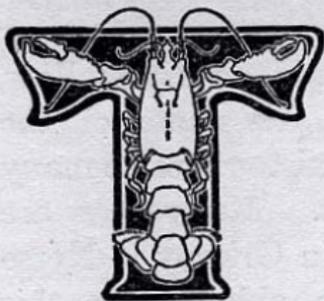


HELEN WATERS: A LEGEND OF SULE SKERRY.



HE mountains of Hoy, the highest of the Orkney Islands, rise abruptly out of the ocean to an elevation of fifteen hundred feet, and terminate on one side in a cliff, sheer and stupendous as if the mountain had been cut down through the middle and the severed portion of it buried in the sea. Immediately on the landward side of this precipice lies a soft green valley, embosomed among huge black cliffs, where the sound of the human voice or the report of a gun is reverberated among the rocks till it gradually dies away into soft and softer echoes.

The hills are intersected by deep and dreary glens, where the hum of the world is never heard, and the only voices of life are the bleat of the lamb and the shriek of the eagle. The breeze wafts not on its wings the whisper of the woodland, for there are no trees on the island; the roar of the torrent stream and the sea's eternal moan for ever sadden those solitudes of the world.

The ascent of the mountain is in some parts almost perpendicular, and in all exceedingly steep; but the admirer of Nature in her grandest and most striking

aspects will be amply compensated for his toil, upon reaching their summits, by the magnificent prospect which they afford. Towards the north and east, the vast expanse of the ocean, and the islands, with their dark heath-clad hills, their green vales, and gigantic cliffs, expand below as far as the eye can reach. The view towards the south is bounded by the lofty mountains of Scaraben and Morven, and by the wild hills of Strathnaver and Cape Wrath, stretching towards the west. In the direction of the latter, and far away in mid-ocean, may be seen, during clear weather, a barren rock called Sule Skerry, which superstition in former days had peopled with mermaids and monsters of the deep. This solitary spot had long been known to the Orcadians as the haunt of sea-fowl and seals, and was the scene of frequent shooting excursions, though such perilous adventures have been long since abandoned. It is associated in my mind with a wild tale, which I have heard in my youth, though I am uncertain whether or not the circumstances which it narrates are yet in the memory of living men.

On the opposite side of the mountainous island of which I speak, and divided from it by a frith of several miles in breadth, lie the flat serpentine shores of the principal island or Mainland, where, upon a gentle slope, at a short distance from the sea-beach, may still be traced the site of a cottage, once the dwelling of a humble couple of the name of Waters, belonging to the class of small proprietors.

Their only child Helen, at the time to which my narration refers, was just budding into womanhood; and though uninitiated into what would now be con-

sidered the indispensable requisites of female education, was yet not altogether unaccomplished for the simple times in which she lived, and, though a child of nature, had a grace beyond the reach of art.

Henry Graham, the accepted lover of Helen Waters, was the son of a small proprietor in the neighbourhood; and being of the same humble rank with herself, and, though not rich, removed from poverty, their views were undisturbed by the dotage of avarice or the fears of want, and the smiles of approving friends seemed to await their approaching union.

In the Orkneys it was customary for the bridegroom to invite the wedding guests in person; for which purpose, a few days previous to the marriage, young Graham, accompanied by a friend; took a boat and proceeded to the island of Hoy in order to request the attendance of a family residing there; which done, on the following day they joined a party of young men upon a shooting excursion to Rackwick, a village romantically situated on the opposite side of the island. They left the house of their friends on a bright, calm autumnal morning, and began to traverse the wild and savage glens which intersect the hills, where their progress might be guessed at by the reports of their guns, which gradually became fainter and fainter among the mountains, and at last died away altogether in the distance.

That night and the following day passed, and they did not return to the house of their friends; but the weather being extremely fine, it was supposed they had extended their excursion to the opposite coast of Caithness, or to some of the neighbouring islands, so that their absence created no alarm whatever.

The same conjectures also quieted the anxieties of the bride, until the morning previous to that of the marriage, when her alarm could no longer be suppressed. A boat was manned in all haste, and dispatched to Hoy in quest of them, but did not return that day nor the succeeding night.

The morning of the wedding day dawned at last bright and beautiful, but still no intelligence arrived of the bridegroom and his party; and the hope which lingered to the last, that they would still make their appearance in time, had prevented the invitations from being postponed, so that the marriage party began to assemble about midday.

