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**Illustrations of northern antiquities, from the earlier  
Teutonic and Scandinavian romances**

**Weber, Henry William**

**Edinburgh [u.a.], 1814**

Rosmer Haf-Mand, or the Mer-Man Rosmer

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ROSMER HAF-MAND, OR THE  
MER-MAN ROSMER.

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WHEN on a former occasion, "in Popular Ballads and Songs," vol. ii. p. 282, the present writer laid before the public a translation of the first ballad of "Rösmer," he expressed an opinion that this was the identical romance quoted by Edgar in "King Lear," which in Shakespeare's time was well-known in England, and is still preserved, in however mutilated a state, in Scotland. Having the outline of the story so happily sketched to his hand, it would have required no very great exertion of talents or industry for one exercised in these studies, to have presented this Romance in a poetical dress, far more correct and generally engaging, than that in which it can be expected to be found; but, as he accounts an original, however imperfect, which bears the genuine marks of the age which produced it, and of the taste of those who have preserved it, much more interesting to the historian or antiquary, than any mere modern tale of the same kind, however artfully constructed, he has preferred subjoining the Scottish legend *in puris naturalibus*, in the hope that the publication of it may be the means of exciting curiosity, and procuring a more perfect copy of this singular relic.

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[“ King Arthur's sons o' merry Carlisle]  
 Were playing at the ba' ;  
 And there was their sister Burd Ellen,  
 I' the mids amang them a'.

“ Child Rowland kick'd it wi' his foot,  
 And keppit it wi' his knee ;  
 And ay, as he play'd out o'er them a',  
 O'er the kirk he gar'd it flee.

“ Burd Ellen round about the isle  
 To seek the ba' is gane ;  
 But they bade lang and ay langer,  
 And she camena back again.

“ They sought her east, they sought her west,  
 They sought her up and down ;  
 And wae were the hearts [in merry Carlisle]  
 For she was nae gait found !”

At last her eldest brother went to the Warluck Merlin, (*Myrddin Wyldt*), and asked if he knew where his sister, the fair burd Ellen, was? “ The fair burd Ellen,” said the Warluck Merlin, “ is carried away by the fairies, and is now in the castle of the king of Elfland ; and it were too bold an undertaking for the stoutest knight in Christendome to bring her back.” “ Is it possible to bring her back,” said her brother, “ and I will do it, or perish in the attempt.” “ Possible indeed it is,” said the Warluck Merlin ; “ but woe to the man or mother's son who attempts it, if he is not well instructed beforehand of what he is to do.”

Inflamed no less by the glory of such an enterprise, than by the desire of rescuing his sister, the brother of the fair burd Ellen resolved

to undertake the adventure ; and after proper instructions from Merlin (which he failed in observing,) he set out on his perilous expedition.

“ But they bade lang and ay langer,  
Wi' dout and mickle maen ;  
And wae were the hearts [in merry Carlisle,]  
For he camena back again.”

The second brother in like manner set out ; but failed in observing the instructions of the Warluck Merlin ; and

“ They bade lang and ay langer,  
Wi' mickle dout and maen ;  
And wae were the hearts [in merry Carlisle,]  
For he camena back again.”

Child Rowland, the youngest brother of the fair burd Ellen, then resolved to go ; but was strenuously opposed by the good queen [Gwenevra,] who was afraid of losing all her children.

At last the good queen [Gwenevra] gave him her consent and her blessing ; he girt on (in great form, and with all due solemnity of sacerdotal consecration) his father's good *claymore* [Excalibar,] that never struck in vain, and repaired to the cave of the Warluck Merlin. The Warluck Merlin gave him all necessary instructions for his journey and conduct, the most important of which were, that he should kill every person he met with after entering the land of Fairy, and should neither eat nor drink of what was offered him in that country, whatever his hunger or thirst might be ; for if he tasted or touched in Elfland, he must remain in the power of the Elves, and never see *middle eard* again.

