

XXVI.

LILY HARRIS, AN OLD BLAIRGOWRIE CHARACTER.

Something between a hindrance and a help.

—WORDSWORTH.

Lily (or Lilia^s) Harris was born at Little Fardle, in the Lower Stormont, about the year 1730—a century too late and in the wrong parish to participate in the doings of Jenny Geddes; but there can be no question as to the attitude she would have taken up on that memorable occasion in St Giles's Cathedral had she been present—the probability being that a couple of stools instead of one would have been sent flying at the minister's head. So far as history or tradition is any guide she is the nearest approach to Jenny that the district has produced. She grew up to be a good-looking young woman of somewhat uncertain temper, a great reader of the Bible and religious books, much given to disputations about points of doctrine, abrupt and eccentric of manner, and a believer in good, honest, straightforward speech. There was a sort of "aloofness" which clung to her all through life, and what "Lily" said or did came to be recognised as among the things that mattered in the district. She married David Chalmers, Hiltoun of Mause, near Blairgowrie, and as she grew older, all her peculiarities became accentuated, culminating in

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complete mental derangement after the birth of her third child, which she persisted in believing had been

CARRIED OFF BY THE FAIRIES.

Thenceforth her sole business was to find out where the little people had taken her bairn, and many a dangerous adventure she had in her wild search, night as well as day, up and down the banks of the River Ericht, which runs through a deep ravine just below the Mause, its precipitous walls at that time—and not much else even now—being one dense mass of tangled brushwood, down which she would clamber. For a while she used to be accompanied by some of her friends, but by and by she was left to her own free will. One night, which was a turning point in her life, she had a fearful experience in a thunder storm, in which she came upon the Witches Knowe, caught the fairies at their revels, with the queen—thrice welcome sight!—in their midst, clasping her long-lost child in her arms! Lily rushed forward with a cry, but a huge black monster—beyond doubt the Deil himself—confronted her in the shape of a bat, grew bigger and bigger and more frightsome the longer she gazed upon it, and she was compelled to seek the shelter of a tree, followed hard by the Evil One. Turning upon him defiantly, however, she repeated the opening lines of the 46th Psalm, the tree went over with a great crash, and the demon

“GAED AFF WI’ A FLUFF”

just as the first streak of dawn appeared over the hills of Glenballoch. Something like that was Lily’s account of the affair when she reached home in a sorely bedraggled condition that morning; in any case she had passed a terrible night, and

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from that date she was completely cured of this particular hallucination. All her life long, however, she was a "character," the privileged censor of high and low, and a great "sermon-taster." Many of her whimsical sayings have obtained currency beyond the district. Nothing irritated her more than affectation on the part of a preacher, whether this took the form of using the "paper"—for so she seemed to regard it—or was shown by voice, gesture, or otherwise. She usually attended the Parish Church, where she sat under three ministers in her day—the Rev. James Lyon, 1723-1768; the Rev. William Dow, 1769-1786; and the Rev. James Johnstone, 1787-1836. In passing, it may be noted that Mr Johnstone was the "fule body" that advised "the Lady Pitlyal" in Miss Graham's clever "Mystifications" "to gae to law," although Lord Jeffrey declared it was "very sensible advice." One day, however,

A STRANGER WAS IN THE PULPIT

who stuck close to the abhorred "paper," and Lily was so wroth that, not willing to wait till after the church was out to express her opinion of it, she kept up an audible running commentary during the delivery of the sermon itself—ear-marking the various sources of the preacher's eloquence in a very uncomfortable manner for that individual. "That's John Bunyan," she muttered after a fine passage. "That's William Law," came a minute or two later on. "That's Jeremy Taylor," was the next comment. Then—"That's Giles Fletcher!" and the mere man in the pulpit could stand it no longer. Looking over, he ordered the beadle to "put Lily out!" Lily laughed her scorn. "That's yer ain," retorted she, "an' gin that paper were ta'en oot afore ye, ye'd be as ready to gae oot as I am!" Her rest-

