinner, there was a great crash in the smoke-room, and the seal woman appeared in the form of a terrifying troll; she sniffed at the food in the troughs and cried the curse: 'Here lie the head of my husband with his broad nostrils, the hand of Hárek and the foot of Fredrik! Now there shall be revenge, revenge on the men of Mikladalur, and some will die at sea and others fall from the mountain tops, until there be as many dead as can link hands all round the shores of the isle of Kalsoy!'

When she had pronounced these words, she vanished with a great crash of thunder and was never seen again.

But still today, alas, it so happens from time to time that men from the village of Mikladalur get drowned at sea or fall from the tops of cliffs; it must therefore be feared that the number of victims is not yet great enough for all the dead to link hands around the whole perimeter of the isle of Kalsoy.

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