

II.

SKOTLANDS RÍMUR. ICELANDIC BALLADS ON THE GOWRIE
CONSPIRACY. By W. A. CRAIGIE, M.A., F.S.A. Scot.

The above *rímur* are found only in one MS., that numbered "146 a, 8vo" of the Arna-Magnæan Collection in the University Library, Copenhagen. This manuscript, now in an unbound and defective condition, is a huge collection of such poems, containing somewhere about 25,000 lines in all, and belongs to the first half of the 17th century. It is in the small and beautiful hand of Jón Finnsson of Flatey, the island in Broadfirth from which Bishop Brynjólf obtained the famous Flatey-book. In its present state it has 434 pages, but some of these are blank; the *rímur* being written straight on like prose, the number of lines to a page averages from 50 to 70, according to metre.

Of the 24 sets of *rímur* contained in the MS., the one here dealt with is the eleventh, beginning on page 210. It was the heading *Skotlands rímur* in the printed catalogue (vol. ii. p. 411) that drew my attention to them. The Icelander Jón Sigurdsson, in the catalogue of *rímur* compiled by him, thought that they related to the Gunpowder Plot, from noticing that King James VI. was the hero, but on perusal it soon became evident that the subject of them was the Gowrie Conspiracy. Though it could not be expected that they would throw any fresh light on this event,—the author indeed was simply following the Latin account published under royal sanction,¹—it was interesting to find an Icelandic priest putting the story into verse so soon after its occurrence, the date of the *rímur* being probably about 1610.

From the middle of the 14th century down to the present day *rímur* have been the favourite popular poetry of Iceland. While they may be described as ballads, they differ from those of other countries in the greater exactness of the metre (alliteration being strictly observed, and combined with rhymes which are often very complex), in the use of *kennings* or circumlocutions after the style of the old Skaldic verse, and

¹ *Ruvenorum Conjuratio*, 1601.

in the way in which they are connected in cycles. The oldest *rímur*, indeed, are single poems, but as a rule the story is told in several, which are nearly always in different metres: thus a modern poet, Benedikt Gröndal, has lately published *Gaungu-Hrólf's rímur*, 48 in number.

"Skotlands rímur" are six in all; and although some leaves are wanting after page 236 of the MS., it seems that only one line and a word has been lost. The total number of lines is thus 1762; the lengths of the individual *rímur* will be given below. The title is perhaps not original, as the heading in the MS. is simply

RÍJMUR SEM SIERA EINAR GUDMUNDZ

SON HEFUR ORDT

i.e., "Ballads, which Sir (= Reverend) Einar Gudmundsson has composed," and in the last verse (vi. 42) the story is called *Skotta þáttur*.

According to the usual practice, each *ríma* is preceded by some introductory verses, which, being originally addressed by the poet to his lady-love, are technically known as the *mansöngur*, or "love-song." In many cases the original idea has quite disappeared from the *mansöngur*, but a conventional trace is retained in some slight mention of a fair one to whom the *ríma* is supposed to be addressed. To this class belong Sir Einar's, which are properly didactic moralisings, and lay special stress on the necessity of giving due respect to the clergy.

The *rímur* themselves, with their respective introductions, run as follows:—

I. *Mansöngur* of 30 verses: "Once I read a story which a doughty master had written in clever words. He tells of Scotland and its mighty King, and how two brothers plotted against him. Their attempt did not succeed, for the hand of the Lord protected him. Their fate is a warning to all who seek to deal falsely, for the traitor always comes to shame, and yet he goes on blindly. *Ill begun is always ill ended.* This is shown by the fates of Julian the Apostate, killed by an arrow from heaven; Nero, whose own dogs tore him to death; Antiochus and Herod; Cyrus, who fell by a woman; the accusers of Daniel, whom the lions devoured. So must all other false men perish: the same God will visit the same sin with the same punishment, but it would be too long

to reckon up all the instances. My dull examples grow tedious to the dear maid, so I shall pour out the wine of song and go on with my story."

The *ríma* proper then tells in 72 verses how there was a King Jacop in Scotland, who had a queen named Anna, daughter of the King of Denmark. One time he went round his kingdom and came to *Falkaland*. While at the chase one day he is met by Alexander, brother of the Earl of Goiver, who tells him the story of finding the strange man with the gold. The King refuses to have anything to do with it, and rides after the chase.

The metre is simple, as may be seen from verse 35 :—

Alexand hjèt sá örfa grér,
ítran kvaddi stilli,
Greifans bróðir af Góivér,
gótt var þeirra í milli.

II. Headed *Önnur scotsk. Mansöngur* of 28 verses :—"Young folks ought to give heed to the matter of this poem, and not mind the metre of it. From youth upwards fear God and love knowledge ; rise early ; give no heed to spae-wives, who only want to get money. Practise good conduct and industrious habits. Be content with your own position in life. Saul and Usias lost their kingdom for interfering with religious matters. Never wish for any man to be disgraced. Arius tried to bring Athanasius into disrepute, but utterly failed. Such practices are common ; men falsely accuse others, but Achitofel's ill counsels do not always succeed ; the Lord can confound them, and envious men are paid back with full measure. This is proved by our story, if I can only get on with it."

Alexander sends his servant Andries to his brother to tell him that he may expect the King. The King finally decides to ride to Perth (*Johannis Stadur*, i. 36), accompanied by the Earl of Mar (Greifi af Mayr) and sixteen others, of whom Lennox is referred to, but not by name. Alexander tries to persuade him to dismiss these, without success ; the King asks Lennox what his opinion of Alexander is. At Perth the Earl comes to meet the King, and leads him to his hall. (66 verses.)

