

# Tales of Galloway

Alan Temperley



Illustrations by pupils of Kirkcudbright Academy



## **About the Book**

In this collection from the land of Galloway, Alan Temperley pays tribute to the great Scottish tradition of storytelling. Heroes, ghosts and smugglers; witches, martyrs, mermaids and fairies; outlaws, monsters and colourful rogues run wild through these pages. Their stories reflect the magic of some of the most beautiful and dramatic countryside in Britain. Originally told in crofts and rural cottages, these stories grew naturally out of the rich past and the land and lives of the people - wonderful tales. And they remain as alive today as when they were first told.

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Tales of  
Galloway

Alan Temperley

For  
JEAN SLAVEN  
with all my love



## Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to the hundreds of local people who have so readily and with such interest told these stories to me, and so unfailingly helped my enquiries. It sometimes seemed strange, standing in the doorway of a barn with the rain sweeping by, talking to a farmer in wellington boots about witches and fairies; or having introduced myself to a quiet old lady, plunging at once into stories of bloody murder and pillage. I would like to express my gratitude also to the many people who lent me books that were precious to them, and sometimes quite irreplaceable. More particularly I wish to thank Miss Jean Slaven for her great help and encouragement; Mr. James Manson, Rector of Kirkcudbright Academy, for his enthusiasm and readiness to allow the young people to participate; Mr. Robin McLeish and Mr. Tom Collin, Honorary Curator of the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright, for reading the manuscript and giving me the benefit of their opinion and knowledge; the Dumfries and Galloway Regional Library Service, and in particular Mrs. Jo Laurie, Mrs. Mary Kirkpatrick and Mr. Martin McColl of the Castle Douglas Library, for their kindness and great assistance; and The Scots Magazine for permission to publish substantial extracts from my articles 'The Boy and the Adder' and 'The Yule Beggar'. Finally I wish to acknowledge with appreciation the award of a writer's bursary from the Scottish Arts Council.

Illustrations by  
PUPILS OF KIRKCUDBRIGHT ACADEMY

Under the guidance of  
ANNE MCNEIL

Map by Martin Rosindale



## Preface

Galloway is sometimes called the Garden of Scotland, and justly so. The region, covering the County of Wigton and the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright - 'from the brig end o' Dumfries to the braes of Glen App' - lies on a south-facing slope with its feet lapped by the Solway and its shoulders propped against beautiful ranges of mountains. From these uplands broad silver rivers wind south through undulating pastures and tracts of woodland, wonderful farming country, to run at length into the Solway Firth. And far off across the water, or miles of rippled sand when the tide is out, are the blue hills of Cumbria.

It is a region of dramatic history. The maps are thick with references to the sites of battles, towers and ruined castles, ancient stones, burial mounds, smugglers' bays and the graves of martyrs. Each has a tale to tell, though sadly many have been forgotten. And where the map is bare, where today the passer-by sees only a ploughed field or scrubby wooded hillside, until recent years an ancient village stood. Our present towns had not been built and some of these vanished villages and clachans were local centres. The land was rougher and more wild. A scarcely distinguishable ribbon of level moorland or meadow is all that remains of a potholed main road that for centuries took all the foot travellers and horsemen and rattling carriages of that district. The wonderful old railway lines, so recently closed, are already sinking back into the land from which they were hewn.

But there are many histories: this book is an entertainment. My aim in writing it has been to present a

simple selection of the old traditional tales of the area. They tell of witches and colourful rogues, family feuds and smuggling escapades, rustic comedy and murders descending into horror, wicked landowners, monsters and fairies. And there are, too, a good number of historical adventures.

Many of the tales were told to me orally, others I have found in old books. Though I have sought to tell the stories simply and directly, it was seldom that they were found so. In every case where it was possible I travelled to the location and enquired locally. Sometimes, in this way, three or four versions of the same story emerged. The one I have recounted seemed to me the most commonly accepted and acceptable, and in many cases I have written or indicated a second and even third account also. There is, of course, bound to be disagreement, and I am glad, for that indicates a living interest. I can only say that I have done my best to be thorough and tell the tales truthfully.