So Child Rowland set out on his journey, and travelled “ on and ay farther on,” till he came to where (as he had been forewarned by the War-

luck Merlin) he found the king of Elfland's horse-herd feeding his horses. "Canst thou tell me," said Child Rowland to the horse-herd, "where the king of Elfland's castle is?"—"I cannot tell thee," said the horse-herd; "but go on a little farther, and thou wilt come to the cow-herd, and he perhaps may tell thee." So Child Rowland drew the good claymore [Excalibar,] that never struck in vain, and hewed off the head of the horse-herd. Child Rowland then went on a little farther, till he came to the king of Elfland's cow-herd, who was feeding his cows. "Canst thou tell me," said Child Rowland to the cow-herd, "where the king of Elfland's castle is?"—"I cannot tell thee," said the cow-herd; "but go on a little farther, and thou wilt come to the sheep-herd, and he perhaps may tell thee." So Child Rowland drew the good claymore [Excalibar,] that never struck in vain, and hewed off the head of the cow-herd. He then went on a little farther, till he came to the sheep-herd. \* \* \* \*

[The sheep-herd, goat-herd, and swine-herd are all, each in his turn, served in the same manner; and lastly he is referred to the hen-wife.]

"Go on yet a little farther," said the hen-wife, till thou come to a round green hill surrounded with rings (*terraces*) from the bottom to the top; go round it three times *widershins*, and every time say, "Open, door! open, door! and let me come in; and the third time the door will open, and you may go in." So Child Rowland drew the good claymore [Excalibar,] that never struck in vain, and hewed off the head of the hen-wife. Then went he three times *widershins* round the green hill, crying, "Open door! open, door! and let me come in;" and the third time the door opened, and he went in. It immediately closed behind him; and he proceeded through a long passage, where the air was soft and agreeably warm like a May evening, as is all the air of Elfland. The light was a sort of twilight or gloaming; but there were neither windows nor candles, and he knew not whence it came, if it was not from the walls and roof, which were rough and arched like a

grotto, and composed of a clear and transparent rock, incrustated with *sheeps-silver* and spar, and various bright stones. At last he came to two wide and lofty folding-doors, which stood a-jar. He opened them, and entered a large and spacious hall, whose richness and brilliance no tongue can tell. It seemed to extend the whole length and height of the hill. The superb Gothic pillars by which the roof was supported were so large and so lofty (said my seannachy,) that the pillars of the Chanry Kirk, or of Pluscardin Abbey, are no more to be compared to them, than the Knock of Alves is to be compared to Balrinnes or Ben-a-chi. They were of gold and silver, and were fretted like the west window of the Chanry Kirk,\* with wreaths of flowers composed of diamonds and precious stones of all manner of beautiful colours. The key-stones of the arches above, instead of coats of arms and other devices, were ornamented with clusters of diamonds in the same manner. And from the middle of the roof, where the principal arches met, was hung by a gold chain, an immense lamp of one hollowed pearl, perfectly transparent, in the midst of which was suspended a large carbuncle, that by the power of magic continually turned round, and shed over all the hall a clear and mild light like the setting sun; but the hall was so large, and these dazzling objects so far removed, that their blended radiance cast no more than a pleasing lustre, and excited no other than agreeable sensations in the eyes of Child Rowland.

The furniture of the hall was suitable to its architecture; and at the farther end, under a splendid canopy, seated on a gorgeous sofa of velvet, silk, and gold, and “Kembing her yellow hair wi’ a silver kemb,”

“There was his sister burd Ellen;  
She stood up him before.”

\* The cathedral of Elgin naturally enough furnished similes to a man who had never in his life been twenty miles distant from it.

Says,

“ God rue on thee, poor luckless fode !<sup>1</sup>  
What hast thou to do here ?

“ And hear ye this, my youngest brither,  
Why badena ye at hame ?  
Had ye a hunder and thousand lives,  
Ye canna brook ane o’ them.

“ And sit thou down ; and wae, O wae  
That ever thou was born ;  
For come the king o’ Elfland in,  
Thy leccam<sup>2</sup> is forlorn !”

