

## A WHALE-HUNT IN ORKNEY.

“**W**HALES in the bay so soon in the season!” exclaimed the clergyman, starting to his feet. “Come away,” he continued, “you have yet another day before you; we imitate the great of old, who entertained their guests with tournaments.”

The manse garden commanded a fine view of Mill Bay, and on rushing out into the open air we saw a long dark line of boats, some with sails and some with oars, stretching across the blue waters of the broad voe, upwards of a mile from the shore. The practised eye of my host caught the gleam of dorsal fins in front of the boats, and we immediately hurried down to the beach, scarcely drawing breath till we stood on the bank above the sands of Mill Bay. The inmates of the neighbouring cottages had already assembled in eager groups on the grassy downs, and other islanders still came flocking from remoter farms and cabins to the shore. Several of the men were armed with harpoons, while farm lads flourished over their shoulders formidable three-pronged “graips” and long-hafted hayforks.

Many of the matrons had their heads encased in

woollen "buities," and this peculiar headdress imparted a singular picturesqueness to the excited groups on the sea-bank. Other boats with skilled hands on board put off from various points along the shore, and the fleet of small craft in the bay was rapidly increased by the arrival of fresh yawls. The crowd of urchins on the beach, who "thee'd" and "thou'd" each other like little Quakers in the Orcadian vernacular, cheered lustily as boat after boat hove in view round the headlands, swelling the fleet of whalers.

The line of boats was now little more than a quarter of a mile from the beach. The bottle-nosed or ca'ing whales, showing their snouts and dorsal fins at intervals, seemed to advance slowly, throwing out skirmishers and cautiously feeling their way. As the beach was smooth and sandy, with a gentle slope, the boatmen in pursuit were endeavouring to drive the "school" into the shallows, where harpoons, hayforks, and other weapons could be used to advantage.

The excitement of the spectators on land increased as the long line of the sea-monsters drew closer inshore. From the boats there came wafted across the water the sound of beating pitchers and rattling rowlocks, and the hoarse chorus of shouting voices. This babel of noises, which the water mellowed into a wild war-chant with cymbal accompaniment, was meant to scare the "school" and hasten the stranding of the whales. But an incident occurred that changed the promising aspect of affairs, turned the tide of battle, and gave new animation to the scene.

Eager to participate in the expected slaughter, two or three farm lads, whose movements had escaped notice, suddenly shot off from the shore in a skiff

rowing right in front of the advancing line. The glitter and splash of oars alarmed the leaders, and the entire "school," seized with a sudden panic, wheeled round and dashed at headlong speed into the line of pursuing boats.

A shout rose from the shore as the flash of tail-fins, the heaving of the boats, and the rapid strokes of the boatmen showed all too plainly the escape of the whales, and the success of their victorious charge. Away beyond the broken line of the fleet they plunged in wild stampede, striking the blue waters into spangles of silver foam. Arches of spray, blown into the air at wide distances apart, served to indicate the size of the "school" and the speed of the fugitives.

"Whew!" exclaimed my reverend friend, "that was a gallant charge, and deserved to succeed; but I hope our brave lads will yet put salt upon their tails. The boatmen have toiled hard for their share of the fish, and great would be the pity if the whales made right off to the open sea. It is not every day that a 'drave' a hundred strong visits our shores, and there they go round the head of Odness in full career."

A commotion among the crowd at a short distance along the beach here arrested our attention. The exciting spectacle of the grand charge and wild flight of the whales had so absorbed our gaze that we failed to notice a mishap which was fortunately more ludicrous than alarming. The three youths who foolishly rowed off from the shore and caused the stampede had suffered for their rashness by getting their skiff capsized when the sea-monsters wheeled round to the charge. On gaining the outskirts of the crowd, we found the three luckless whale-hunters already beached.

Bonnetless, dripping, and disconsolate, they were the objects of mirth to some, of commiseration to others.

At last they made off, and we immediately set out in the direction of Odness to catch a sight of the whales, which had quite disappeared from the bay. The boats had turned in pursuit when the "school" escaped, and they were now making all haste to double the headland. On gaining the top of the cliffs, we were glad to observe that the whales, recovered from their fright, drifted leisurely along the coast, giving way at times to eccentric gambols.