So far as the historical stories are concerned, I have found great disagreement in published sources. Five quite separate fates, for example, are allocated to the Fair Maid of Galloway during the siege of Threave Castle - if she was there at all: Mons Meg is bound to the region by strings of historical myth as tangled as barbed wire: Galloway is described as being both in the vanguard and rearguard of agricultural change. It has not been my brief to hunt deeply among ancient archives and historical papers to ferret out the truth or otherwise of an old tale. On the other hand, it would not do in print, I feel, to show a sublime disregard for historical fact in the manner of the old storytellers. One is on the horns of a dilemma. In many of the old stories, of course, myth and fact are inextricably entwined. I have tried, in recounting these historical tales, to be as accurate as possible, and there is no fact for which I cannot account on good authority. But pure history and traditional legend, of course, rarely make the happiest of marriages.



Another problem has been the Scots language. I need make no apology for the fact that whilst generally characters speak in plain English, they sometimes use broad Galloway Scots, and the occasional Scots phrase is used where it is appropriate in the narrative. To have omitted the Scots would have been to deprive certain speeches of their force and even fame. It is untranslatable. On the other hand, to have maintained it throughout would often have made the dialogue hard to read, have held up the story, and in my opinion would have been artificial. Certainly it would have been artificial for me to attempt it.

The most important reason for writing the book was to present a selection - and it is no more - of the local tales for the people of the district, for those who love Galloway and are absent, and for those who travel here. Also I hope it may remind people in all parts of the country of their wonderful heritage. These stories, which grew over the centuries and are now almost entirely forgotten or ignored, present a glimpse of the life that flourished in the south-west until comparatively recent years. Farms and villages were isolated by the poor roads and limited means of transport: many people did not move more than a few miles from home throughout their entire lives. The stories were told in cottages for entertainment. They grew up out of the history of the land and the lives of the people. And they are as alive today as when they were first told. But now, in the manner of our time, we switch on television, and instead of absorbing the stories of an honourable past, we are battered by the sham and slick drama of the great cities. I would like to think that this collection might do at least a little to redress the balance.

But in most cases we do not read a book of this nature for some objective reason, we read it for entertainment. And it is my hope and belief that these old stories, written by the past and the land and the people of Galloway, will be enjoyed today.

Alan Temperley  
Rhonehouse, 1979

## **Aiken Drum - the Brownie of Bladnoch**

Roun' his hairy form there was naething seen,  
But a philabeg o' the rashes green,  
And his knotted knees played ay knoit between:  
What a sight was Aiken-drum!

On his wauchie arms three claws did meet,  
As they trailed on the grun' by his taeless feet;  
E'en the auld gudeman (Satan) himsel' did sweat,  
To look at Aiken-drum.

"I lived in a lan' where we saw nae sky,  
I dwalt in a spot where a burn rins na by;  
But I'se dwell now wi' you, if ye like to try -  
Hae ye wark for Aiken-drum?"

William Nicholson

Darkness spread over the land, the last traces of sunset faded over the Machars. It was All Hallows Eve.

One or two women, shawls drawn about their shoulders against the advancing chill, gathered at the gates and in the doorways of cottages before they should retreat indoors for the night. Children played along the lane.

From far down there came a scream, then a hubbub of cries, and the children came racing and scampering back to the houses, looking behind them with terror as they ran. Way up the lane, dark in the fading light and too far off to see distinctly, a hunched form came stalking towards the houses.

