

SHETLAND BALLAD.

Lieut. F. W. L. Thomas, R.N., Cor. Mem. S.A. Scot., communicated a ballad, hitherto unpublished, obtained by him in Shetland, under circumstances thus narrated by him :—

“ I wrote down the following ballad from the dictation of a venerable lady-udaller, who lived at Snarra Voe, a secluded district in Shetland. The story is founded on the superstition of the Seals or Selkies being able to throw off their waterproof jackets, and assume the more graceful proportions of the genus *Homo*—of which there is an amusing account in *Hibbert's History of Shetland*, and one still more extraordinary at p. 435 of *Barry's History of Orkney*.

“ Silky is a common name in the north country for a seal, and appears to be a corruption of *Selch*, the Norse word for that animal. Sule Skerry is a small rocky islet, lying about twenty-five miles to the westward of Hoy Head, in Orkney, from whence it may be seen in very clear weather. The seals still resort to it in the breeding season. Up to a late period, a sloop annually left Stromness, in the months of July or August, for the purpose of taking them ; and I remember to have been told that, on one occasion, the vessel was so long detained by calm weather, they were under the necessity of throwing their cargo overboard to escape infection. In the ‘ Coppie of my Lord Sinclairis Rentale, that deit at Flowdin,’ we find ‘ Sowliskerrie, of the old earldome ī gave in male (-rent) xx. s̄ orknay payment of the best gild price, ī now nought set.’ Near Sule Skerry is a high conoid rock, called the Stack, and boats can only land in very fine weather at either of these places. There are not wanting stories of hairbreadth ‘scapes, from the sea suddenly rising while people have

been upon the island, and the ballad will give a still more romantic interest to these lone spots, 'placed far amid the melancholy main.'

"There are two or three kinds of seals, but the one here referred to is the Haaf-fish (Haaf, *i.e.*, oceanic) of the Shetlanders, which grows to the size of an ox, and of which most wonderful tales are told. There is usually among a herd of seals, one individual whose bulk, age, and scars, distinguish him as the patriarch of his tribe, in fact, the 'Great Silky.' The Haaf-fish is rarely seen, seldom coming into the still waters of the bays, but retiring to the most desolate and surf-beaten rocks. One of their breeding places is at the Ve (sacred) Skerries, situate upon the west side of Shetland, several miles from the land. These rocks are almost covered by the sea at high water, and, in this stormy climate, a heavy surf breaking over them, generally forms an effectual barrier to boats. It was once my fortune, after having passed the night at the Haaf-fishing (for cod, ling, &c.) to fall in with these rocks when pulling for the land. The morning was very foggy, but there was no wind, and the sea was as smooth as a mirror. We pulled for nearly a mile through the narrow channels formed by a thousand weed-covered skerries, upon which the monsters of the deep were reposing, and as we passed they leisurely raised their heads to look curiously at the strangers; a few rolled themselves into the water, and swam after us, but most remained on shore to guard their young. The mist shrouded us so completely, that we caused no general alarm, and nursing operations continued undisturbed. But the lullaby was anything but euphonious; for such a howling, bellowing, and snorting, was never heard by us before. Near us, but unseen, some Phocine monster would give utterance to a roar, such as could only be imagined from the throat of Cerberus; then groans and sighs expressive of unutterable torment, were followed by a melancholy howl of hopeless despair; so strange a mixture of sounds seemed only capable of arising from a scene of the most dreadful confusion and woe, and for a mile and more the bellow of the sea-monsters resounded through the still and heavy air.

"It was on the Ve Skerries (so says the tale) a boat's crew landed, in the pairing season, and were very successful in killing and skinning a number of these animals, when the sea and wind rose suddenly, obliging the crew to make a quick retreat to their boat. One man, further detached than the rest, was unable to reach her in time, for, in a few minutes, the storm hurled his comrades far to leeward, where they disappeared among the spray and mist. The man retired to the highest part of the rock, there to watch the rising tide which was to sweep him into the sea. The seals, meanwhile, began to return to their haunts from which they had been driven, and seemed to enjoy the misfortune of one who had acted so cruelly to them. At last one swam into the surf, as if

about to land and wreak vengeance upon the destroyer of his race. The poor fellow's despair was almost at its height, when, to his extreme horror, the Silky addressed him by name. What was said I never could exactly learn, but a compact was made between them, that the fisherman should be borne through the sea on its shoulders, upon condition of his returning a certain skin, that erst had clothed the delicate and pliant limbs of the Silky's beloved partner. The bargain concluded, the man slipped into the water, and bestrode the back of his ocean-steed, clinging firmly to its neck. But its hide was so smooth and glossy that the rider had great difficulty to prevent his falling off, so he requested permission to cut two small holes in the back of its neck, that he might put through his fingers to hold on by. This he was allowed to do, and he reached the shore in safety, when, like an honest man, the identical skin required was returned to the Silky. The surprise of all was great on the appearance of the lost boatman, but the incredulous people would not believe the story of his escape, until some weeks afterwards, the body of a large seal, haggard and emaciated, was found upon the shore, and behind the neck were the two holes in the skin by which the fisherman had held on during his strange ride across the sea! Such is one of the legends of the Shetlanders, as related to me during my residence among the natives of these northern Isles; and which may serve as an illustration of the popular belief in which the following ballad originated.

“The ballad itself is too regular and well constructed to be very old, but it may prove interesting to the Society as a graceful record of Scandinavian romance. I must not forget to add that it was sung to a tune sufficiently melancholy to express the surprise and sorrow of the deluded mother of the Phocine babe.”

THE GREAT SILKIE OF SULE SKERRY.

An eart'ly nourris sits and sings,
 And aye she sings “Ba lily wean;
 “Little ken I my bairnis father,
 Far less the land that he staps in.”

Then ane arose at her bed fit,
 An' a grumly guest I'm sure was he;
 “Here am I thy bairnis father,
 Although that I be not comelie.”

“I am a man upo' the lan',
 An' I am a Silkie in the sea;
 And when I'm far and far frae lan',
 My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.”

"It was na weel," quo' the maiden fair,
"It was na weel, indeed," quo' she;
"That the Great Silkie of Sule Skerrie,
S'uld hae come and aught a bairn to me."

Now he has ta'en a purse of goud,
And he has pat it upo' her knee;
Sayin' "Gie to me, my little young son,
An' tak thee up thy nourris fee."

"An' it sall come to pass on a simmer's day,
Quhen the sin shines het on evera stane;
That I will tak my little young son,
An' teach him for to swim the faem."

"An' thu sall marry a proud gunner,
An' a proud gunner I'm sure he'll be;
An' the very first schot that ere he schoots,
He'll schoot baith my young son and me."