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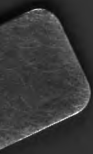
*Eccentricities
of the Animal Creation*

John Timbs

W. Wood

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W. THOMAS, ESQ.



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ECCENTRICITIES
OF
THE ANIMAL CREATION.

BY JOHN TIMBS,
AUTHOR OF "THINGS NOT GENERALLY KNOWN."

WITH EIGHT ENGRAVINGS.



SEELEY, JACKSON, AND HALLIDAY, 54, FLEET-STREET.
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STORIES OF MERMAIDS.

FLESS than half a century ago, a pretended Mermaid was one of the sights of a London season; to see which credulous persons rushed to pay half-crowns and shillings with a readiness which seemed to rebuke the record—that the existence of a Mermaid is an exploded fallacy of two centuries since.

Mermaids have had a legendary existence from very early ages, for the Sirens of the ancients evidently belonged to the same remarkable family. Shakspeare uses the term Mermaid as synonymous with Siren :—

“O train me not, sweet Mermaid, with thy note,
To drown me in thy sister’s flood of tears ;
Sing, Syren, for thyself.”—*Comedy of Errors*, iii. 2.

Elsewhere, Shakspeare’s use of the term is more applicable to the Siren than to the common idea of a Mermaid ; as in the “*Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” where the “Mermaid on a dolphin’s back” could not easily have been so placed. A Merman, the

male of this imaginary species, is mentioned by Taylor, the water-poet:—

“ A thing turmoyling in the sea we spide,
Like to a Meareman.”

An old writer has this ingenious illustration:—
“ Mermaids, in Homer, were witches, and their songs enchantments;” which reminds us of the invitation in Haydn’s Mermaid’s Song:—

“ Come with me, and we will go
Where the rocks of coral grow.”

The orthodox Mermaid is half woman, half fish; and the fishy half is sometimes depicted as doubly tailed, such as we see in the heraldry of France and Germany; and in the Basle edition of Ptolemy’s “ Geography,” dated 1540, a double-tailed Mermaid figures in one of the plates. In the arms of the Fishmongers’ Company of London, the supporters are “ a Merman and maid, first, armed, the latter with a mirror in the left hand, proper.” From this heraldic employment, the Mermaid became a popular tavern sign; and there was an old dance called the Mermaid.

Sir Thomas Browne refers to the *picture* of Mermaids, though he does not admit their existence. They “ are conceived to answer the shape of the ancient Sirens that attempted upon Ulysses; which, notwithstanding, were of another description, containing no fishy composure, but made up of man and bird.” Sir Thomas is inclined to refer the Mermaid to Dagon, the tutelary deity of the Philis-

tines, which, according to the common opinion, had a human female bust and a fish-like termination; though the details of this fish idolatry are entirely conjectural.

Leyden, the Scottish poet, has left a charming ballad, entitled "The Mermaid," the scene of which is laid at Corrievreckin: the opening of this poem Sir Walter Scott praised as exhibiting a power of numbers which, for mere melody of sound, has seldom been excelled in English poetry:—

"On Jura's heath how sweetly swell
The murmurs of the mountain bee!
How softly mourns the writhèd shell
Of Jura's shore its parent sea!

"But softer floating, o'er the deep,
The Mermaid's sweet sea-soothing lay,
That charmed the dancing waves to sleep
Before the bark of Colonsay."

The ballad thus describes the wooing of the gallant chieftain:—

"Proud swells her heart! she deems at last
To lure him with her silver tongue,
And, as the shelving rocks she passed,
She raised her voice, and sweetly sung.

"In softer, sweeter strains she sung,
Slow gliding o'er the moonlight bay,
When light to land the chieftain sprung,
To hail the maid of Colonsay.

"O sad the Mermaid's gay notes fell,
And sadly sink remote at sea!
O sadly mourns the writhèd shell
Of Jura's shore, its parent sea.

“ And ever as the year returns,
The charm-bound sailors know the day;
For sadly still the Mermaid mourns
The lovely chief of Colonsay.”

