

Secret of the Shetlands

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1. A Puffin in Trouble

“You know, Lisbeth, it always amazes me after the kind of storm we’ve just had to see so many guillemots sitting on eggs as if nothing had happened,” and Sinnie Ollason shaded her eyes against the blue sky to stare up at the beetling cliffs. “You’d think the wind would just blow them all off, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” Lisbeth paused for a moment in her rowing and stared across at the cliffs. They looked as if some giant had painted white lines along them, starting about eighty feet above the sea level, and continuing to within twenty feet of the top—a distance of more than two hundred feet. “Has it never struck you, Sinnie, that if guillemots lost their eggs every time a storm lashed the Shetlands, there wouldn’t be any of them left by this time.”

“I suppose you are right,” Sinnie agreed. “And after all, the eggs are shaped so they won’t roll off the ledges, aren’t they? Old Magnus once told me he won a bet with a visitor who refused to believe that the wind couldn’t blow an egg off a ledge. The visitor even went to the trouble of borrowing a pair of bellows and trying to blow an egg off a patch of rock.”

“I don’t believe that,” Lisbeth scoffed. “You know, Old Magnus tells too many fancy stories. The biggest duffer going would see by the shape of a guillemot’s eggs that they simply roll round in a circle.”

“Well, Magnus swore it was true,” Sinnie insisted.

“Magnus swears he has taken lots of flotsam and jetsam from the beaches here,” Lisbeth said, pulling hard on her right oar to take the small boat closer to the foot of the cliffs. “But we never see any. The tide race always sweeps it further along, where the water has eaten out the caves.”

Sinnie nodded agreement, and nothing more was said for a few minutes. It was always exciting to come along here after a typical Shetland snorter. For three days the southwesterly gale sweeping in from the Atlantic had beaten against the coast, the thunder of the waves dashing themselves to foam against the foot of the cliffs had been like deep organ music. The wind would have lifted any normal roof, but the single storied crofters’ cottages were built to stand such fury. Out at sea, however, where wind and waves combined, passing ships often had deck housings

damaged or even boats swept overboard which was why the two girls were taking a day off their normal duties to look along the foot of the cliffs.

Sometimes the search would result in nothing more worthwhile than a plank or two, or a few broken crates; but there had been occasions when much more valuable flotsam had been washed ashore.

Between the small boat and the open sea were four skerries. The largest of them was the Viking Skerry, three hundred yards from the mainland. It was a massive rocky bastion which must at one time have been part of the mainland, for it reached the same height as the cliffs. It was two hundred yards long, and rose from the sea in the shape of a sword tip. To the south of it was Peerie (small) skerry, and to the north The Twins; two smaller skerries which deserved the name given them.

There was never any flotsam or jetsam on their minute beaches, for they broke the full fury of any south-westerly gale, while between them and the mainland there was usually a roaring tide-rip. Except in the calmest weather only experts ventured between the skerries and the cliffs; the currents were strong and treacherous, and rocks which showed only at low tide spelled danger to the unwary.

"I can see something, Lisbeth," Sinnie said, shading her eyes again. "In fact there seems to be quite a lot of broken timber. I wonder if there's been a shipwreck?"

"I shouldn't think so, or we would have had a warning from the lighthouse keeper to look out for people in boats," the wiser Lisbeth pointed out. "Anyway, even if the wood is only from some deck housing, it will be fine. Ship builders always use good timber, don't they. I've got quite a nice stack of pine and some teak, too, for when John comes home. I want him to make me a loom. I've got a drawing of one and he . . ."

"Steady," Sinnie warned, and was stepping over the bows to ease the small boat on to the shingle when there was a sudden clatter from about a dozen yards away. Stones, dirt, and even a few eggs came down in a minor avalanche. The overhang of the cliffs sent them into the sea; but a few moments later, while the girls were still looking upwards, something most unexpected came down. It was a puffin, and the bird was obviously in trouble.

Puffins, which the Shetlanders call *Tammy Norries*, are generally looked on as the clowns of the sea. Small, sturdy birds, they have the oddest of odd beaks. It is like that of a parrot but more solid looking, and to add to its queer appearance it is striped with red. As the puffin has also got vivid yellow legs, he does on first sight give the impression of being dressed for clowning.

The puffin the girls saw was doing quaint aerobatics. His short wings were beating wildly, yet he was not really flying. He just fluttered down towards the water and seemed to have lost all sense of balance. Not until he was within a foot or so of the sea did he regain some of his powers of flight. Even then he rose but heavily—like a plane which has lost one of its engines.

“What’s that dangling?” Sinnie cried, pointing.

Lisbeth, a little taller than her friend, and dark haired against Sinnie’s straw thatch, cupped her hands about her eyes and watched the puffin’s labouring flight. Sinnie was right. There was something dangling from one of the puffin’s feet.

