

Transcript

My name's Tom Muir and I'm from the Orkney Islands.

A long time ago there was a man called Donald who lived on the north coast of Caithness near John O'Groats and Donald was a seal catcher. He used to hunt the seals that pulled themselves up on the rocks of the Pentland Firth. And he would skin them and he would sell the skins and that's how he made his living. Now the old people in the area used to say, 'You shouldn't do that, Donald, don't you know that those big seals, those big Atlantic grey seals, they're selkies, they're the selkie folk and you shouldn't mess with them. Because they have the power to take human form, they cast off their skins at certain times of the tide and they dance all night in the moonlight and they're enchanted creature, you shouldn't be killing them.' But he just said, 'Och, old wives' tales, I don't believe in all that sort of rubbish,' and so he went and run his trade as ever.

Now one day he was down at the shore and he saw a big selkie lying sunning himself on the rock, lying sleeping. And so he crawled over the rocks and slowly went towards the seal with his knife in his hand and just then he lunged at the selkie. Now whether the selkie seen him coming or whether he just missed his mark that day, he stuck the knife into the side of the selkie but it got away off the rock into the sea and disappeared, taking his knife with him.

Well, Donald was kind of upset about this because not only had he lost a fine seal with a beautiful coat that could have made him a good lot of money, he'd also lost his best knife. So he went home crestfallen and he was sitting at his table having a bite to eat when there was a loud knock at the door. He went to the door and there was this man standing there - a stranger, a very tall, a very handsome man dressed in very grand clothes. A real gentleman. He said, 'I'm looking for Donald the seal catcher.' 'Aye that's me,' said Donald. He said, 'Well, I've a friend who's interested in buying skins from you, as many skins as you can supply him with.' 'Aye well yeah, of course,' he said, thinking well this is good, this is good trade, 'how many skins would you be needing?' 'Why at least a dozen,' he said. 'A dozen, oh well I'm sorry, I don't have that many skins.' 'Well,' he says, 'I'll tell you what, Donald, I know a place that's very good for seals, you'll catch a lot there. I'll take you with me and show you where it is.' 'Aye sure.'

So they went out and the stranger had a great big horse and he said, 'Climb up behind me and hold tight and I'll take you to where the selkies are.' So he did as he was told and they rode off at great speed. And they rode and they rode, I mean it was so fast that he could hardly breathe and eventually they came to the top of a tall cliff. 'You can get off here now,' said the stranger. Well Donald did as he was told and he looked around and he didn't like the look of this place. It was just a sheer cliff and he started to feel that maybe he was in danger here, maybe this man meant to do him some harm. But he very gingerly went to the edge of the cliff and he looked over, but there was no rocks below him, it was just a sheer drop down to the sea with the waves lashing against the side of the cliff.

And he didn't see any seals down there and he says, 'I don't see any selkies,' and the man said, 'Look closer.' He went a bit nearer and he leant over and had a look down

and suddenly a pair of strong arms were wrapped around him and this stranger grabbed him and he pushed him forward and the two of them fell over the cliff down to the sea with a splash. And when they entered the sea Donald expected that this was his last hour had come and he expected the salty water to fill his nose and his mouth, it would choke him. But to his amazement he could breathe underwater like a fish and they carried on going down to the bottom of the sea at great speed, just as fast as when they actually fell over the cliff.

Down and down they went, deeper and deeper under the sea until there in front of them there was a great arched doorway and the door was studded with pink coral. And as they swam down to it the door swung open and there before them was a great underground hall. The walls of it were lined with mother of pearl and the floor was beaten golden sand and everywhere was decorated with coloured coral. It was beautiful. And when he went in he saw that inside the hall there weren't people - they were selkies, lots and lots of selkies. And he turned around to look at the stranger that had brought him there and he was a seal as well.

Well, he entered the hall; he was starting to feel really scared now. He knew that this were of course the selkie folk and he knew now that all those old wives' tales had been true. There they were in front of him. But he was still to get the biggest shock of his life because, as they walked down this hall, there was a mirror on the wall and when he looked into the mirror instead of seeing his own reflection look back at him, it was the face of a seal with big brown eyes. He was terrified and he thought this must be the selkie folk having their revenge on him.