Curious evidences of the existence of Mermaids are to be found in ancient authors. Pliny says that “the ambassadors to Augustine from Gaul declared that sea-women were often seen in their neighbourhood.” Solinus and Aulus Gellius also speak of their existence. Some stories are, however, past credence. It is related in the “*Histoire d’Angleterre*” that, in the year 1187, a Merman was “fished up” off the coast of Suffolk, and kept for six months. It was like a man, but wanted speech, and at length escaped into the sea! In 1430, in the great tempests which destroyed the dykes in Holland, some women at Edam, in West Friesland, saw a Mermaid who had been driven by the waters into the meadows, which were overflowed. “They took it, dressed it in female attire, and taught it to spin!” It was taken to Haarlem, where it lived some years! Then we read of Ceylonese fishermen, in 1560, catching, at one draught, seven Mermen and Mermaids, which were dissected! In 1531, a Mermaid, caught in the Baltic, was sent to Sigismund, King of Poland, with whom she lived three days, and was seen by the whole court!

In Merollo’s “*Voyage to Congo*,” in 1682, Mermaids are said to be plentiful all along the river Zaire. In the “*Aberdeen Almanack*” for 1688, it is predicted that “near the place where the famous

Dee payeth his tribute to the German Ocean," on the 1st, 13th, and 29th of May, and other specified times, curious observers may "undoubtedly see a pretty company of Mar Maids," and likewise hear their melodious voices. In another part of Scotland, about the same time, Brand, in his "Description of Orkney and Shetland," tells us that two fishermen drew up with a hook a Mermaid, "having face, arm, breast, shoulders, &c., of a woman, and long hair hanging down the neck, but the nether part, from below the waist, hidden in the water." One of the fishermen stabbed her with a knife, and she was seen no more! The evidence went thus:—Brand was told by a lady and gentleman, who were told by a baillie to whom the fishing-boat belonged, who was told by the fishers! Valentyn describes a Mermaid he saw in 1714, on his voyage from Batavia to Europe, "sitting on the surface of the water," &c. In 1758, a Mermaid is said to have been exhibited at the fair of St. Germain, in France. It was about two feet long, and sported about in a vessel of water. It was fed with bread and fish. It was a female, with negro features.

In 1775 appeared a very circumstantial account of a Mermaid which was captured in the Grecian Archipelago in the preceding year, and exhibited in London. The account is ludicrously minute, and it ends with: "It is said to have an enchanting voice, which it never exerts except before a storm." This imposture was craftily made up out of the skin of the angle shark. In Mr. Morgan's "Tour to Mil-

ford Haven in the year 1795," appears an equally circumstantial account of a Mermaid, said to have been seen by one Henry Reynolds, a farmer, of Ren-y-hold, in the parish of Castlemartin, in 1782. It resembled a youth of sixteen or eighteen years of age, with a very white skin: it was bathing. The evidence is very roundabout, so that there were abundant means for converting some peculiar kind of fish into a Merman, without imputing intentional dishonesty to any one. "Something akin to this kind of evidence is observable in the account of a Mermaid seen in Caithness in 1809, which attracted much attention in England as well as in Scotland, and induced the Philosophical Society of Glasgow to investigate the matter. The Editor of a newspaper, who inserted the statement, had been told by a gentleman, who had been shown a letter by Sir John Sinclair, who had obtained it from Mr. Innes, to whom it had been written by Miss Mackay, who had heard the story from the persons (two servant girls and a boy) who had seen the strange animal in the water." (Chambers's "Book of Days.")

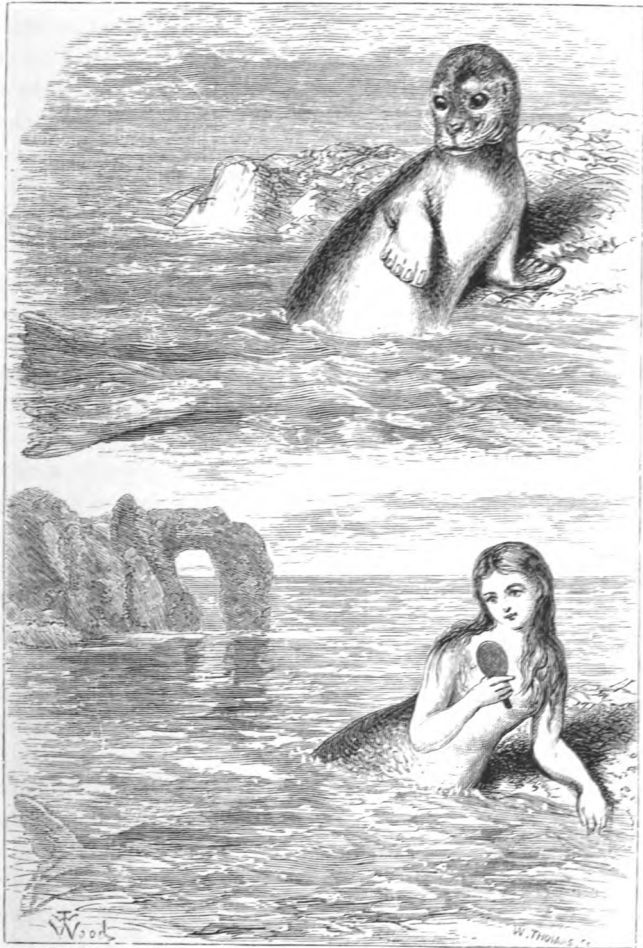
Then we read of a so-called Mermaid, shown in the year 1794 at No. 7, Broad-court, Bow-street, Covent-garden, said to have been taken in the North Seas by Captain Foster. It was of the usual description.

