

The Word-Hunter

With the sea at his back, Steven left his bike leaning against the lichen-crusted drystone wall, and pushed open the ramshackle wooden gate. Apart from a couple of windblown fuchsia bushes, the garden mostly consisted of a healthy crop of nettles. The path up to the front door looked well-used, but the door itself was warped and peeling. A couple of sun-bleached net floats nestled by the doorstep, and a decrepit pair of oars leant against the side of the porch. He knocked and waited, but there was no response. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a movement behind a net curtain hanging against a filthy window.

"Hello? Mr Manson? Anyone in?"

After a minute or so, an old man appeared round the corner of the croft house. Tall, strongly-built, grey hair thinning a bit, and a sparse whiskery moustache. Somehow regal in his faded grey overalls, he had a corrugated weather-whipped countenance and a thin line of a mouth. His eyes were lustrous and deep brown; somehow they seemed larger than they should be.

"Ir you lost, son?" His voice was slow and vibrant, the intonation of the local dialect lending a ponderous deliberation to the question.

"Hello Mr Manson, I'm Steven Timpson. I wrote you a letter? I'm a linguist - that is, I'm interested in words, and I wanted to ask..."

"I ken whit a linguist is, son. Yes, I mind dy letter."

"Er, can we talk for a bit? Is this a good time?"

The old man looked straight into his eyes for several moments. Disconcerted, Steven felt that his inner self was being dissected and evaluated.

"Will du stop for a cup o tea?"

He followed the old man around the back and into a shed leaning against the rear wall of the croft, then into the croft itself. An old kettle was starting to hiss on top of a small peat-fired stove at the gable end, and there was a pervasive smell of smoke and fish. Loose-leaf tealeaves and a dark brown earthenware teapot were produced; mugs of hot strong black tea were poured.

There were no signs of luxuries like milk and sugar.

"So, Mr Timpson, you ir interested in wirds?"

"Call me Steven, please."

The old man gave no indication that he was even prepared to disclose his first name, let alone give permission to use it, so Steven ploughed on.

"As I mentioned in my letter, I was given your name and address as someone who could help with my enquiries. I understand you're a retired fisherman, sir?"

The "sir" came out quite naturally. It seemed appropriate for this large and slightly intimidating figure.

"No, I am a fisherman yet. I fish just for mysel. Subsistence fishing, du might caa it."

"I see. So you fish alone? Have you always fished alone, or did you work with a crew?"

The old man smiled slightly. "Alane, maistly. But sometimes dere were idders."

"I'm interested in the way you spoke with your crew. I understand that there is what you might call a "sea language" in the fishing communities hereabout?"

There was a pause as the fisherman considered his words.

"Well, yis, in a wye. I suppose du could say dere is a sea language in a ... fishing community hereabouts. But it is no whit du tinks."

"Tell me more, sir."

"I can tell dee dat maist fishermen hereabouts ir superstitious. Dey will not refer to certain tings while at sea. Da minister, fir example, canna be spoken o directly. If he needs to be mentioned, dey might say 'Da upstaander.'"

"I've heard of that superstition, sir. Did that happen on your boat?"

"I wisna on such a boat."

"I see. I was wondering if there are any special words which are used at sea but never on land, or to landsmen? I've heard of '*kisek*', but I don't know

what it means.”

Manson shook his head.

“How about ‘*brennir*’? Or, um, ‘*ljoag*’? I’m not sure how it’s pronounced. I know about ‘*swilkie*’.”

At this last, the old man looked up.

“Du kens aboot ‘*swilkie*’, does du? What meaning has du for dat?”

“I have heard that it refers to the grey seal, sir. But I have also heard that it refers to a race of mythical creatures who can change between seal and human form.”

“I tink you ir confused, Mr Timpson. Swilkie refers tae a whirlpool ida Pentland Firth. I see you have finished your tea. I canna help you ony mair wi’ your words. Dey ir foreign tae me.” He stood up.

Disappointed, Steven got up hastily and thanked the old man.

Manson watched as the young word-hunter cycled off down the road into the gathering dusk. It was time. Swilkie, he thought, as he stalked down to the rocky shore. It is Selkie, and it is not a mythological race of people. There is only one Selkie, and he is king of all seals. As he reached the rocks, his whiskers lengthened, his grey overalls changed, and he slid noiselessly into the sea to begin the night’s fishing.