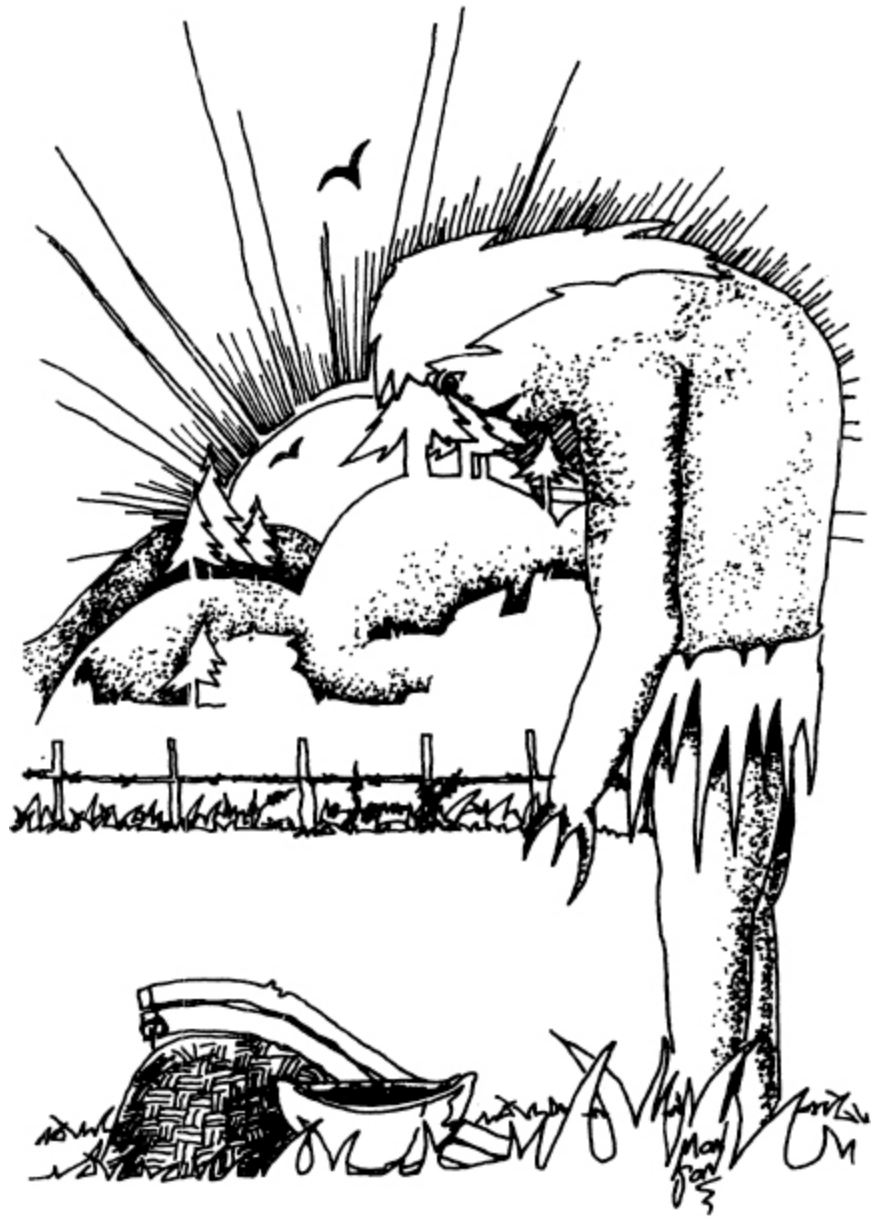
The women in the lane ran to their homes and shut the gates. Calling their men they stood back in the doorways.

The figure drew closer, bare feet slapping on the ground, moaning and humming and uttering fragmentary words beneath his breath: "Aiken Drum ... no fee ... till your fields for a dish o' brose."

The young wife who lived in the first cottage gave a loud cry of fear and slammed her door.

