

Bessie Skebister

By E. Lynn Linton

All the honest men of the isle knew Bessie Skebister. She was the shrewdest witch in the whole country, and it was a usual thing with them when they thought their boats in danger to send to her to know the truth; and, "Giff Bessie say it is weill, it is weill" was a common proverb in the Orkney Islands. She did other things besides foreknowing the fall of storms, for she took James Sandieson when in a strange distemper and tormented him greatly. "In his sleip, and oftymes waking," says the dittay, "he was tormented with yow, Bessie, and vther two with yow, quhom he knew not, cairying him to the sea, and to the fyre, to Norroway, Yetland, and to the south—that ye had ridden all this wayes, with ane brydle in his mouth." Moreover, Bessie was a "dreamer of dreams," as well as a rider of sick men's souls; so she was strangled and burnt.