A long conversation then takes place ; Child Rowland tells her the news [of merry Carlisle,] and of his own expedition ; and concludes with the observation, that, after his long and fatiguing journey to the castle of the king of Elfland, he is *very hungry*.

Burd Ellen looked wistfully and mournfully at him, and shook her head, but said nothing. Acting under the influence of a magic which she could not resist, she arose, and brought him a golden bowl full of bread and milk, which she presented to him with the same timid, tender, and anxious expression of solicitude.

Remembering the instructions of the Warluck Merlin, “ Burd Ellen,” said Child Rowland, “ I will neither taste nor touch till I have set thee free !” Immediately the folding-doors burst open with tremendous violence, and in came the king of Elfland,

“ With “ *fi, fi, fo, and fum !*  
I smell the blood of a Christian man !  
Be he dead, be he living, wi’ my brand  
I’ll clash his harns frae his harn-pan !”

“ Strike, then, Bogle of Hell, if thou darest !” exclaimed the undaunt-

<sup>1</sup> Fode—*man*.

<sup>2</sup> Leccam—*body*.

ed Child Rowland, starting up, and drawing the good claymore [Excalibar,] that never struck in vain.

A furious combat ensued, and the king of Elfland was felled to the ground; but Child Rowland spared him on condition that he should restore to him his two brothers, who lay in a trance in a corner of the hall, and his sister, the fair burd Ellen. The king of Elfland then produced a small crystal phial, containing a bright red liquor, with which he anointed the lips, nostrils, eye-lids, ears, and finger-ends<sup>1</sup> of the two young men, who immediately awoke as from a profound sleep, during which their souls had quitted their bodies, and they had seen &c. &c. &c.—So they all four returned in triumph to [merry Carlisle.]

Such was the rude outline of the Romance of Child Rowland, as it was told to me when I was about seven or eight years old, by a country tailor then at work in my father's house. He was an ignorant and dull good sort of honest man, who seemed never to have questioned the truth of what he related. Where the *et cæteras* are put down, many curious particulars have been omitted, because I was afraid of being deceived by my memory, and substituting one thing for another. It is right also to admonish the reader, that "The Warluck Merlin—Child Rowland—and Burd Ellen," were the only *names* introduced in *his* recitation; and that the others inclosed within brackets are assumed upon the authority of the locality given to the story by the mention of *Merlin*. In every other respect I have been as faithful as possible.

It was recited in a sort of formal, drowsy, measured, monotonous recitative, mixing prose and verse, in the manner of the Islandic Sagas; and as is still the manner of reciting tales and *fabulas aniles* in the winter evenings, not only among the Islanders, Norwegians, and

<sup>1</sup> This anointing the seats of the five senses seems borrowed from the sacrament of *extreme unction* in the Catholic church; but *extreme unction* (with blood,) *lustration by water*, the *sign of the cross*, *breaking of bread* and *drinking of wine*, &c. were in use among the Goths long before the introduction of Christianity; and the *Mitres* of our bishops are lineally descended from the radiated turbans of the priests of *Mithra*, the Persian God of the Sun.—The *Rosary* is used by the followers of *Lama*, among the Kalmucks, &c.



Swedes, but also among the Lowlanders in the North of Scotland, and among the Highlanders and Irish. This peculiarity, so far as my memory could serve me, I have endeavoured to preserve; but of the *verses* which have been introduced, I cannot answer for the exactness of any, except the stanza put into the mouth of the king of Elfland, which was indelibly impressed upon my memory, long before I knew any thing of Shakespeare, by the odd and whimsical manner in which the tailor curled up his nose, and sniffed all about, to imitate the action which "fi, fi, fo, and fum!"<sup>1</sup> is intended to represent.

Pleased with the fire which his tales struck from me, as well as teased by my indefatigable importunity and endless questions, as I sat on a *creepy*<sup>2</sup> by his knee, my good Seannachy let me into the following secrets in the natural history of Elfland, which I can still find as interesting as I did thirty years ago, although for somewhat different reasons.

