

II Dream Island.

London is an ancient city, a city of character and I am fond of it, but I do not want to live there ever again, and I disliked it immensely when I was removed from the semi rural seclusion of Highgate with its private gardens, its magnificent red and white chestnut trees, its leafy lanes, to the uncompromising bricks and mortar of the West End. For the first time I became conscious of poverty. Obviously poverty existed in Highgate, but in my sheltered life I could find nothing worse to bemoan than the woes of fishmongers slapping wet fish about amongst the blocks of ice on a winter's morning. In the heart of the London of those days evidence of squalid destitution met you at every turn. Shivering crossing sweepers would make a token gesture with their brooms before holding out their hands for pennies; blind beggars stood monumentally at street corners with a little tray round their necks holding a few boxes of matches, or bootlaces; Crippled pavement artists crouched on the cold hard paving stones beside their pathetic offerings; down and outs ran after the horse cabs of returning holiday makers in the hope of earning a few coppers helping with the luggage. Behind the lordly dwellings of the rich were the mean streets of the slum dwellers, where the children had their only play ground. Benevolent ladies used to gather these children into Play Centres, and invite the young daughters of the well to go to come and help amuse them. Many were undernourished, anaemic, apathetic, but some were robust, jolly little souls and they were not hard to amuse, only, in the sensitive nostrils of youth, how those slum children stank. My brother and I spent Sunday afternoons exploring London, visiting picture galleries and museums, or simply walking, all the way from Oxford Circus to Greenwich and back. How my feet ached from those unyielding pavements.

But, for the children of the privileged, there were always the summer holidays. When holidays were under discussion a small voice could be heard inquiring anxiously, "Will it be wild?" Wildness was my sole requisite for holidays, and, fortunately for me, my family was not addicted to the popular type of seaside holiday, ~~with its accompaniment of~~ ~~beach~~ ~~and~~ ~~sun~~

with its accompaniment of spades and buckets, donkey rides and nigger minstrels, formal promenades and sandy beaches littered with recumbent figures. Our seaside was ~~the-Sh~~ our mother's home in the Shetland Islands, lovely and remote. There the sea was all around you, sea that broke in great waves on the sands of Lund, that rattled over pebble beaches, that welled and ebbed in little rock pools full of enchanting marine life, that dashed itself ~~in spray-on~~ the rocks in magnificent showers of spray when there was a storm, and that lapped the foot of the great cliffs of the Blue Mull. If you had a good head for heights, you could stand on the ~~precipitous~~ edge of the cliffs, looking dizzily down at the multitudinous sea birds that perched on ledges, or swooped, screaming, across the cliff's face. Before standing on the cliff's edge you looked carefully to see if there was a ram about, having been told by jocose uncles that rams were inclined to take a playful butt at tempting behinds.

We did not go into the sea above the knees. It was too cold, but we were constantly on the sea. For the small fry it was mostly a rowing boat, though a sail could be rigged with the aid of a macintosh and an oar, and we could go sailing with our elders. We were forbidden to go outside the sound, but within its limits we learned something of the power of the sea, even in an apparently calm mood. We learned the force of a ground swell on a placid day when we tried to land on the rocky stack of Ramnageo. We got caught with the wind and tide against us and found that, ~~how~~ as we might, the best we could do, till the tide turned, was to stay on the same spot. A sea mist descended upon us suddenly, muffling sound as well as sight. All we could see was our two selves and the row boat; all we could hear was the creak of the oars in the rowlocks, and all we could do was to go on rowing. We might have been anywhere until there loomed up before our grateful eyes an indistinct shape which we recognised as the wooden pier. Perched eerily on top was a pair of knickerbobkered legs, cut off at the waist, and a disembodied hand violently agitating a noiseless dinner bell. An uncle trying, hopefully, but quite inaudibly, to lure us in.

One of the charms of a Shetland holiday was its unchangeability. Each year we went back to find that our cousins had grown a little taller, that some tumbledown croft had ~~tumbled~~ tumbled down a bit more, that the derelict fishing boat on the beach, that made such a wonderful plaything, was a little more derelict. The magic began when the ~~little~~ Earl of Zetland steamed into the Sound after what had as likely as not been a rough voyage. To the right lay the little green island of Uyea, and, foursquare on the shore, stood my grandfather's house with the garden running right down to the beach. Already a rowing boat with an uncle or two in it would be setting forth to take us ashore, and the old pier stood ready to receive us, two stone ramps running up on each side of the wooden structure, familiar ramps, slippery with seaweed and encrusted with barnacles and the limpets that clung so closely that, to detach them, you had to creep up on them unaware. Up the road and in through the iron gate with its well remembered groan, the crunch of the pebble path beneath your feet and another Shetland holiday had begun.

