

Shetland Superstitions.

Bijl-a-am a Krun. I.

Da knowes a Catfirth! a a sae green!
Wi lang flat corn rigs atween,
An gjates an gorstas here an dere
Among da aits an da bladed bere;
An doon be aest dey'r a seggy hollow,
Whaar dockens russet, an gowans yallow
Hings owre a stripe, as it wengies doon
Ta da shingly beach at da fit a da tuon.

The knowes of Catfirth, properly so called, are four in number. They form a series, lying in line north and south. They are elevations of a vein of grey limestone which extends almost the whole length of the mainland, cropping up at Lunnasting, North Nesting, Catfirth, Girsta, Veensgarth and Scalloway. Their crevices and hollows hold a brown mould, which grows a rich snort grass, and, in summer, beautiful small flowers.—Violets, thyme, calceolaries, the immaculate dog rose, and the sweet smelling yule girse. The knowe nearest to the north houses is the Hamerhuls (hools), next is the Ennie Knowe, then the Frammerhuls, now called the Ha' Knowe, and at the south burn Klingrahul. When these rocks have been broached by quarrying, there have been found among and between the layers of stone, cavities sometimes so large that they might be called caverns, and in these cavities a white or greyish powder-like ashes. These caverns are the trowes' "hads," that is, their strongholds or dwelling places; and this powder is the ashes of their fires.

About the middle of the eighteenth century, a company was formed, for the purpose of establishing a linen factory at Catfirth. The promoters of the enterprise were, I believe, mostly the lairds with some merchants and other business men. They built a house at the side of the Frammerhul for weaving in, and another house down at the burn, called the wauk-mill for fulling in. They dammed in the loch of Sandwater by building an embankment across at its debouchure into the burn of Skurran; and cut a canal from the east side of the loch to the burn of Krugill, to carry the water down the valley to work the machinery of their waukmill. This canal may still be seen, where the high road crosses it, on the rising ground at the east side of the loch.

Robert Gaudie told me that when he was a lad about 18 years old, he was with Gideon Gifford of Busta, carrying his portmanteau, when they walked over this embankment. Robert died sometime in the forties, when he was about a hundred years old.

These knowes had been the habitations of trowes from time immemorial. Here they had dwelt in peace and security throughout all generations, undisturbed by the turmoil of human affairs. Here young lasses might stand-canning the kye, with their hands at their foreheads, screening their eyes from the glare of the sun, and the skirts of their petticoats waving in the breeze. Here old women, baiting the sheep, might cry at the highest pitch of their voices; children in their play might jump, and run, and scream; dogs might yelp, running after rabbits, or sit on their haunches

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But now impious quarrymen, with mashes and crowbars and blasting powder, tear up their walls, and bore through their roofs, letting in the light and the air of the upper world.

One night, when this quarrying had been going on for sometime, the Catfirth folk saw the trows comin out from the Frammerhul, and from the Duss (the Duss is another knowe of the same series, which I forgot to mention), carrying their household stuff. One had a kist on his back and a daffik in his hand; another had a kettle on his head, and a creepie under his arm; everyone carried something, so it seemed they meant to make a permanent flitting. They were weeping and lamenting as they went—"Oh! whaar sall we gaeng noo, whaur sall we gaeng noo!"

Ales! Ales! Ales! Ales!

Dey're spoljied me kaamer an slocket mi ess

Dey're made me a waanderer, and whaar sall

I go?
God ken a me as I ken no.

When they had come as far west as Tammie's dik, they made a halt, and stood round in a circle. An old man, with a severe and reverent aspect, stood in the middle and spoke:—"My dear children, lament no more, I have decided on a place to go to, we shall go to Bijl-r-am o' Krun." Then up spoke a spruce young fellow with a big yellow beard and a military air,—"Feth, daa, du's said it, we's go ta Bijl-r-am indeed, dat we sall in trath. Bijl-r-am is no a bad place. I'm bön dere afore, and I ken every herry o't. So, bairns, had your tongues, an lat wiz be gjaain, fir da daylight 'll shön be comin in."

So away then went, down over Tammie's rigs, over the burn, up by the south dyke of Crulees, and up to the knowes at the north side of Bijl-r-am, where they vanished!

The word Bijl-r-am was never heard before that night. The place had always been called The Hill a Krun, but ever since this event it has been called Bijl-r-am. Scholars do not know the etymology of the word. Whether it is a proper word, having a root in the ancient, classical trowie language, or is it mere gibberish, nobody knows. The word, it seems, was not new to the trowes, they knew what place was meant, and they went there at once. And there they have resided ever since, for it is well known that there is not, in all Shetland, a more trowie place than Bijl-r-am a Krun.

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