"You have seen," said he, "on a fine day in the *go-harst*<sup>3</sup> (post-autumnal season) when the fields are cleared, a number of cattle from different farms collected together, running about in a sort of phrensy, like pigs boding windy weather; capering, leaping, bellowing, and goring one another, as if they were possessed, although there is no visible cause for such disorder.

"If, at such a time, you were to look through an elf-bore in wood, where a *thorter knot* (the knarry end of a branch) has been taken out, or through the hole made by an elf-arrow, (*which has probably been made by a warble*) in the skin of a beast that has been elf-shot,<sup>4</sup> you may see the elf-bull *haiging* (butting) with the strongest bull or ox in

<sup>1</sup> I question whether any of our actors on the stage now understand this ejaculation, if it may be so called, so well as my Seannachy did.

<sup>2</sup> "Creepy," short-legged stool.

<sup>3</sup> It is pity that this word is not English, as we have none to supply its place.

<sup>4</sup> In his notes upon the ballad of Sir Oluf and the Elf King's Daughter, (of which a translation will be found in "Popular Ballads and Songs," vol. i. p. 219,) the Editor of the K. Viser says, that Sir Oluf was "Elf-shot."

the herd; but you will never see with that eye again.—Many a man has lost his sight in this manner!

“The elf-bull is small, compared with earthly bulls, of a mouse-colour; *mosted* (crop-eared,) with short *corky* horns; short in the legs; long, round, and *slamp* (supple) in the body, like a wild animal; with short, sleek, and glittering hair, like an otter; and supernaturally active and strong. They most frequently appear near the banks of rivers; eat much green corn in the night time; and are only to be got rid of by, &c. &c. (*certain spells which I have forgot.*)

“A certain farmer, who lived near the banks of a river, had a cow that never was known to admit an earthly bull; but every year, in a certain day in the month of May, she regularly quitted her pasture, walked slowly along the banks of the river, till she came opposite to a small holm covered with bushes; then entered the river,<sup>2</sup> and waded or swam to the holm, where she continued for a certain time, after which she again returned to her pasture. This went on for several years, and every year, after the usual time of gestation, she had a calf. They were all alike, mouse-coloured, *mosted*, with *corky* horns, round and long bodied, grew to a good size, and were remarkably docile, strong, and useful, and all *ridgels*.<sup>3</sup> At last, one forenoon about Martinmas, when the corn was all “under thack and raip,” as the farmer sat with his family by the *ingle-side*, they began to talk about killing their *Yule Mart*. “Hawkie,” said the gude-man, “is fat and sleek; she has had an easy life, and a good goe of it all her days, and has been a good

<sup>1</sup> Here, among many others of the same kind, he specified one instance of a man of his own acquaintance who lost the sight of an eye in consequence of looking through an *elf-bore*. “It is true,” said he, “the man himself always denied it, from the fear of the vengeance of the fairies, but every body knew that he lost it in that way.”—Such is the power of credulity in forcing evidence for its own delusion!—There was no danger of my Seanachy putting his eye-sight in jeopardy by such a rash indulgence of curiosity.

<sup>2</sup> In the southern counties of Scotland, this story, or one very similar, has been peculiarly appropriated to Saint Mary’s Loch, in Selkirkshire.

<sup>3</sup> This is a fortunate circumstance for the fabulist, as otherwise the ceremony of castration, by obliging the steers to declare themselves too soon, would have quite spoiled the story.

cow to us ; for she has filled the plough and all the stalls in the *byre* with the finest steers in this country side ; and now I think we may afford to pick her old bones, and so she shall be the *Mart!*"—

The words were hardly uttered, when Hawkie, who was in the byre beyond the *hallan*, with her whole bairn-time, tyed by their *thrammels* to their stalls, walked out through the side of the byre with as much ease as if it had been made of brown paper ; turned round on the midding-head ; lowed once upon each of her calves ; then set out, they following her in order, each according to his age, along the banks of the river ; entered it ; reached the holm ; disappeared among the bushes ; and neither she nor they were ever after seen or heard of. The farmer and his sons, who had with wonder and terror viewed this phenomenon from a distance, returned with heavy hearts to their house, and had little thought of *Marts* or merriment for that year."