For weeks and weeks a whole island was yours, with its hills and lochs, the bogs, where you jumped from one grassy hummock to another and sometimes missed, the beautiful metamorphic rocks that yielded treasures in the shape of green serpentine, greasy feeling soapstone, that an uncle carved into little figures, ~~and~~ sparkling schists, and great sheets of mica, fascinating to split. Sheep and ponies roamed freely, the small sized beasts of this windy island. If you lay down in the heather near a group of ponies, they would draw near, step by cautious step, till they stood round you in a circle, delicately poised for flight. Sometimes there was a pony broken in for riding in the home paddock, and then an energetic morning might be spent having a ride, as energetic for you as for the pony, as Shetland ponies are past masters at not being caught. When you had at last cornered it you rode it barebacked if you were wise, but, if you were feeling grand, you put on a saddle. As you tugged with your puny strength at the girths the pony gently inflated itself, and, as soon as you put your weight on the stirrup, it ~~deflated~~ deflated and child and

saddle would disappear beneath its belly. Sometimes we went on picnics, a crowd of children on ponies, armed with nothing more formidable than a docking with which to belabour the indifferent animal. If there were any foals attached to the ponies they came too, and I fear that our untidy cavalcade would not have met with the approval of the Pony Club.

The island swarmed with our relations. ~~My-family-w~~  
 My mother was one of a family of ten and five brothers and one sister had remained on the island. The others came back for holidays and my grandfather's house bulged at the seams. I find it difficult to disentangle what I remember about my grandparents from what my mother told me about them. She painted a portrait of my grandfather as a man, not wealthy, but important in the business and social life of the community, a man liked and respected. He took services in the kirk when no minister was available, tended the sick and injured when no doctor was available, and re-married old couples who had fallen out and wanted to make it up. I am not sure what form this re-marriage ceremony took, but obviously it was a comfort to them. My brothers were very fond of my grandfather, and saw him as guide, counsellor and friend, but I suspect that all I really remember is a presence by the fire with a truly patriarchal beard and an otterskin, (or was it sealskin) waistcoat, against which it was pleasant to rub a confiding cheek. My grandmother I remember much better. The boys seem to have found her rather formidable, but I had the greatest confidence in her. She must, I think, have led a hard life bringing up a family on a shoestring, and my mother, as eldest daughter, must have worked hard too. In the early days there was no steamship to the island, only a sailing packet, often delayed by bad weather. The family had to be self dependent, house cows and backyard hens, home killed meat, vegetables in the walled garden, and in autumn a great salting of beef, curing of mutton hams, making of saucer meat, a highly spiced meat roll, as well as a knitting of stockings and making of clothes, often from homespun cloth, though I do not think my relations did the spinning.

My grandmother was a conscientious woman, but to one temptation she yielded. Books. The sailing packet might bring

with it a box of new books, and then, said my mother, there was no doing anything with your grandmother. All her household duties neglected she would dip into one book after another, or become completely absorbed in the latest volume of Carlyle until, her eye falling upon the heaped mending basket, her conscience would be aroused and she would rush to the window to take advantage of the last of the brief daylight of the northern winter. Ruining her eyes, said my mother, who would have done the darning first, but that is how I like best to picture my grandmother, her austere, high cheek boned face silhouetted against the fading grey of the windowpane, darning mechanically while the words she had been reading churned round in her mind.

