CHAPTER II.

"THE HOOSE-HEATIN'."

"And say, without our hopes, without our fears,
Without the home that plighted love endears,
Without the smile from partial beauty won,
Oh, what were man?—a world without a sun!"

IN the year 1812, Charles Grant, laird of Elchies, founded the village of Charlestown by granting feus on liberal terms, with four acres of land attached. In the year 1830 most of the sites had been allotted, only one corner at the upper end of the village being left vacant. My father took off one of the stances there, and started at once to build upon it. The house was built back some distance from the high road, so that the garden might be in front of it. On a dull October day we landed in the village to take possession of our new home. Eighteen years had elapsed since the first house was built in the village, and during that time most of the feuars had only built one house upon their allotments, thus making a long, straggling street. In the ugly open gaps between the houses lay pools of stagnant water. At that time the village was no ideal "Auburn." The contrast of its appearance at the present day is so great that only those who lived in it in 1830 can realise it. Although the village escaped being submerged by "the flood," the water rose to near the level of the street. A stone stood for a number of years at the bottom of the old schoolhouse garden to mark the height to which the water rose. The great devastation caused by it is still to be seen. So entirely was the greater part of the minister's beautiful glebe land swept away that it has never been reclaimed. For many years after the spate, when the river was in flood, the overflow water ran down a channel where the present railway station stands, and it was no uncommon thing for salmon to be caught in the pools left behind after a flood. For several years a stream from the lower end of the "Boat Hole"

Digitized by Google

passed the back of the church, so the little haugh behind the village was named "The Isle."

Soon after our "hame-comin'," my father and mother being considered "gey genteel folks," it was deemed the genteel thing to "heat the hoose," and the presence of the minister was requisitioned to consecrate our "new dwallin'." It was considered a great honour to the family when he took the head of the table, and he even consented to ladle out the punch. It was said that upon social occasions of this kind, when he presided at the punch-bowl he was wont to skim it for any of the party that he wished to "fill fou." Whether he did so or not on the happy occasion here referred to, I cannot say, but before he departed some of the company "werna feart tae speak their minds afore the minister." Eppie Shearer, my father's aunt, even went the length of heckling him on the doctrine of works and grace. He took it all in good part, being used, as he afterwards said, to Eppie's tongue. In acknowledgement of her abilities in this line, he styled her "Witty Eppie," an affront that she never forgave. When Bailie Laing, a far awa' frien' (through his wife) of my father's, crossed swords with the minister, the encounter was fought out to the bitter end. Bailie Laing was a man of great energy. He did not scruple to speak his mind even to the minister. As a proof of this, one day the minister met the Bailie driving his ass along the road, and saluted him with, "Weel, William, hoo are ye the day, and hoo's the ass?" "I'm verra weel, sir; but the ass wud be the better if ye paid me that accoont that's been awin' me mair than three years," retorted the Bailie. An ass was not at that time a very common beast of burden in the North. Few of the earlier inhabitants of the village could compare with Bailie Laing in energy and industry. When he built his first house, a great part of the stones were carried upon a hand barrow by him and his wife from the bed of the Spey. As soon as it was habitable he set up a shop in it, and sold all kinds of wares, from a pin to a ploughshare. Starting as the first carrier between the village and Elgin, he was able to supply his customers with cheap goods. The name of Bailie Laing deserves to be remembered. From a humble beginning he died possessed of many houses in the village. When the history of its deceased bailies is written, none of them will

Digitized by Google

stand higher in the record than William Laing. Had he been a citizen of "famous London town" he would have certainly filled the civic chair. Another villager of note honoured the feast—"Kirkton," as he was familiarly called, having been tenant of The Kirkton. His farm was broken up and the land portioned out to feuars. He selected one of the most eligible sites in the village, and built upon it, I believe, the first two houses erected in the place. The minister having discovered his "qualities," made him an elder, and dubbed him "The Governor." Whether he possessed the governing faculty or not, he had a profound belief in the existence of fairies. He told me that when he went to "fother the beasts" of a winter's night at Kirkton he could plainly hear the fairies playing the fiddle in "The Shean," half-a-mile distant.

But none of the party has left upon the writer's memory so lasting an impression as old Saunders Stewart, the miller. A deadly feud existed between him and the minister. At the time this was unknown to my father, and he was much relieved when Saunders took "the gait for hame." From that time and for some years after I literally sat at the old miller's feet listening to his old historical and weird stories. His language was more forcible than polished, not at all suited for the ears of a young boy, but he had a strange attraction for me. One of the strangest traits displayed in his otherwise irreverent mind was a belief in fatalism. He related the following story with a solemnity that showed the conviction of its truth upon his mind:—"There was once a minister of Aberlour that had a son born to him—an uncommon fine bairn. He consulted the stars at the time of his birth, and was horrified to find it revealed that the child would die by drowning. To prevent this, he determined that the boy should never leave his presence. "Ae day," said the miller, "the minister cam' up tae this verra mill tae speak tae the miller aboot takin' ower muckle muter fae the puir folk. He was sae angry that he forgot that the bairn had slippit oot o' his han', an' he never missed him till the miller's dochter cam' runnin' in tae say that the bairn was ower the wheel."

Here in Cleveland the very same legend was told to me by an ancient Yorkshire dame at her cottage fireside. "You'll have no doubt heard how this place got its name—Osmotherly." I owned

Digitized by Google

that I was ignorant on the subject. "You have heard of King Oswald. He had a son born to him. He was named after his father, but it was prophesied by wise men at the time of his birth that he would be drowned. To prevent this his mother never allowed him to leave her side. One beautiful summer day she took him out to yon green hill to play. As she knew that there was no water, she lay down and fell asleep. When she awoke she was horrified to see him lying drowned in a well that no one had ever seen there before. That's how this place got its name. It stands upon the place where Oswald's mother lay." This shows how widespread these old legends were, and how deeply they were imprinted upon the minds of people whose literary knowledge consisted for the most part of oral tradition and fire-side stories.

Digitized by Google