The foregoing tale will be found in the unpublished MS. of the late Mr Boucher of Epsom's Glossary, as it was furnished by the present writer, who was then altogether unacquainted with the following tragical and curious history of an elf-bull, in "Eyrbyggiasaga," published in 4to., in Copenhagen, by the learned Professor G. J. Thorkelin, in 1787, p. 317, who with much probability supposes it to be of a date anterior to 1264.

"It was milking-time, about nine in the evening, when Thoroddr returned ; and as he rode towards the stable, a cow, running before him, broke her foot. The cow, which was *yeld*, was taken ; and, being too lean to be slaughtered, Thoroddr caused her foot to be bound up ; and, as soon as it was strong enough, she was sent to Ulfarsfell to be fattened, as the pasture there was as good as on the holms. There are some who say that the islanders, when carrying their dried fish to the inner part of the creek, saw with the cow, as she was feeding upon the side of the fell, a strange bull of a mouse-colour, that nobody knew. Next autumn Thoroddr thought of killing the cow ; but those who were sent to fetch her could no where find her. After much search

to no purpose, they at last gave her up for lost, supposing she must have been either dead or stolen. A little before the *Yule*-time, one morning as the neat-herd at *Kærstead* was going as usual to the cow-house, he saw the broken-footed cow, that had been so industriously sought for, standing before the door. Turning her into the cow-house, and tying her up, he carried the news to *Thoroddr*, who, entering the cow-house, and viewing and handling the cow, discovered that she was with calf, and therefore not fit for a mart, especially as he had flesh enough besides for his family. About the end of the following spring, she had a *quey*-calf, and shortly after a bull-calf, which was so large that she died soon after calving. This large bull-calf was brought into the house, and was of a mouse-colour, and seemed well worth preserving. When the calves were carried into the room, there happened to be present an old *Kerling* (*sic. in orig.*) who had been foster-mother to *Thoroddr*, and was now become blind. In her younger days she had been reputed to have the second sight; but as she grew old, her predictions were regarded as the ravings of dotage, although many of them were verified by the events. The calf, with his legs bound, being laid on the floor, bellowed aloud, on which the *Kerling*, in the greatest terror, cried out, "That is the low of an Elf's imp, and of no earthly creature; and you will do well to destroy it immediately!" *Thoroddr* said it would be a pity to kill such a fine calf, which, if properly taken care of, must turn out an excellent steer. The calf then lowed a second time; on which the *Kerling* threw away what she had in her hand, and said, "My bairn! let the calf be killed; for if he is brought up, we shall all one day have great cause to rue it." "Well, nurse, since you will have it so," said *Thoroddr*, "he shall be killed." Both calves were then taken out of the room, and *Thoroddr* gave orders to kill the *quey*, and carry the bull into the barn, to be brought up, with strict injunctions that nobody should undeceive the old nurse. This calf grew so fast, that before spring he was full as large as those that had been calved several months before him. When let out, he ran very much about the meadow, and roared like a full-grown bull, so loud that it was heard in the house. Then the *Kerling* said,

“As this monster is not killed, he will assuredly do us more mischief than words can express!”—The calf grew a-pace, and that summer was turned into a field of saved grass; and by autumn, he was so large that few year-olds could match him. He was well-horned, and of all the cattle the most sleek and beautiful to see, and was thence called *Glæsir*. Before he was two years old he was as large as a five-year-old ox; fed mostly among the cows, not far from the house; and as often as Thoroddr went into the fold, *Glæsir* went up and smelled him, and licked his cloaths, and Thoroddr patted him. He was gentle as a lamb both to men and cattle; but when he roared, it was tremendous, and the old woman never heard it without expressing the greatest consternation and horror. When *Glæsir* was four years old, if women, or children, or striplings, went near him, he took no notice of them; but if men passed, he chafed and threatened, and was so surly and unruly that he would hardly suffer himself to be driven out of the way.”

