

**FAIR ISLE, A  
TALE IN VERSE**

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Fair isle, a tale in verse by Wilhelm Jensen

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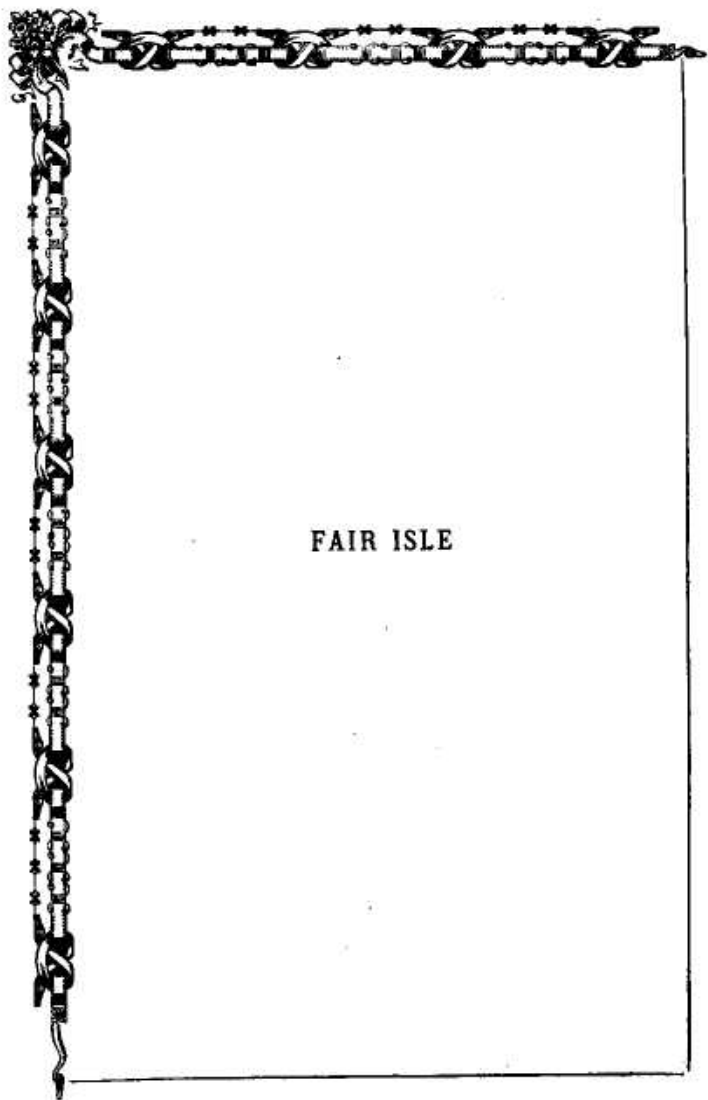
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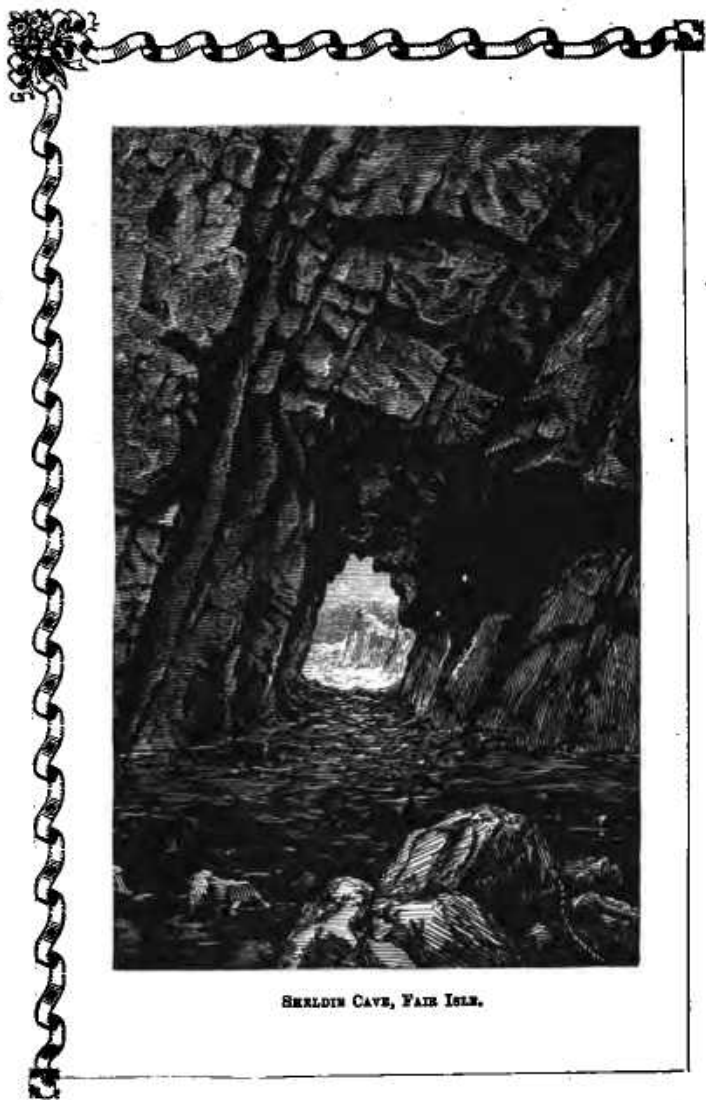
**WILHELM JENSEN**

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FAIR ISLE



SHERLOIN CAVE, FAIR ISLE.