The figure that trudged towards them was truly terrible, more like a monster than a man. He wore nothing but a rough kilt of rushes, his shaggy body was smeared with the mire of the deep Galloway bogs. Dreadful hair hung about his face and shoulders, and at the glare of his eyes a good woman passed clean away into her husband's arms. He had no nose, and for a mouth only a hideous gash that might have been torn by the horn of a bull. His clammy arms, ending in knotted claws for hands, trailed almost to his feet in the mud of the lane.<sup>[fn1](#)</sup>





By the time he had reached the middle of the village all the doors were locked and barred save one. Frightened, but standing their ground, a goodwife and her husband watched as the creature came towards them and stopped only a few feet away. Unable to stand it, the man drew a swift circle around himself and made the sign of the cross. His wife was too terrified to move a muscle, then suddenly recovering, rushed into the house and grabbed up the big black family Bible. Clutching this to her bosom she ventured once more as far as the doorstep.

“What do you want?” said the man, his voice little more than a whisper. “Tell us, in God’s name, from where you come, and what you want here with us.”

The monster gave a groan, his dreadful mouth moved.

“I come from a land where there is no sky, no water. No home! ... Aiken Drum, they call me: Brownie of the Bladnoch. ... Work! Have you work for Aiken Drum?”

“No! No!” Again the man crossed himself. “We have no work. Leave us. Leave us in peace. We have no work for you.”

“I seek no wages, no bond, no fee. All I ask is a dish of brose and a clear well, to drink and see my face. I can leap the burn when it is in spate, and milk the cattle, and plough the fields. I can churn the butter, and thresh the corn, herd the sheep on the hills and keep them safe from foxes, lull the children to sleep with songs they have never heard.” His head lolled backwards, his dreadful eyes, full of anguish, glared at the sky.

“No, no! I tell you we have no work.”

But the goodwife thought of their crops still on the fields unthreshed, the autumn ploughing, the decimation of their flocks and poultry by the foxes and wolves. She caught her husband by the arm. “His speech is fair, he seeks no harm. We have plenty of meal. Let us give him a trial for one week.”

When the other wives and men saw that their neighbours were unharmed, that they were not attacked and devoured by the terrifying creature, they crept from their doorways and ventured closer. But when they heard that he was to stay among them and work for his living, they raised their voices in horror.

“No, he must not stay. His very looks make us faint with fear. And who will ever come to the village when they know that Aiken Drum is living among us? He is dreadful, a foul ghost. His presence will blast the village.”

But the goodwife silenced them with a reminder of the work that was unfinished – for they were not industrious villagers – and what must yet be done if they were to survive the following year.

So Aiken Drum stayed. The goodwife had made a good bargain, for the brownie did the work of ten men. By the gleam of the northern lights, and the light of the moon and stars, the fields were ploughed and furrowed, the corn was threshed and later sown, the sheep were tended and herded into folds on the hills.

(One evening, the tale is told, a farmer had requested Aiken Drum to drive his sheep from the hill and pen them in a fold at the end of the village by an early hour. Before breakfast the following morning he went along to see if the job was well done. So conscientiously had the brownie done his work that along with all the sheep from the hillside he had driven down the hares and rabbits also, and they were running about among the sheep’s legs and jumping up the walls of the fold. Not a single sheep was missing. The farmer congratulated Aiken Drum on the excellence of his work. The brownie replied: “Confound they wee grey devils! They cost me mair bother than all the lave o’ them!”)

Soon the villagers grew used to his awful appearance, and the children came to love him, for he sang strange gentle songs to them when they were fretful and could not

sleep; and at other times he played and showed them fairy games that they loved. Wherever he was, the children were merry and content. In the evenings, when he started work before their bedtimes, they followed him into the fields.

And all he asked was the wooden bowl of brose that the goodwife left for him on the doorstep every night, and a drink from her clear well. No-one ever saw him eat the brose, but in the morning it was gone. He never even asked for a spoon. And so anxious was he to be helpful that a word, or a wish, and he was there, his gash of a mouth twisted into a smile. Only when the sun was out did he slip away. Also, though the Bible held no fear for him, he could never bear to look upon a certain communion cup of the district.<sup>fn2</sup>

For a long time the brownie worked for the villagers and unflinchingly did his best. At length the act of a young wife drove him away. She was a newly-married girl, and very aware of the proprieties and decencies. It offended her sense of decorum that Aiken Drum should go around in no more than a ragged kilt of rushes. So one night she left a pair of old, mouldy britches, discarded by her husband, by his clean dish of brose.