Much evidence comes from Scotland. Thus, in the year 1797, a schoolmaster of Thurso affirmed that he had seen a Mermaid, apparently in the act of combing her hair with her fingers! Twelve years

afterwards, several persons observed near the same place a like appearance. Dr. Chisholm, in his "Essay on Malignant Fever in the West Indies," in 1801, relates that, in the year 1797, happening to be at Governor Van Battenburg's plantation, in Berbice, "the conversation turned on a singular animal which had been repeatedly seen in Berbice river, and some smaller rivers. This animal is the famous Mermaid, hitherto considered as a mere creature of the imagination. It is called by the Indians *méné*, *mamma*, or mother of the waters. The description given of it by the Governor is as follows:—'The upper portion resembles the human figure, the head smaller in proportion, sometimes bare, but oftener covered with a copious quantity of long black hair. The shoulders are broad, and the breasts large and well-formed. The lower portion resembles the tail of a fish, is of great dimensions, the tail forked, and not unlike that of the dolphin, as it is usually represented. The colour of the skin is either black or tawny.' The animal is held in veneration by the Indians, who imagine that killing it would be attended with calamitous consequences. It is from this circumstance that none of these animals have been shot, and consequently examined but at a distance. They have been generally observed in a sitting posture in the water, none of the lower extremity being seen until they are disturbed, when, by plunging, the tail agitates the water to a considerable distance round. They have been always seen employed in smoothing their hair, and have

thus been frequently taken for Indian women bathing." In 1811, a young man, named John M'Isaac, of Corphine, in Kintyre, in Scotland, made oath, on examination at Campbell-town, that he saw, on the 13th of October in the above year, on a rock on the sea-coast, an animal which generally corresponded with the form of the Mermaid—the upper half human shape, the other brindled or reddish grey, apparently covered with scales; the extremity of the tail greenish red; head covered with long hair, at times put back on both sides of the head. This statement was attested by the minister of Campbell-town and the Chamberlain of Mull.

In August, 1812, Mr. Toupin, of Exmouth, in a sailing excursion, and when about a mile south-east of Exmouth Bar, heard a sound like that of the Æolian harp; and saw, at about one hundred yards distance, a creature, which was regarded as a Mermaid. The head, from the crown to the chin, formed a long oval, and the face seemed to resemble that of the seal, though with more agreeable features. The presumed hair, the arms, and the hand, with four fingers connected by a membrane, are then described, and the tail with polished scales. The entire height of the animal was from five feet to five and a-half feet. In 1819, a creature approached the coast of Ireland. It was about the size of a child ten years of age, with prominent bosom, long dark hair, and dark eyes. —It was shot at, when it plunged into the sea with a loud scream.



SEAL AND MERMAID.

In reviewing these stories of Mermaids, it may be remarked that there is always a fish in each tale—either a living fish of a peculiar kind, which a fanciful person thinks to bear some resemblance in the upper part to a human being, or a fish which becomes marvellous in the progress of its description from mouth to mouth. It is commonly thought the seals may often have been mistaken for Mermaids. But, of all the animals of the whale tribe that which approaches the nearest in form to man is, undoubtedly, the Dugong, which, when its head and breast are raised above the water, and its pectoral fins, resembling hands, are visible, might easily be taken by superstitious seamen for a semi-human being, or a Mermaid. Of this deception a remarkable instance occurred in 1826. The skeleton of a Mermaid, as it was called, was brought to Portsmouth, which had been shot in the vicinity of the Island of Mombass. This was submitted to the members of the Philosophical Society, when it proved to be the skeleton of a Dugong. To those who came to the examination with preconceived notions of a fabulous Mermaid, it presented, as it lay on the lecture-table, a singular appearance. It was about six feet long; the lower portion, with its broad tail-like extremity, suggested the idea of a powerful fish-like termination, whilst the forelegs presented to the unskilful eye a resemblance to the bones of a small female arm; the cranium, however, had a brutal form, which could never have borne the lineaments of “the human face divine.”