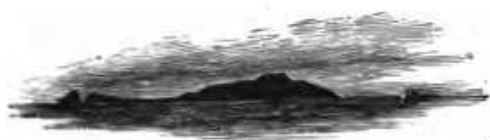
# FAIR ISLE

A TALE IN VERSE

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY A SHETLANDER

WITH PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

WILHELM JENSEN



KIRKWALL

WILLIAM PEACE & SON, ALBERT STREET  
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## FAIR ISLE.

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### Part I.

**T**olden time my lay doth lead you back,  
To rudest wilds, where long time Winter stands,  
Snow crown upon his head, sceptre of ice  
In stiffened hand, and doth the climate rule.  
To names, strange to the ear, and quaintly sounding ;  
A heritage of old, to us come down ;  
E'en as the hard soil there the meagre growth  
Of early times doth still produce. To men  
Of words aye sparing, and now long since mute—  
In storm and sea-foam scattered and dispersed—  
These I do conjure up, and shades they rise  
From out the misty air, under my call,  
And converse with you.

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Norway's coast doth sink  
With many jagged cliffs towards the East,  
And restless rolls the sea before the keel,  
Like to a damn'd one in the grave, who sleeps not,



But all night long groans on. Then here and there  
Is seen erst after two days' sail, what seems  
Like sea-birds floating on a wave-crest high ;  
But faint and dim in th' atmosphere of Heaven  
It grows, then vanisheth again in gloom  
Like to a ghost. Soon towards us hoarsely roars  
The surge's swell, and screaming flies a swarm  
Of sea-mews round the mast. Now peers from out  
The mist a rock precipitous—and more  
Than one—on all sides—by milky foam o'er dashed :  
It is the Shetland isles ; by sailors' lips  
Since days of which no memory remains  
Hetland it has been called—the new found land.

A strange wild land indeed ! once on a time by heat  
And great convulsive throes of Nature's womb  
Cast up to light. Then by the waves washed o'er  
And rocked like to an unfledged brood of birds  
With doleful lullaby. An offspring bold  
Towers Hetland hundred-headed in the air ;  
Around the head the storm-wind roars ; the feet  
The greedy-eating tooth of strong tide gnaws,  
Which also snake-like round the limbs entwines.  
A ridge from out the deep doth rear and twist  
Its watery form, by black scales overspread,  
A monster of the abyss, and "Skerry" named ;  
Stone shears it is, which thrust their giant teeth  
Mute-lurking in the body of the ship.  
By flood tide they are hidden, but the ebb  
Lays bare their jaws by its continuous swirl.  
Aloft the tern of silver gray, with shrilling voice  
Laughs out ; the northern diver plungeth down  
Into the vortex, while on edge of crag  
Cowers, booty-spying, motionless the auk.  
As now, so was it aye.

## To race of men

A small part only of these hundred isles  
Can house and home, and nourishment afford ;  
Who, erst as leader, brought them to these rocks  
Is known to none, but yet their language points  
Across the sea to Norway, to whom first  
This Hetland did belong. Then Britain's hand  
Was outstretched after it, and Shetland fell  
Together with the Orkneys to its grasp.  
Then changed itself the language of these isles,  
A mélange of the Norse, the old home tongue  
And England's speech and accent it became.  
Still show the people's height, their eyes and hair,  
They sprang from Norland's stock. By nature nursed  
With niggard breast, their speech's fountain scant  
Became ; but yet from many a maiden glance  
Shines bright and clear, a rare and heavenly blue,  
And shining golden hair round fair white brows  
Floats free, as if Heaven meant to compensate  
For lack of other gifts.

## In moor and sand

Their houses, which are ofttime only huts,  
Like nests of eider ducks stand isolate,  
But here and there a tiny thorp they form.  
A thatch roof overspreads the dwelling small,  
The wall of which is stone. No tree, nor bush  
Riseth from base of sterile, rocky cleft,  
Nor from the vale where marsh and heather growth  
The soil doth choke. The brown peat moor is seen,  
By mists o'erhung, from which resounds the cry  
Of whistling swan which broodeth on the waste.  
'Tis late in Autumn ere the corn matures,  
The meagre barley fields which only now and then  
A plough upturns : the harvest often fails,

And breadless, through the winter long, the board  
 Where hunger with dried fish, and sea-fowls' eggs  
 Of brightly speckled hue, contents itself.  
 The Islands offer pasture ground for sheep,  
 And cattle also, of a species small,  
 With shaggy coats. The ownership of them  
 Is source of wealth, and forms the difference 'twixt  
 The poor and rich. The sea, with mighty wave  
 Casts on the shore the seal—the whale comes too  
 As guest, and leaves, as present to his host,  
 Though 'gainst his will, his bones, and skin and oil.  
 By fowling some maintain themselves, and some  
 Burn kelp from sea-tang, and by Winter's storms  
 For months long separate from neighbouring isle,  
 Schooled by necessity, each makes for self  
 The things his life demands; with axe and plane,  
 With file and anvil, shapes the tools required  
 For labour. Housewife and daughter meanwhile  
 Dresses and shoes prepare; grind corn to meal,  
 The meal to dough transform, and then the dough  
 To bread do bake. When writing must be done—  
 A rare event—the quill is then brought out  
 From store which in a chest concealed doth lie,  
 Mayhap provided by the wife, when she  
 For bridal furnishings to Lerwick came—  
 The one small town on Mainland situate—  
 The largest of these isles. There sits the Foud  
 To make the laws respected, and convoke  
 The Thing, and judgment give in case of strife.  
 The burden of his office is but light,  
 For falsehood and deceit, robb'ry and theft  
 Are as unknown in Hetland, as a lock  
 On door or press. Yet brawls and discord rise  
 At times in Summer, with the foreign crews  
 Whose ships from east and west for trade do come