"All right!" cried my friend, handing me back my binocular; "they are coasting away famously round Lamb Head, and they are almost certain to take a snooze in Rousholm Bay, which is the best whale-trap I know in Orkney. Let us sit down here on the top of the cliffs till the boats come abreast, and then we shall take a nearer way to Rousholm than following the coast."

The summit of the rocks, softly carpeted with grass, moss, and wild flowers, afforded a pleasant resting-place, and commanded a picturesque prospect. To eastward there was a wide expanse of sea, stretching away without a break to the Norwegian fiords. The whale-hunting fleet, composed of all varieties of small craft, was soon well abreast of our resting-place. A fine and favourable breeze had sprung up, and fishing-yawls, with their brown sails outspread, coasted briskly along. The rearguard of the fleet consisted of row-boats manned by patient and determined boatmen, who pulled hard at the oars in the prospect of winning some share of the spoil. We remained a short time on the moss-crowned cliffs gazing on the

animated scene, and listening to the voices of the boatmen, the plash of the waves below, and the plaint of restless sea-birds. On leaving our lair we dropped down upon a neighbouring farmhouse, where a couple of "shelties" were placed at our disposal, and away we trotted along field-paths and rough tracks to the head of Rousholm Bay, on the south side of the island. From all the cottages and farms in the district the islanders were flocking to the shore of the bay, and we thus had good hope that a portion of the school at least had run blindfold into the whale-trap of Rousholm. On nearing the shore we were delighted to find that our hope was fulfilled. A large detachment of the whales, supposed to number one hundred and fifty, had entered the bay, while the rest of the school had disappeared amid the reaches of the Stron-say Firth.

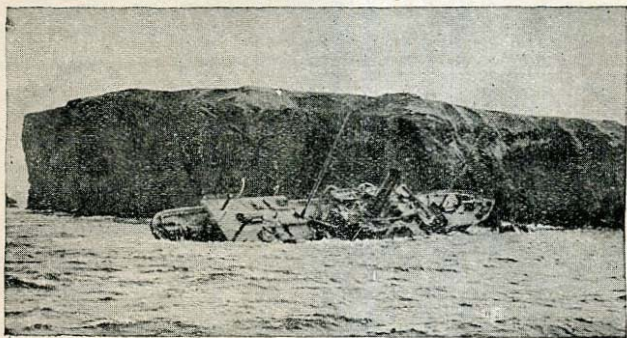
Rounding the point of Torness, and stretching across the mouth of the bay, the fleet of small craft again hove into view, and pressed upon the rear of the slowly advancing and imprisoned whales. Among the onlookers there was now intense excitement, the greatest anxiety being manifested lest the detached wing should follow the main army, and again break the line of boats in a victorious charge. The shoutings and noise of the boatmen recommenced, and echoed from shore to shore of the beautiful and secluded bay. A fresh alarm seized the monsters, but instead of wheeling about and rushing off to the open sea as before, they dashed rapidly forwards a few yards, pursued by the boats, and were soon floundering helplessly in the shallows.

The scene that ensued was of the most exciting

description. Fast and furious the boatmen struck and stabbed to right and left; while the people on the shore, forming an auxiliary force, dashed down to assist in the massacre, wielding all sorts of weapons. The wounded monsters lashed about with their tails, imperilling life and limb, and the ruddy hue of the water along the stretch of shore soon indicated the extent of the carnage. Some of the larger whales displayed great tenacity of life; but the unequal conflict closed at last, and no fewer than a hundred and seventy carcasses were dragged up on the beach.

One or two slight accidents occurred, but to me it seemed marvellous that the boatmen did not injure each other as much as the whales amid the confusion and excitement of the scene. The carcasses, as I was informed, would realize between £300 and £400; and grateful were the people that Providence had remembered the island of Stronsay, by sending them a wonderful windfall of bottle-noses fresh from the confines of the Arctic Circle.

DANIEL GORRIE (*"Summers and Winters in the Orkneys"*).



*Wreck at Burgh Head, Stronsay.*