The Mermaid has been traced to the Manatee as well as to the Dugong: the former is an aquatic animal, externally resembling a whale, and named from its flipper, resembling the human hand, *manus*. Again, the *mammæ* (teats) of the Manatees and Dugongs are pectoral; and this conformation, joined to the adroit use of their flippers (whose five fingers can easily be distinguished through the inverting membranes, four of them being terminated by nails) in progression, nursing their young, &c., have caused them, when seen at a distance with the anterior part of their body out of the water, to be taken for some creature approaching to human shape so nearly (especially as their middle is thick set with hair, giving somewhat of the effect of human hair or a beard), that there can be little doubt that not a few of the tales of Mermen and Mermaids have had their origin with these animals as well as with seals and walruses. Thus the Portuguese and Spaniards give the *Manatee* a denomination which signifies Woman-fish; and the Dutch call the Dugong *Baardnetjee*, or Little-bearded Man. A very little imagination and a memory for only the marvellous portion of the appearance sufficed, doubtless, to complete the metamorphosis of this half woman or man, half fish, into a Siren, a Mermaid, or a Merman; and the wild recital of the voyager was treasured up by writers who, as Cuvier well observes, have displayed more learning than judgment.

The comb and the toilet-glass have already been incidentally mentioned as accessories in these Mer-

maid stories ; and these, with the origin of the creature, Sir George Head thus ingeniously attempts to explain :—“ The resemblance of the seal, or sea-calf, to the calf consists only in the voice, and the voice of the calf is certainly not dissimilar to that of a man. But the claws of the seal, as well as the hand, are like a lady’s back-hair comb ; wherefore, altogether, supposing the resplendence of sea-water streaming down its polished neck, on a sunshiny day, the substitute for a looking-glass, we arrive at once at the fabulous history of the marine maiden or mermaid, and the appendages of her toilet.”

The progress of zoological science has long since destroyed the belief in the existence of the Mermaid. If its upper structure be human, with lungs resembling our own, how could such a creature live and breathe at the bottom of the sea, where it is stated to be ? for our most expert divers are unable to stay under water more than half an hour. Suppose it to be of the cetaceous class, it could only remain under the water two or three minutes together without rising to the surface to take breath ; and if this were the case with the Mermaid, would it not be oftener seen ?

Half a century has scarcely elapsed since a *manufactured* Mermaid was shown in London with all the confidence of its being a natural creature. In the winter of 1822 there was exhibited at the Egyptian Hall, in Piccadilly, this pretended Mermaid, which was visited by from 300 to 400 persons daily ! The imposture, however, was too gross to last

long; and it was ascertained to be the dried skin of the head and shoulders of a monkey attached very neatly to the dried skin of a fish of the salmon kind with the head cut off; the compound figure being stuffed and highly varnished, the better to deceive the eye. This grotesque object was taken by a Dutch vessel from on board a native Malacca boat; and from the reverence shown to it by the sailors it is supposed to have represented the incarnation of one of the idol gods of the Malacca Islands. A correspondent of the "Magazine of Natural History," 1829, however, avers that the above "Mermaid" was brought from the East Indies; for being at St. Helena in 1813 he saw it on board the ship which was bringing it to England. The impression on his mind was that it was an artificial compound of the upper part of a small ape with the lower half of a fish; and by aid of a powerful glass he ascertained the point of union between the two parts. He was somewhat staggered to find that this was so neatly effected that the precise line of junction was not satisfactorily apparent: the creature was then in its best state of preservation.