She did not know - perhaps no-one in the village knew - that any payment for his labours infallibly drives a brownie away, even a gift so poor as a pair of rotten breeks. So Aiken Drum, who needed a place of work and a home, and was so happy among them in his brownie way, had no alternative but to depart. Their bond was broken.

And in the night some were woken from their sleep by his loud cries of distress when he found the breeks by his bowl of brose. Peering from their curtains they saw his hairy form shambling flat-footed away down the lane through the village. Soon he was gone into the darkness and his moans and sighs faded into silence. He never returned.



Some time afterwards his voice was heard by a shepherd up in Penninghame, a few miles to the north. It came from the heart of the bogs in the miles of no-man's-land Viand before the old Penninghame Forest, but in the darkness the shepherd could discern nothing. The brownie was grieving: "Aiken Drum. Oh, Aiken Drum! Fee and leave! ... Weep now, weep! No home! ... No home for Aiken Drum!" And as he passed, the shepherd heard the splash of his big feet in the bogs.

But still, they say, when the wind is in the trees, when the Bladnoch Linn is in spate and the water roars through the rocks, if you listen carefully you may make out the voice of Aiken Drum. And children in their beds smile, for they hear him clearly, singing them to sleep as he did so long ago.

fn1 Aiken Drum was given the rush kilt by Nicholson, and this is now accepted. In the original tale, however, he was naked. This more readily explains the gift of the proper young wife - 'a mouldy pair o' her ain man's breeks'. It also gives a second explanation for his departure, for brownies were generally considered spirits too free to be fettered by human clothing.

fn2 McMillan's Cup was used as a test of orthodoxy. It had originally belonged to John McMillan, founder of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, who was deposed in 1703 from the Established Church of Balmaghie for his nonconformity. The cup was treasured by a follower in the parish of Kirkcowan, the eastern boundary of which is the River Bladnoch. If, upon holding it, the man under examination trembled or showed any other sign of agitation, he was denounced as 'having bowed the knee to Baal, and sacrificed at the altar of idolatry.' Small wonder that Aiken Drum found the cup intimidating.



## **The Mermaid of Barnhourie**

On a clear, cool night in early April, a little Dalbeattie lugger, homeward bound from Whitehaven, drew in towards the mouth of the River Urr. The moon was full, and as the young seaman adjusted the sheet and tidied the deck, the moonlight shone on his dark curls and the side of his face and shoulders. A little distance away the waves curled and broke on the treacherous sandbanks of Barnhourie.

Gazing along the moon's track the young seaman saw the silhouette of what he took to be a seal's head dark on the water. He watched and whistled; then whistled again, trying to tempt the animal closer. From further aft the captain shouted: "You should know better than to whistle on a boat - especially with the banks so close." Looking away and breaking into song, the seaman continued with his work.

The head, however, was not that of a seal. It belonged to the mermaid of Barnhourie, who was utterly in love with the young man. Whenever he returned home, or went fishing along that stretch of coast, she followed his boat, and when she thought it safe, she watched him from the shelter of rocks or some patch of weed. Now, as the Galloway coast came closer, she swam easily, parallel with the lugger.

Soon they shortened sail, and drew neatly into the channel that led up to Kippford at the mouth of the river. In less than half an hour they were moored in one of the narrow creeks.

The young sailor jumped ashore, barefoot in the mud, carrying his clothes and few possessions in a small bag slung over his shoulder. Then he set off up the rough road that led five miles into Dalbeattie, where his pretty wife and children lived.