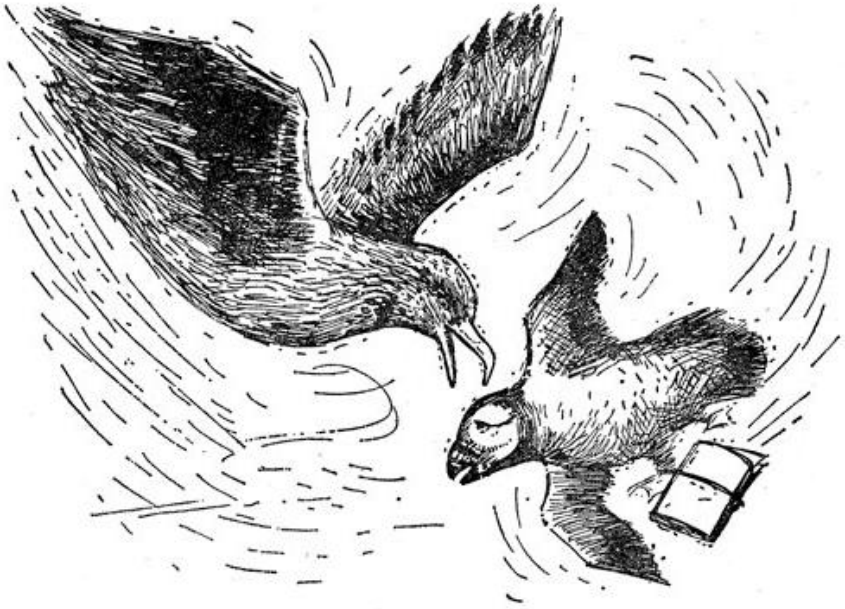
At first she thought it looked like a slender book. Then something fell from it, and in the windless air dissolved into a number of pale coloured wisps which began to float gently down.

Lisbeth grabbed the oars again and started to row out to where the things looked as if they would fall. Sinnie, staring spellbound at the puffin, suddenly gave an anguished:

“Oh, no!”

Lisbeth swivelled on her seat, expertly shipping one oar as she did so, and was in time to see one of the little dramas which are always taking place along the Shetland cliffs. A powerful Great Skua had seen the puffin, and puffins were his natural prey. He spent most of his time watching out for them as they winged their way back from the sea to their burrows—for the puffin is not averse to using even a rabbit burrow for his nest. A swift dive on to the labouring puffin is usually enough to make the smaller bird disgorge his catch. He speeds away glad to escape with his life and the Great Skua expertly catches the fish, or whatever it is the puffin has dropped. Then he waits for the next unlucky parent to come along.

Lisbeth was in time to see this little drama. The Great Skua swept down, swift and unerring as a thrown javelin. This time the poor little puffin could not disgorge his catch, for the thing was somehow entangled about one of his legs.



Spellbound, the two girls watched. The skua beat the air within inches of the poor little puffin's head, then swung round to launch another attack. The puffin, his wings flickering so quickly they seemed almost a blur, could do nothing except keep on flying. The skua beat the air in an acrobatic turn then swept down on him again, and was probably more amazed than ever when the puffin still did not drop his burden.

Four times the skua swung in, and each time he forced the puffin lower and lower; yet somehow failed to smash him down into the sea.

"Oh, if only I had a gun," Lisbeth said, her lips pressed into a thin line. "If the tammy norrie gets another knock, that will finish him."

Sinnie just nodded. By now the two birds were three quarters the way to the Viking skerry and the skua was wheeling for still another attack. Then, and both girls tightened their hands until the knuckles showed white against the sun and wind browned skin, the puffin started to climb. Almost as if, in a last despairing effort, he would meet the skua face to face.

For one breathless moment it did seem as if the two birds would clash head on, but in the last instant the skua, with a flick of his

powerful wings, turned aside. That turn cost him his prize, for before he could turn and pounce once more the terrified puffin had reached the shelter of Viking Skerry, and landed on a ledge just above a point known as The Angel.

"I think I would have cried if he had been knocked down," Sinnie said, blowing out a great breath of relief. "You know, I've never seen anything like that before. Have you? That puffin must" and there she stopped. While they had been watching the puffin's frantic fight for life, their small boat had drifted on, and now Lisbeth had reached out and picked up one of the dozen or more things which had been floating quietly down on the still air.

In silence the two girls stared at the piece of paper. It was wet on one side, and though Lisbeth and Sinnie saw few enough of them, there was no mistaking what it was. It was a one pound note!

"Is it real?" Sinnie asked breathlessly, and looked half afraid to take it when Lisbeth held it out.

"Looks real enough to me," Lisbeth asserted, and laughed a little shrilly as she added: "That'll make a story for old Magnus. I'll bet he's never seen one pound notes floating down from Heaven. And nobody can say we invented the story, either. We'll have proof. Put that down and help me collect the others before they get too wet."

Gently she rowed the dinghy along so that her friend could pick up, one after another, thirteen more one pound notes which lay on the smooth surface of the water like strange, rectangular flower petals.

"Fourteen pounds," Sinnie said, awe in her voice. "You know it's like a dream, isn't it? I say, we haven't missed any, have we?" and she stood up to look carefully all about.

Lisbeth shook her head then turned to stare across to the bulk of Viking skerry. Like most people who live at the edge of the sea, she had very long vision, and after a moment or so was sure she could make out the puffin as a little white blob above The Angel rock.

Sinnie got the glasses from the small locker and handed them to Lisbeth. They were binoculars with a magnification of five times. The Viking Skerry seemed to leap towards her the moment she had the lens in focus. When Sinnie asked if she could see the puffin, she nodded. He was still there.

"The thing must be fastened to his legs, somehow," she said. "He's pecking away like mad and if . . . ah, he's free."