In a volume of "Manners and Customs of the Japanese," published in 1841, we, however, find the following version of the history of the above Mermaid:—"A Japanese fisherman seems to have displayed ingenuity for the mere purpose of making money by his countrymen's passion for everything odd and strange. He contrived to unite the upper

half of a monkey to the lower half of a fish so neatly as to defy ordinary inspection. He then gave out that he had caught the creature in his net, but that it had died shortly after being taken out of the water; and he derived considerable pecuniary profit from his cunning in more ways than one. The exhibition of the sea monster to Japanese curiosity paid well; yet more productive was the assertion that the half-human fish, having spoken during the five minutes it existed out of its native element, had predicted a certain number of years of wonderful fertility and a fatal epidemic, the only remedy for which would be the possession of the marine prophet's likeness! The sale of these *pictured Mermaids* was immense. Either the composite animal, or another, the offspring of the success of the first, was sold to the Dutch factory and transmitted to Batavia, where it fell into the hands of a speculating American, who brought it to Europe; and here, in the year 1822-3, exhibited his purchase as a real Mermaid to the admiration of the ignorant, the perplexity of the learned, and the filling of his own purse."

The Editor of the "Literary Gazette," Mr. Jerdan, was the first to expose the fabulous creature of the Egyptian Hall. He plainly said:—"Our opinion is fixed that it is a *composition*; a most ingenious one, we grant, but still nothing beyond the admirably put-together members of various animals. The extraordinary skill of the Chinese and Japanese in executing such deceptions is noto-

rious, and we have no doubt that the Mermaid is a manufacture from the Indian Sea, where it has been pretended it was caught. We are not of those who because they happen not to have had direct proof of the existence of any extraordinary natural phenomenon, push scepticism to the extreme and deny its possibility. The depths of the sea, in all probability, from various chemical and philosophical causes, contain animals unknown to its surface-waters, rarely if ever seen by human eye. But when a creature is presented to us having no other organization but that which is suitable to a medium always open to our observation, it in the first instance excites suspicion that only one individual of the species should be discovered and obtained. When knowledge was more limited, the stories of Mermaids seen in distant quarters might be credited by the many, and not entirely disbelieved by the few; but now, when European and especially British commerce fills every corner of the earth with men of observation and science, the unique becomes the incredible, and we receive with far greater doubt the apparition of such anomalies as the present. It is curious that though medical men seem in general to regard the creature as a possible production of nature, no naturalist of any ability credits it after five minutes' observation! This may, perhaps, be accounted for by their acquaintance with the parts of distinct animals, of which it appears the Mermaid is composed. The cheeks of the blue-faced ape, the canine teeth, the *simia* upper body,

and the tail of the fish, are all familiar to them in less complex combinations, and they pronounce at once that the whole is an imposture. And such is our settled conviction." Though naturalists and journalists fully exposed the imposture, this did not affect the exhibition, which for a considerable time continued as crowded as ever; but the notoriety had dwindled down to "a penny show," at Bartholomew Fair, by the year 1825.

After so many exposures of the absurd belief in Mermaids, it could scarcely be expected that any person could be found in Europe weak enough to report the existence of one of these creatures to an eminent scientific Society. Yet, on the 22d of June, 1840, the first Secretary of the Ottoman Embassy at Paris addressed a note to the Academy of Sciences, stating that his father, who was in the Admiralty department at Constantinople, had recently seen a Mermaid while crossing the Bosphorus, which communication was received with much laughter.

We have still another recorded instance—and in Scotland. In the year 1857 two fishermen on the Argyleshire coast declared that when on their way to the fishing-station, Lochindale, in a boat, and when about four miles south-west from the village of Port Charlotte, about six o'clock in a June evening, they distinctly saw, at about six yards distance, an object in the form of a woman, with comely face and fine hair hanging in ringlets over the neck and shoulders. It was above the surface of the water gazing at the fishermen for three or four minutes

—and then vanished! Yet this declaration was officially attested!

In 1863 Mermaids were supposed to abound in the ponds and ditches of Suffolk, where careful mothers used them as bugbears to prevent little children from going too near the water. Children described them as “nasty things that crome you (hook you) into the water;” others as “a great big thing like a feesh,” probably a pike basking in the shallow water.

Sometimes the Mermaid has assumed a picturesque in fairy tale; and her impersonation has been described by Dryden as “a fine woman, with a fish’s tail.” And, laying aside her scaly train, she has appeared as a lovely woman, with sea-green hair; and Crofton Croker relates, in his “Fairy Legends,” a marriage between an Irish fisherman and a “Merrow,” as the Mermaid is called in Ireland.