The house was inherited, together with its army of summer guests, by a bachelor uncle and a spinster aunt. My uncle was a large, quiet man, a man of few words and those reasonable. No one could have called my aunt reasonable, but she was very amusing. She was a lady of strong prejudices and volatile affections. It was judicious at the beginning of a holiday to find out which of our cousins were, currently, little angels, or little devils, the former to be conversed with freely, the latter to be met clandestinely behind a dyke. We, not having been seen for some time, at least started the holiday as little angels. She was a born raconteuse. I remember listening entranced to a story, told with a wealth of picturesque detail, in which, on reflection, all that seemed to have happened was that once on a never to be forgotten visit to the Canary Islands she had seen a camel pick a small boy up by the slack of his trousers. She was endlessly good to any lame dogs in the family and remarkably patient with her houseful of guests and their assorted hobbies. Nobody ever paid any attention to the weather and she had endless piles of wet clothes and sodden boots to dry. Sketching materials, photographic materials, shotguns, fishing tackle, books, papers, and bits of sewing lay about all over the place, and the young made their contribution to the muddle by hopegully producing misshapen clay objects to be baked in the oven just as the cook was putting in the roast, or demanding storage space for collections of stones, shells, crab's backs, smelly,

imperfectly cleaned sea urchin cases and long, dripping trails of seaweed. Yet never once was I made to feel that my occupations were not worth while, or that my treasures were not precious.

Children are not always well behaved, and, when misdemeanours occurred at mealtimes, the offender was apt to be banished to a slip of a room adjoining the dining room. It was an enchanting prison. On one wall was the "museum" full of curious or beautiful objects collected by various members of the family, and, if by any chance you got tired of examining these, there were shelves and shelves of books. Only in the most fractious mood could you fail to be soothed to sweet reasonableness by this delectable detention, though that may not have been quite what our elders intended.

There was a drawing room, stiff, formal and seldom sat in. To use it would have meant more housework and more fires. We lived in the diningroom.\* On fine nights it was good to sit out of doors on a dyke, but when it was blowing half a gale it was wonderfully cosy in the dining room, with a bright fire on the hearth and the wind whistling round the house. It could blow too. Once, my mother told me, the whole roof blew off and landed in a nearby field and "old Uncle John sat there by the fire and never noticed a thing." I pictured it blowing off all in one piece and wished I had been there to see. Odd uncles would drop in during the evening and, curled up in a corner, I would listen to the conversation, which seemed to me much more fun than grown up conversation usually was. My mother's family were lively minded people with a wide range of interests, a disputacious habit, and a gift of picturesque expression. They made the world seem a zestful place, full of things to do and find out about.

I enjoyed talking to the crofters too. I loved their soft Shetland voices and their dry humour. In a good mood they would tell you stories.

"There was once an old woman, who wanted to go from one island to another to visit her relations. She arranged with the skipper of a fishing smack to take her across, and went on board with a bundle of clothes, a bottle of milk and a bite to eat. The crew

settled her below and set sail. In doing this one of them fell overboard. Very few Shetlanders could swim, so they lowered a boat in haste and picked him up. But, before they could get back to the ship, a breeze sprang up and she began to sail. She sailed on and on over the North Sea with nobody but the old woman on board, and next morning a Norwegian fisherman saw her flapping aimlessly about off the coast of Norway. He went on board and found the old lady, sitting placidly where the crew had placed her, with an empty milk bottle rolling about at her feet. Restored to Shetland she was surprised to find herself a heroine. What had she done when she realised that she was alone on board? She had done the only thing there was to be done. She had put her trust in the Lord and stayed where she was." This story is I believe perfectly true.

Changes, of course, there were. The herring left the Shetland waters, and the curing industry, in which my grandfather had an interest, ceased completely. No longer could young visitors gather in an excited group to watch the herring boats come in, or go down to admire the beshawled gutter girls, their bare, red arms flashing as they gutted the fish with the deft movements born of long practice, throwing the fish into one receptacle and the entrails into another, all in an atmosphere of fish scales, brine and screaming gulls. It is never very easy to find employment for the inhabitants of a group of small islands. Many of the men went whaling, to return to their crofts in winter. Others went as seamen. They seem to have been popular with sea captains being conscientious workers and no trouble makers. But few of them seemed to possess that plodding ambition that raises you step by step to the top of <sup>your</sup> ~~their~~ profession. If they were interested they worked; if they grew bored they returned to Shetland for a nice long holiday. The original inhabitants were probably Picts, but the islands were so often in the hands of Norse invaders that the dialect spoken by the crofters was full of Norse words, and my aunt confessed that when two crofters were talking together she could not understand what they said.

I would have liked to proclaim myself a Shetlander, but, since my father's father came from Orkney and his mother from the West Highlands, I concluded sadly that I was just a mongrel.