While the friends were all in amazement, and the bride in a most pitiable state, a boat was seen crossing from Hoy, and hope once more began to revive; but, when her passengers landed, they turned out to be the members of the family invited from that island, whose surprise at finding how matters stood was equal to that of the other friends.

Meantime all parties united in their endeavours to cheer the poor bride, for which purpose it was agreed that the company should remain, and that the festivities should go on—an arrangement to which the guests the more willingly consented, from a lingering hope that the absentees would still make their appearance, and partly with a view to divert in some measure the painful suspense of the bride; while she, on the other hand, from feelings of hospitality, exerted herself, though with a heavy heart, to make her guests as comfortable as possible, and by the very endeavour to put on an appearance of tranquillity acquired so much of the reality as to prevent her

from sinking altogether under the weight of her fears.

Meantime the day advanced, the festivities went on, and the glass began to circulate freely. The absence of the principal actor of the scene was so far forgotten that at length the music struck up, and dancing commenced with all the animation which that exercise inspires.

Things were going on in this way when, towards night, and during one of the pauses of the dance, a loud rap was heard at the door, and a gleam of hope was seen to lighten every face, when there entered, not the bridegroom and his party, but a wandering lunatic named Annie Fae, well known and not a little feared in all that countryside. Her garments were little else than a collection of fantastic and parti-coloured rags, bound close around her waist with a girdle of straw, and her head had no other covering than the dark tangled locks that hung, snake-like, over her wild and weather-beaten face, from which peered forth her small, deep, sunk eyes, gleaming with the light of insanity.

Before the surprise and dismay excited by her sudden and unwelcome appearance had subsided, she addressed the company in the following wild and incoherent manner,—

“Hech, sirs, but here’s a merry meeting indeed. Plenty o’ gude meat and drink here, and nae expense spared! Aweel, it’s no a’ lost neither; this blithe bridal will mak’ a braw burial, and the same feast will do for baith. But I’ll no detain you langer, but jog on upon my journey; only I wad juist hint that, for decency sake, ye suld stop that fine fiddling and dancing.”

Having thus spoken, she made a low curtsy, and hurried out of the house, leaving the company in that state of painful excitement which, in such circumstances, even the ravings of a poor deranged wanderer could not fail to produce.

In this state we too may leave them for the present, and proceed with the party who had set off on the preceding day in search of the bridegroom and his friends. The latter were traced to Rackwick ; but there no intelligence could be gained, except that some days previous a boat, having on board several sportsmen, had been seen putting off from the shore, and sailing away in the direction of Sule Skerry

The weather continuing fine, the searching party hired a large boat, and proceeded to that remote and solitary rock, upon which, as they neared it, they could discover nothing, except swarms of seals, which immediately began to flounder towards the water's edge. A large flock of sea-fowl arose from the centre of the rock with a deafening scream ; and upon approaching the spot, they beheld, with dumb amazement and horror, the dead bodies of the party of whom they had come in search, but so mangled and disfigured by the sea-fowl that they could barely be recognized.

It appeared that these unfortunates upon landing had forgotten their guns in the boat, which had slipped from her fastenings, and left them upon the rock, where they had at last perished of cold and hunger.

Fancy can but feebly conceive, and still less can words describe, the feelings with which the lost men must have beheld their bark drifting away over the face of the waters, and found themselves abandoned in the vast solitude of the ocean.

With what agony must they have gazed upon the distant sails, gliding over the deep, but keeping far aloof from the rock of desolation. How must their horrors have been aggravated by the far-off view of their native hills, lifting their lonely peaks above the wave, and awakening the dreadful consciousness that they were still within the grasp of humanity, and yet no arm was stretched forth to save them; while the sun was riding high in the heavens, and the sea basking in his beams below, and Nature looking with reckless smiles upon their dying agonies!

As soon as the stupor of horror and amazement had subsided, the party placed the dead bodies in their boat, and, crowding all sail, stood for the Orkneys. They landed at night upon the beach, immediately below the house where the wedding guests were assembled; and there, while debating in what manner to proceed, they were overheard by the insane wanderer, the result of whose visit has already been recorded.

She had scarcely left the house, when a low sound of voices was heard approaching. An exclamation of joy broke from the bride. She rushed out of the house with outstretched arms to embrace her lover, and the next moment, with a fearful shriek, fell upon his corpse! With that shriek reason and memory passed away for ever. She was carried back delirious, and died towards morning. The bridal was changed into a burial, and Helen Waters and her lover slept in the same grave!