

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE NAMELESS BUSH.

“And her alone he lo’ed, and lo’ed her from a child.”

IT will be admitted by every one that has stood upon the site of the old Castle of Rothes, that for situation and surrounding scenery it is not surpassed by any of the old castles in the North. The antiquary has searched in vain the musty records of the past to find the date of its first erection. Tradition is also silent on the subject. In 1238, Eva de Mortach was Domina de Rothes. In 1263 she made a grant of her lands in Inverlochty to the Cathedral of Moray. In that year Haco, the aged King of Norway, made his last invasion upon these islands. He came with a large and powerful fleet to the Firth of Clyde, and a number of his men landed at Largs, where they were routed and driven back by a Scottish host. In October of the same year the dreaded Haco died in Orkney.

It may be inferred from the natural surroundings of the Castle of Rothes that the spot where it stood would be occupied in one form or other from the very earliest times. Possibly a wooden structure was first erected upon the hill, as we know that erections of this description were common in Moray.

Beautiful as the view from the castle hill is at the present day, it was even more romantic when the heiress of Inverlochty made over her lands to the Cathedral of Moray. At that time the surrounding hills were clothed by natural woods, abounding in game of all sorts, and the Spey was famous for its abundance of salmon. The wolf had his lair in “The Doonies,” and prowled around the Conrock, close to the castle gates.

Around the grey ruins of many of the old castles of Scotland there linger stories of the dark deeds done within their ancient walls in the days of raid and rapine. It would have been strange if the old Castle of Rothes had no tale of the past to tell. In my

early boyhood, the story of Jenny Hossack had a powerful fascination for my young mind. Her ghostly form could be seen, it was said, sitting at a corner of the ruined wall, rocking a cradle all the night long and singing the following cradle song:—

“Hush, bonnie bairnie,  
Close your blue eye,  
The ravens are croaking  
On the Conrock so high ;  
The wild winds rock them,  
But never to sleep,  
All the long night  
They vigil do keep.

“Hush, bonnie bairnie,  
The polecat and fox  
And the owls are abroad  
From their holes in the rocks ;  
The nightjar is booming  
Around the old tower,  
And midnight's the time  
When spirits have power.

“Hush, bonnie bairnie,  
Dry your salt tear ;  
The angels are round you,  
There is nothing to fear ;  
The Saviour is near  
To guard and to keep  
His precious wee lambs,  
Both awake and asleep.”

Tradition says that Jenny Hossack was foster-mother to the only child of a lord of Rothes Castle. The mother died in giving birth to the child, and Jenny was chosen to nurse her. So faithfully did she fulfil her trust that she never left her side until the day of her untimely death. From her infancy the child seems to have been imbued with a love of nature. To clamber up the rugged face of the Conrock was her delight at all seasons. When the summer sunshine filled the beautiful vale with its light and warmth, the river-side was her favourite resort. There she was wont to meet the children of the laird of Arndilly, and the eldest of them, a beautiful boy, rowed the little maiden in his boat. As long as they were children, her father made no objection ; but when the boy grew up to manhood, he discovered the attachment that existed between his daughter and the young Master of Arndilly, and sternly forbade her ever to see him again or to go near the river-side. She obeyed the latter part of her father's command, but was wont to meet her lover at “The Wishing Well,” a

beautiful spring that in my boyhood went by the name Toperun-Donich. It rose in the face of the green brae on the east side of the back burn of Rothes, and was at one time surrounded by a wild thicket of sloe and bramble bushes. From the earliest times the well had been frequented by devotees, who threw into it their offerings of beads, pins, and other personal ornaments. I well remember seeing the bottom of the well strewn with pins. But interesting as the well was, a bush that grew beside it was still more so. It was known as "The Nameless Bush." None could tell its name, nor had anyone ever seen a plant or bush of the same description. One midsummer eve, "The Rose of Rothes," with her foster-mother, went to "The Wishing Well" to cast in their offerings. Matilda dropped in the pater bead from her rosary, with a prayer for the safety of the noble youth who had gone to fight for the Holy Sepulchre. The prayer had hardly risen from her lips before she was embraced in the arms of the soldier of the cross, who had returned safe and crowned with glory. The lovers sat down by the well, and, hand in hand, tasted in that brief interview the highest pleasure granted to the pure and faithful here below. The foster-mother sat there too, pondering deeply in her heart the obstacles that lay in the path of the faithful lovers, when she was alarmed by a rustle in the brushwood behind her. At that moment a figure stole stealthily behind the lovers, and plunged his dirk up to the haft in the defenceless back of the young soldier, who fell lifeless into the arms of his lover. She was carried home to the castle a raving maniac, and placed in what was known ever afterwards as "The Cradle Tower," for there she sat rocking her own cradle until death came and took her to join in heaven the spirit of her murdered lover. It was never known who the assassin was, but, strange to tell, upon the very spot where the blood of the young soldier oozed into the ground there sprang up a beautiful plant that grew into a bush. The leaves resembled a cross, and in autumn they became scarlet, while the berries it bore were white.

I cannot tell if "The Nameless Bush" is still growing by Toperun-Donich, but it was no myth in my early days. It is a singular thing to find, in the remote vale of Rothes, a legend of this kind, so nearly resembling Shakespeare's Venus with the dead body of Adonis. She says :—

“And in his blood, that on the ground lay spill’d,  
A purple flower sprung up, chequer’d with white,  
Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood  
Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood ;  
She crops the stalk, and in the breach appears  
Green dropping sap, which she compares to tears.”

It is well to cherish these harmless legends ; they take a deep hold upon the mind. Jenny Hossack was at one time, to me, as real a personage as Her Majesty Queen Victoria. To my young mind she was not only real, but, like many other children, I believed her to be the donor of all the bairns sent to bless the humble homes on the burnside of Rothes.