The metre is one of three lines : verse 3 is—

Frá úngdom skaltu óttast Guð og elska fræði,
Föður, móður, og frændur bæði ;
Frægur er sá er þrifnað næði.

III. *Mansöngur* of 17 verses : "Though the ring-decked maid might wish for a love-song, I have but little poetry from Odin. But a little scent of the fruit of song he gave me once : I have no need to be grateful for his generosity. Let those rejoice who have been more successful. Friendship is not shown to every man, and I was never good at winning favour with the great. True friendship is rare over all the land ; most men look for some advantage, and are envious of all others who get wealth or fame. Seek not, then, to be praised by the world : disgrace and loss may follow. He that sees in secret will reward you, and He will come one day to sit in judgment. May I be able to see Him with joy, though my works are not so good as they might be. I have not the *Mansöngs* art to speak about the fair maid, but I must try to give her the third ballad now."

The entertainment of the King and his followers is then described. After dinner Alexander leads off the King by himself through four apartments, locking each door behind him : in a small room they find an armed man. Alexander threatens the King, who is defenceless, but Christ protects him, and Alexander lays aside his weapon. The King makes a long speech, promising him pardon for his attempt. (72 verses.)

The metre is difficult : verse 17 is—

Mér er ei *lent*¹ sú mansöngs *mennit*
að mæla um sprundið ljósa,
þriðja *hátt* fyrir þorna *gátt*
þó mun eg verða að glósa.

IV. "The last ballad left the King in a strait : now we shall begin a new one." (3 verses.)

Alexander goes off to fetch his brother, after making the King promise to keep quiet. The armed man swears that he will do him no harm. Meanwhile the company have missed the King, and are told that he has ridden off, but the porter denies this. The Earl calls him

¹ The italics show the internal rhymes.

liar, and, going away as if to make certain, comes back and says the King had gone long ago. The rest prepare to follow him. In the meantime Alexander returns and attacks the King, who defends himself as best he may. (57 verses.)

The metre is still more complex : verse 12 runs—

*Min til þín er mjúkust bón,
mætur spjóta¹ beitir,
fordæst morð og falsklígt tjón
við Fróða sáða veitir.*

V. Headed *Fimta skotska*. The *mansöngur* contains 35 verses. "I cannot offer men a feast of poetry : little of that has Odin given me that will please fine folk or young maidens : rather it is for the old wife in her hut, yet I shall make a *mansöngur* that will contain old instances worth hearing. Ahab had a wife, fair and false, who stirred him up against God and his servants, while she sheltered the wicked. For this they both perished miserably. She tried to kill Elias, but the Lord delivered him. Let all women then avoid evil, love peace, and follow virtue. 'Cold sometimes are women's counsels,'² a fact that men often forget. No one ought to do harm to a servant of God, but rather prize him highly, for God's anger is sometimes quick ; therefore beware of opposing him. Prosperity often brings pride, but it is best to be moderate : a man may be ruddy with health to-day and dead to-morrow. When I see people proud of themselves, I think what folly it is to deck out the body and neglect the soul. Let the inner man be adorned with virtue : that is the best ornament. It is this that God will reward at the last day ; therefore let all keep themselves free from deceit. He that lives a pure life becomes both king and clerk in God's kingdom. Here I end the *mansöngur*, and turn again to the story."

The King finally reaches the window, and calls out just as his men come past. They all turn back, and try to gain entrance to where he is.

Alexander is unable to wound the King, and is himself stabbed thrice by Ramsay, who enters the room, and then thrown into the courtyard

¹ *Mætur* : *spjóta* and *Fróða* : *sáða* are half-rhymes, or *skot-hending*.

² An old proverb : *Köld eru kvenna ráð*.

by the King. The armed man walks off, terribly afraid. The Earl in the courtyard had pretended he had heard no cry: he is now seized by "Tomas Eskinn," but manages to get away. The King's men rush up and find Alexander nearly dead, and despatch him, he protesting his innocence. The Earl comes up with five men and there is a fight at the chamber door, but "Christ gave the King's men strength and courage," and Ramsay runs the Earl through. Meanwhile the other 13 of the King's followers are breaking down the other door. (52 verses.)

The metre is fairly simple: verse 40 is—

þegar að heyrðu harma sút
Herra síns í garðinn út,
inn um portið allir senn
aptur snèru kónsins menn.

VI. *Mansöngur* of 5 verses: "Now we shall row the dwarf's boat (poetry) for the sixth time, if men and women will deign to hear. I am not very skilful at it, but I shall again essay it, if the maid will listen. Odin's ship (poetry) has but a slight breeze, yet I shall not give in until the song is ended."

The King and his men offer thanksgivings for his delivery. The town's folk assemble to avenge the Earl, and the tumult lasts four hours. The King has the leading men brought to him, and explains all. In the Earl's breast is found a piece of parchment covered with runes, on the removal of which his wounds bleed. The King and his men go to Falkland, and thence to Edinburgh: there is universal rejoicing at his escape. (37 verses.)

A fairly difficult metre: verse 38 is—

Firðar vitja Fálka-lands
og fara til Æðinborgar;
þar réð sitja þeitir brands,
ber nú ei til sorgar.

The subjects of Icelandic *rímur* are mainly taken from the fictitious sagas, and comparatively few are based on historic incidents. It is therefore not a little curious to find such an event as the Gowrie Conspiracy selected for this purpose by the clerical poet, who has thus produced what is perhaps the only attempt to adorn with poetic colour-

ing a highly romantic occurrence. What led Sir Einar to select his subject it would be useless to inquire ; he probably thought it a good one both for the incidents and the lessons to be drawn from them. In point of technique his *rímur* are very fairly done ; and, from their date and the place of their composition, are interesting as a literary curiosity.