The mermaid saw him vanish behind a clump of trees, then turned sadly and swam back down the channel between the muddy banks, out into the open water of the Solway. Rocking in the comforting waves, she swam eastwards along the shore to the Needle's Eye, a high narrow fissure through an outcrop of rocks beneath the crag. It was her favourite spot. There she sat on a weedy stone with the sea lapping about her beautiful tail. The moon moved across the sky. Slowly the tide ebbed, showing the top of the long lines of stake net set in the sand a little distance off-shore. When the water had sunk so far that barely sufficient remained for swimming, she slipped once more into the waves and made her way over the miles of rippled sand to the deeper channels between the Mersehead Sands and Barnhourie Bank.

Further out, in the depths of the Solway, lived her father, a merrow from the Irish coast. Despite his dreadful green body and face – the black beard topped by a nose like a red thorn and little piggy eyes – he was a kindly fellow. The mermaid of Barnhourie, his youngest daughter, had inherited her gentle nature from her father. Her sisters, however, though wonderfully beautiful were avid and cruel, always seeking to lure sailors and fishermen into watery graves with their sweet singing and wiles.

For many months the mermaid had been in love with the young seaman, and the morning following his return from Whitehaven she swam back to Kippford. He was working on the boat with a pot of pitch in his hand. On the shore nearby he had built a little fire to melt the pitch down, and his children were playing around it. Keeping against the hull of a vessel moored a few yards away, where she was



sure she would not be seen, the lovely mermaid watched him working. Then she turned her eyes to the children, laughing and calling as they clambered aboard one of the boats drawn up on the shore. An old man called, holding out something in his clenched fist, and they ran across to him. When the mermaid looked back at the lugger, the young seaman was watching her. In his eyes was a look of surprise combined with an expression of wonder that was to remain with her for many months. For a moment she regarded him with some fear, then quietly slipped below the surface.

She swam away, but before she had gone far she paused, then turned and swam back. Clinging to the mooring rope of another vessel, she watched him from behind the stern. He had come to the rail and was scanning the water with his dark eyes. In a minute or two his children joined him, holding out their little hands to show him something, and he gave them his attention.

Less than a week later the lugger sailed. He was gone for three months.

During the shortening spring nights the mermaid sat on the rocks at the Needle's Eye. When she sang, the fulmars and jackdaws which cawed on the rocks were silent, the moon grew pale - unlike her sisters, for at their song the moon turned red and the stars dripped blood upon the water.

At the end of June there was a great storm. The sands of the Solway were stirred and Barnhourie Bank shifted. A few days later the young seaman returned.

The sea was still rough and the crescent moon showed briefly between ragged tails of dark cloud. The captain of the lugger kept his eyes on the beacons of Southernness and Heston Island, and the diamond glittering on the summit of Criffel.<sup>fn1</sup> The wind roared in the rigging, the waves whipped across the deck. No-one knew that Barnhourie

Bank had shifted further west than had ever been known before. The lugger was into the broken water before they even saw it. Swiftly the captain flung the helm across and called on his crew to trim the sails. But the following wind drove them onward, and barely a minute later, with a massive lurch, the keel struck the sandbank. Briefly the lugger lifted on the crest of a wave, then struck again, swung wildly as the sea caught her on the beam, and settled with a final splitting shudder on the clinging bank of sand.



The waves broke clear across the sails and soon they were hanging in shreds. The yard-arm snapped like a splinter and fell across the rail. In the wash that swept the deck the captain and other members of the crew were carried away. For a while the young seaman clung to the rigging and the broken spar, then his grip was broken and he, too, was flung into the wild water.

His cries were instantly swallowed up in the wind, but they reached the ears of the mermaid, who sat with streaming hair on the rocks beneath the Needle's Eye. Her own cry answered his. In a moment she had slipped into the foaming sea and was making her way through the curling masses of water towards the treacherous sandbank.

Already the lugger was being broken up. When she reached him the young seaman was unconscious, tumbling over and over along the sandbanks of Barnhourie. With her slim arms about his waist she bore him to the leaping surface of the sea. He coughed salt water, and the sweet air struggled into his lungs. Soon he was breathing, his dark head lolling on her breast. As consciousness returned they were still a mile from land. He felt her arms, her long hair trailing about his face, the strong sweep of her tail.