[*Glæsir* continuing to be unmanageable, and to roar as terribly as ever, Thoroddr, moved by the continual warnings and apprehensions of his nurse, promises in good earnest to slaughter him next autumn, as soon as he should be fat enough. But the old *spæ-wife* tells him that it will be too late; and breaks forth into a vehement, prophetic, and poetical rapture, in strains which, far from resembling those of Cassandra, except in their inefficacy, were perfectly perspicuous and to the point.]

“So it fell out, that same summer, that one day after Thoroddr had got the hay in a hay-field raked together, and made up into cocks, there fell a great deal of rain. Next morning the servants going out, observed *Glæsir* in the hay-field, disencumbered from the board which, since he became vicious, had been fastened upon his horns, running about, overturning the cocks, and scattering the hay all over the field, which he had never been accustomed to do; at the same time that his roarings and bellowings so terrified the servants, that no one durst venture to go and drive him away. On their telling Thoroddr what *Glæsir* was at, he ran out, and snatching up a large birchen stake by the

two forks, hastened into the field, with it over his shoulder, to attack the bull. Glæsir, seeing this, desisted from the havoc which he was making, and advanced to meet him, regardless of his threats, and the noise he made to intimidate him. On this Thoroddr struck him so hard between the horns, that the stake broke short close by the forks. Glæsir then rushed upon Thoroddr, who, seizing him by the horns, turned his head aside; and in this manner they struggled for some time; Glæsir always striking, and Thoroddr avoiding, till the latter began to be fatigued. Then Thoroddr leaped upon his neck, and leaning over between his horns, clasped his hands under his throat, which he griped with all his might, in hopes of stifling him, or tiring him out; and in this manner the bull ran about the field, carrying him upon his neck.

“The servants seeing their master in such danger, and, being weaponless, not daring to interfere, ran home to arm themselves, and returned with spears and other weapons. When the bull saw that, he stooped his head between his legs, and shook it till he got one of his horns under Thoroddr, then raised it with a jerk so suddenly, that he threw up Thoroddr’s legs, so that he stood almost upon his head upon the bull’s neck. When his legs fell down again, Glæsir stooped his head once more, and struck him with his other horn in the belly, goring him so that he let go his hold, and the bull, roaring tremendously, ran along the meadow towards the river. The servants pursued him through a ravine of the mountain called Geirvaur, till he reached a fen below the farm-stead of Hello, where he ran into a pool, dived, and never after came up again; and ever since, the fen has been called Glæsiskellda.—Returning to the house, they found Thoroddr dead of his wound.”

This idea of peopling the subterraneous and submarine regions, not only with supernatural men and women, but with beasts also, which indulge in frequent intercourse with those of our element, is found in Arabia, Persia, India, Thibet, among the Kalmuck and Mongol Tar-

tars, Swedes, Norwegians, Scottish Lowlanders, Highlanders, and Hebridians; and it may, perhaps with more propriety than any other superstition, be denominated *Gothic*, (if the term is used in contradistinction to *Greek* and *Roman*;) because no distinct traces of it, it is presumed, are to be found among the latter, who seem to have lost sight of it. And here, as a justification of this gossiping, the present writer begs leave to remark, that almost all the superstitions and antient popular usages which are accounted national among us, particularly in the Highlands and Hebrides, are still found in various parts of Sweden and Norway. How far *these*, as well as the *language* and *poetry* of the Highlanders, have been affected by the residence of the Nor-men among them, may on some future occasion be the subject of inquiry, to which end measures have been taken for procuring ample materials from curious and learned friends in the university of Lund, with whom the writer's correspondence has at present been broken off, by the disastrous war in which these countries are unhappily involved. \*

\* This was written two years and a half ago.