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lessness and readiness to pass remarks upon what was going on in church were particularly annoying on Sacrament Days, and it is said that 5s was given her on one occasion on the understanding that she was to keep quiet and "behave herself." She did so as long as she could; but the service had not proceeded far before she shocked every one by rising up and "dingin' doon" the money on the floor with the contemptuous remark—

"HAE, THERE'S YOUR SILLER;

I'd rather hae my liberty!" Two other places of worship she liked to attend occasionally were Lethendy and Littleton of Rattray Secession Churches. The latter was the precursor of the present Mount Ericht U.F. Church, Rattray, which was U.P. before the Union. The site of this old church, built in 1762, is indicated by a stone in the dyke on the right hand of the road to Alyth, opposite the row of cottages known as "Beavershire"—a name given, according to local tradition, on account of the male members of the little community being very partial to "beaver" head covering at one time. The inscription on the stone reads—"Littleton Kirk, erected 1762; ruined 1792." The Rev. James Henderson was ordained first Secession minister in the year of the church's erection, and the new church was built on what is now the garden of ex-Provost Robertson, Old Rattray, the style of the church having resembled the present Parish Church on a smaller scale. The present (Mount Ericht U.F.) church was built in 1835. In the early days of the Secession at the Littleton worship used to be conducted in a tent on Sacrament days, and the behaviour of the younger people was frequently the reverse of decorous.

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On one occasion Lily was present, and things being not to her mind at all, she stood glaring indignation all around her, while every one else was seated. Some one offered her a seat, which she refused, and immediately repeated these lines with a marked impression upon her audience :—

With persons vain I have not sat,
Nor with dissemblers gone.

At the Reisk—which was the name Lethendy Secession Church was known by—the scenes on Sacrament days, as mentioned in a former article, were frequently of a most disorderly sort. Whisky tents were erected just outside the church, and both between the “tables” and after the service was over the “ongaein’s” were such as would not have disgraced Burns’s “Holy Fair.” The Rev. Mr Balfour, who was the first placed minister (ordained in 1787), was a man of great force of character. His great standing abhorrence was the Pope, against whom he was forever fulminating in the good, old-fashioned, thorough-going style—very wearing upon the binding of the pulpit Bible. No one enjoyed his onslaughts more thoroughly than Lily, who was wont to declare that “if there was a Pope at Rome there was a Luther at the Reisk,” and the minister came to be known as “Luther Balfour” from this saying of hers. Lily’s hatred of sham was shown one day when a Mr Smith from Coupar Angus preached, and was the subject of much critical remark from his hearers afterwards. Lily listened to the talk but said nothing until some one asked her opinion, when

SHE GAVE THEM THEIR QUIETUS

by remarking—“I dinna wonder ye didna like Mr Smith, for the Deil didna like him ayther.” When the Rev. Mr Young was elected minister

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of the Secession Church at Logiealmond he preached at the Reisk before being ordained, and Lily had to be there to pass judgment. She caught hold of the preacher before he entered the church, and scrutinised him from head to foot. "The outside man's weel eneuch," said she at last, "but I want to ken what the inside can dae." The sermon was evidently all that his critic could desire, for at the close she stood up in the church and exclaimed in a loud voice—"Behold the chosen of the Lord! Arise and anoint him." She had been absent from the Parish Church for some time, and one of the elders meeting her took it upon him to reprove her, warning her of the consequences of such conduct, and winding up with—"Mind ye, Lily, ye'll get nae preachin' in the bad place." "Guid sakes," exclaimed she, "it'll no be for want o' ministers!" A dandy young preacher who was doing the rhetorical business in grand style had

A TERRIBLE FALL

at her hands on one occasion. He had got the length of his peroration, and after standing for some little time in a very graceful and impressive attitude, with his right hand in his open waistcoat, he suddenly stretched out his arm to emphasise a brilliant point, when the incorrigible Lily gave a new turn to his thoughts—and those of the congregation—by putting the momentous question—"Was it a louse or a flech, sir, an' gat ye it a' richt?"

This strange woman finished her course in 1807. Her sister, Isobel, who married another David Chalmers (cousin of Lily's husband), was the progenitor of a number of well-known families in Blairgowrie district.