The man that had brought him there who was now a seal went into a small room and he came back out and he went over to Donald and he produced a knife and he said 'Do you recognise that knife, Donald?' And Donald recognised his own knife all right and the fear gripped him, the blood in his veins turned to ice, he was terrified. But the selkies around him, they could feel his fear and they went over to him and they nuzzled into him with their noses and they stroked him in a reassuring way to show him that they didn't mean him any harm at all. And the stranger says to him again, 'I asked you a question, Donald, 'do you recognise that knife?' 'Yes,' he says. 'It's mine.' And then he begged for mercy. He said, 'Please don't kill me. I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't know that you were real, I mean selkie folk were real, I was just trying to feed my family, put food on the table, you know, I didn't mean any harm by it, I didn't mean any harm.' 'It's okay, it's all right,' said the man. 'We don't mean you any harm either, but I need you to do something for me, and this is very important not just for me but for all of us here. My father is lying in the room next door there and he is seriously wounded. I need you to cure him.' 'I don't know any medicine,' he says. 'I don't know how to cure people or selkies or anybody; you know I'm just an ordinary man.' He said, 'You are the only person in the world that can do this, don't be scared, just come with me.'

So they went into this room and there was a bed which had been prepared of soft seaweed and lying on it there was a great big selkie and he had this big wound in his side. It was the selkie of course that Donald has stabbed earlier that day. And the stranger said to him, 'Just go over to him Donald and put your hands on him and push that wound together.' So he went over and as best he could, I suppose, with the flippers, he got a hold of him and he pushed the two edges of the wound together and

they fused together and as he touched it, it seemed to fade and disappear so that there was only a faint scar left where there had been that big stab wound. And then the old selkie rose up healthy and well and there was a great excitement among all the selkie folk; they were so happy because here their king was healed again and they were so thankful for his salvation and for Donald for helping. And as they were all embracing each other and nuzzling into each other, well poor Donald was in the corner by himself and he thought, 'Well, I suppose it's my own fault I'm being punished like this. I mean, I'm a seal and I'm going to be stuck here forever under the sea or if I can go ashore again then I mean I can't go home to my family, I'm just going to sit on the rocks and maybe another Donald will come along and stick a knife in me some day,' and he was really, really scared.

But the stranger came over to him and he said, 'Thank you, Donald, you have done us a great service. You have done us a huge, huge service here and I intend to release you. I'll take you back to your family, you'll be free to go.' Oh, he felt relieved about that anyway. He says, 'But before you go,' said the stranger, 'I want you to swear us a solemn vow that you will never kill another seal for the rest of your days.' 'Oh yeah,' he said, 'I'll swear to anything you want. I mean it, of course I will.' So he swore the oath and all the selkie folk were satisfied and so he took him back out through the door and they shot up through the sea at such a speed, it was like the same speed that they fell over the cliff at, they seemed to shoot up like an arrow and he broke the surface of the water and instead of just floating there they shot up through the air and landed right back on top of the cliff where they'd started off from, and there before them was the horse still waiting for them. And when Donald looked down at his flippers they weren't flippers any more, there were hands with fingers and he could see legs and feet and, ah, he was a human again and he looked around at the man and there was the tall handsome stranger with the fine clothes.

He said, 'Get up on the back of the horse, Donald.' So he climbed on the back of the horse and they rode back to his house and they stopped outside the gate. Donald got off, oh, he was relieved to be home. And he held his hand out to shake the man's hand but instead of shaking his hand the man just dumped a big bag in his hand and it was so heavy that Donald needed two hands to hold it and he looked inside of it and it was full of gold coins. And the stranger said to him, 'Never let it be said that the selkie folk deprived an honest man of his livelihood. There's enough money there to do you and your family for the rest of your lives and you'll never have to hurt another seal.' 'Thank you,' said Donald, 'thank you very much,' and he went into the house and he spread the gold out on the table in front of his wife. She couldn't believe it and he said, 'Well, darling, my selkie hunting days are over, we're rich.' And so he lived happily for the rest of his days and he used to spend a lot of his time just sitting by the shore and just watching the selkies lying sunning themselves on the rock and from that day forward he never hunted, never harmed another selkie for the rest of his days.

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