

The Sealskin¹

(Iceland)

Early one morning before people had gotten up, a man was walking past some cliffs. He could hear playful noises and dancing. As he looked over the hill he saw a pile of sealskins. He picked up one of them, took it home, and locked it in his trunk.

Later in the day, he went back to the foot of the hill. A beautiful young girl was sitting there. She was naked and crying. It was her skin that the man had taken. The man gave the girl some clothing, comforted her, and took her home with him.

She eventually got used to the man, but never got along very well with other people. She would often just sit and stare at the sea. After some time, the man took her as his wife. They lived well together and had many children.

The peasant had locked the skin in a trunk, and he carried the key with him everywhere he went.

Many years later, the man left the key at home. Some people say that the man rowed out to sea and forgot he left the key at home under his pillow. Some people say that the man went to a Christmas service with his family, but that his wife had been sick and stayed home—he had forgotten to take the key out of the pocket of his everyday clothes when he changed for church. Whatever happened, when he got home the trunk was open and his wife was gone. She had found the key, looked through the trunk, and found the skin.

The wife could not resist the sea. She said farewell to her children, put on the skin, and threw herself into the water.

Before she jumped into the sea, it is reported that she said:

This I want, and yet I want it not—
Seven children have I at the bottom of the sea,
Seven children have I as well here above.

It is said that this touched the man's heart. From that day on, when he rowed out fishing, a seal often swam around his boat. Tears seemed to run from its eyes. From that day, he always caught many fish.

People often saw the couple's children walking on the beach while a seal swam along out in the sea. It would throw colorful fish and pretty shells to them.

But the mother never again returned to land.

¹ From <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type4080.html#sealskin>

The Dolphin Wife²

(A retelling of The Silkie Wife, a tale from the Orkney Islands)

Long ago, on a faraway coast, a fisherman came upon the edge of a rocky beach. There he discovered beautiful bit of green turf adjoining the sheltered rocks, and over this turf, he spied two beautiful women chasing each other. Just at the man's feet lay the skins of two dolphins, one of which he picked up to examine. The women, catching sight of him, screamed out, and ran to grab the skins. One seized the skin on the ground, threw it over her shoulders, and plunged into the sea. The other wrung her hands, cried, and begged the fisherman to restore her property, but he wanted a wife and would not throw away the chance. He spoke to her so lovingly that she put on some women's clothing that he brought her from his cottage, followed him home, and became his wife.

Some years later, after they had two little children, her husband awoke one night to the sound of voices in kitchen. Stealing softly to the door, he heard his wife talking in a low tone with someone outside the window. The conversation was ending, and he had only time to slip back to bed before his wife crept back into the room. He was greatly disturbed, but decided to keep quiet about the event.

The next evening, as he was returning home by the sea, he spied a male and female dolphin resting near a boulder a few yards out in the sea.

The larger animal, raising himself on his tail and fins, spoke to the astonished man. "You stole the creature who was to be my companion. Only last night I discovered her outer garment, the loss of which forced her to be your wife. I am not angry, as you were kind to her in your way, and my heart is too full of joy to hold any malice. But look at your wife for the last time."

The other dolphin looked at the man with all the sorrow she could force into her animal face, but when the saddened husband rushed toward the rock to secure his lost treasure, she and her companion slipped into the water. The poor fisherman had to return sadly to his motherless children and empty home.

² See <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type4080.html#silkiewife>

The Swan Maiden

(A retelling from a Swedish story)

One day a young peasant, who often amused himself with hunting, saw three swans flying toward him. The birds settled upon the strand of a sound nearby. Approaching the water, he was surprised to see the three swans remove their feathery covering and throw it onto the grass. Three beautiful maidens appeared and dove into the water. After playing in the waves awhile they returned to the land, put their feathery coverings back on, and flew away in the same direction from which they came.

The hunter could not forget the bright image of one creature—the youngest and fairest. His mother noticed something was wrong with her son after he lost interest in hunting, which had been his favorite pastime. She asked him finally the cause of his sadness, and so he told her what he had seen. He declared that there was no longer any happiness in this life for him if he could not marry the fair swan maiden.

"Nothing is easier," said the mother. "Go at sunset to the place where you last saw her. When the three swans come, remember where your chosen one lays her feathery garb, take it, and run away."

The young man listened to his mother's instructions, and hid that evening near the sound. He waited impatiently for the coming of the swans. The sun was just sinking behind the trees when the young man heard a whizzing in the air, and the three swans settled down upon the beach.

As soon as they had slipped off their swan skins, they were again transformed into the most beautiful maidens. From his hiding place, the young hunter took careful note of where his enchantress had laid her swan feathers. Silently, he took them and slipped back behind the bushes.

Soon he heard two of the swans fly away, but the third, in search of her clothes, discovered the young man. She fell upon her knees and asked for his help. The hunter, however, would not lose his beautiful prize. He did not tell her he had her feather dress. He threw his cloak around her and carried her home. They were married in a grand wedding and lived lovingly together.

One evening, seven years later, when they were much in love, the hunter told the girl the truth about how she became his wife. He showed her the white swan feathers of her former days. But no sooner were they feathers in her hands than she transformed once more into a swan, and instantly flew out the open window. In breathless shock, the man stared wildly after his vanishing wife. Before a year and a day had passed, he was laid to rest, with all his longings and sorrows, in the village churchyard.