Soon they were ashore, on the foaming rocks by the Needle's Eye. From the blackness of the sea the waves bore in and climbed hungrily up the rocks as if to pluck them back. The roaring south-west wind struck cold through his heavy, sodden clothing. They moved to a small cave nearby, and there, on a bed of bracken, out of the wind, they passed the remainder of the night.

The stars moved round, the tide swelled and sank back, and at length the first light of morning showed in the sky. There was barely enough water in which to swim. Bidding her young lover a reluctant farewell, the mermaid slithered to the shore. Like an eel in a marsh, she splashed and squirmed for a mile, desperately trying to reach deeper water before the tide was gone altogether. At length she

succeeded. From the shore the curly-headed sailor saw her rise and vanish like a porpoise, then rise again and splash briefly in the early sunlight.

Beyond her, its mast smashed, already a hulk on the sandbank, lay the wreck of the lugger. Caught in the long, long webs of stake-net, two or three hundred yards off-shore, he saw and recognised the body of one of his shipmates. With the water to his calves he splashed out and brought the man ashore. Then, choosing to wade rather than climb the crags, he splashed half a mile along the shore until he came to a steep meadow. From deep water the mermaid saw him, a tiny figure, climb through the banks of bushes and shrubs and at length vanish above the rim of the hill.

He had fallen in love with her, and throughout the summer he returned to the little cave by the Needle's Eye. For whole days he neglected his work, and he and the mermaid lay among the wild flowers, with the lichen-yellow crags above them, the birds swooping overhead, and the fresh wind blowing in from the Solway. So completely did she trust him that she stayed while the tide retreated, until the miles of bare sand stretched out from the shore to mingle with the sky against the hazy, mountainous Cumbrian shore twenty miles away.

Sometimes they swam in the glassily calm or wind-rippled pools the tide had left in the shingle beneath the rocks, and she laughed at how clumsy he was, though in fact he swam well. Then he left her stranded and walked back across the sand until he relented and carried her to the grassy hillside in his arms, her long tail gleaming and shining in the sunlight. They were idyllically happy.

But at length he had to return to the sea once more. There was no money, and though he could always get food from the land and sea, his wife and children were becoming ragged and needy. For one last beautiful September day they lay together above the shore. Then he turned away



and began to climb the track that he had made for himself towards the summit of the cliffs. Heartbroken the young mermaid slid into the warm autumn sea. Neither looked back, they could not bear it.

The following afternoon, at high tide, he sailed once more from Kippford, bound for Whitehaven and a ship that was to take him to the Americas.

The following April the mermaid's baby was born. He was a beautiful child, with his father's dark curls and merry manner, and his mother's black eyes, webbed fingers and long silver tail. From the first he could swim like a fish.

The young seaman was away for twenty months. It was May when his schooner returned from the West Indies. They had traded among the islands and done well. Alas on the return voyage a fever had broken out and a number of the seamen, including the captain, had died. But now in the first light of dawn the sailors, brown as monkeys, gathered in the shrouds and on deck and looked out once more towards the Cumbrian shore. They had all bought trinkets and presents for their children and loved ones. Their kit bags were already packed in the foc'sle. They looked forward very much to being home. On the port side the Scottish seamen gazed across the Solway to the distant mountains of Galloway.

The mate was on the bridge as they drew in towards St Bees Head. He was a man who had joined the ship during the voyage and did not know the coast well. Sails set, green bow-wave curling as they sped through the dancing waves the last few miles to home, he drove her full upon a submerged outcrop of ragged rocks. For a full third of her length the bottom timbers were ripped open. Instantly water flooded into the holds. The suck of the waves carried the schooner back off the rocks into deep water. Within minutes she was floundering. Then she was gone. In the swirl that remained on the surface a single ship's boat spun