

broken timber go to the sea, of which there is enough found cast ashore upon these isles. But many things of this nature are hidden to us, and we can only give our conjectures anent them.

There is also in this firth the Swelchie of Stroma, a very dangerous place at the north end of the isle of Stroma, where there is a meeting of several tides, which causeth the water to rage and make a dreadful noise, heard at some distance; as likewise the sea-billows are raised high, and appear white and frothy, very terrible to behold, especially if any storm be lying on, falling unto which all passengers carefully labour to avoid; as a gentleman related to me, that once he was in great danger, the seamen giving themselves over for lost, though three miles from the Swelchie, and that in a dead calm, when within two or three pair of butts to Stroma, and though so near land, they had been carried down into, and perished by this Swelchie, as they all laid their account, if the Lord had not speedily caused a northern wind to blow, whereby they got hold of Stroma.

There is another dangerous place at the south end of this isle of Stroma, where is also a great conflict of water, called the Merry-men of May, so called from the house of Mey, a gentleman's dwelling in Caithness, opposite to this isle, and called Merry-men, because of the leaping and dancing, as it were, of the waters there, though mirth and dancing be far from the minds of the seamen and passengers, who shall be so unhappy as to fall in among them, especially when any sea is going.

Seeing from what hath been said this firth is so very dangerous to pass, no wonder that the mariners and others be very careful to lay hold on the fittest occasion for a safe passage, which they find to be a little before the turning of the tide, when it is beginning to ebb on the shore, but the flood is yet running in the sea, then they use to go off, that so, when they are in, or nigh unto, the middle of the firth, the tide may be upon the turn, which causeth for some time a still and quiet sea (as to the running of the tides) and the seamen are not so put to it, in wrestling either against flood or ebb. Buchanan, speaking of these seas and the rapid tides, elegantly expresses himself: *Dux sunt tempestates quibus hæ angustia sunt superabiles, aut cum cœstum relapsu cessante undarum conflictu, mare tranquillatur, aut ubi pleno alveo æquor ad summum incrementi pervenit, languescente utrinque vi illa, quæ undas concitabat, veluti receptui, canente oceano procellis et vortices pelagi commoti molibus se velut in sua castra recipientibus.*

Any wind, they observe, will take them over from Burwick to Caithness, if tided right, and the wind not in south-west, or nigh to that point, and so from Caithness to Burwick, if not in the north-east, or nigh to it. But the north-west wind they call the king of the firth, not only, I judge, because it will both take them from Caithness to Orkney, and from Orkney to Caithness, but also because, if it blow any thing, it keepeth them up in an ebb from falling into the wells of Swinna, the Swelchie of Stroma, and the Merry-men of May. By tiding right also they can come over by the help of oars, though there be no wind: and at any time, though they observe not the tide, they can pass from Orkney to Caithness, if it blow a good gale from north-east, and so from Caithness to Orkney, if the like blow from south-west. The boatmen, who use to pass the firth, from their experience know it best, and can avoid the swell of a sea, when persons of greater skill cannot do it.

At no time is there any anchoring in this firth for if any through ignorance or otherwise attempt it, within a little time they must either cut their cables, as some have done, and begone; or else, if their anchors or cables break not, they will be ridden under: the experience whereof one of our ships lately had, who casting anchor even in