

## Christ's Kirk on the Green.

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Was never in Scotland heard nor seen  
 Sic dancin' nor deray,—  
 Neither at Falkland on the Green,  
 Nor Peebles at the Play,—  
 As was of wooers, as I ween,  
 At Christ's Kirk on a day.  
 There cam' our kitties, washen clean,  
 In their new kirtles of gray,  
Full gay,
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

**I**T was the month of September, and Leslie's great annual saturnalia, the one event of the year which broke the humdrum monotony of the existence of its simple villagers, had come once more. Along the highways and byways and into the town trooped the merry-makers, for it was a day of great rejoicing and feasting;—ruddy-cheeked rustics; white-faced, feeble old men, some with oaken staffs and some without; sturdy-limbed fishers and weather-beaten, war-worn soldiers; big, hodden-clad ploughmen; sun-tanned and shoeless roguish urchins, hallooing and huddling in and out amongst the crowd; aproned wives and toothless dames; pretty, playful, laughing wenches tricked out in their Sunday frocks of motley hues, tripping with jocund step alongside their joke-exchanging swains; clowns and cripples, weavers and cobblers, tanners and cotters—all sorts of people joggled onward to the scene of revelry.

Soon the village green is reached, and the frolicsome "kitties," brave in their holiday garb, yet so shy and mim-mim

when men come nigh, make haste to trip "the light fantastic toe" upon the springy sward. Resplendent in their roe-skin gloves and Cordovan or Moroccan shoes, they pledge their love and troth, as girls always did and do, and shall do while ages roll, with the swains who have come hither to take part in the amusements.

Of all these maidens, mild as meid,  
 Was nane sae jimp as Gillie ;  
 As ony rose her cheeks were reid,  
 Her bosom like the lily.  
 Fu' yellow, yellow was her heid,  
 But she of love was silly ;  
 Though a' her friends had sworn her deid,  
 She'd have nane but sweet Willie

Allan

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

She scorn'd Jock and jeer'd at him,  
 Made mouths at him wi' mocks ;  
 He'd have loved her,—she wouldn't let him,  
 Nathless his yellow locks,  
 He cherished her,—she bade gae hang him,  
 Scarce worth was he twa clocks ;  
 She shamefully his short-gown set him,  
 His limbs were like twa rocks,  
 She said,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Let us pity fair-haired Jock with the spindle-shaped legs ! Surely he needs it all when the object of his most earnest affections bids him go and hang himself, asserting that a couple of beetles make up the sum total of his worth. Yes, poor Jock, accept our sincerest sympathies !

By and by another rustic youth appears upon the scene. Stephen is his name. Light and nimble of foot is he, and such is his reputation that none are there who can outdo him in the dance. His eyes roam searchingly over the vast assembly—anon he catches sight of Maud, another of the village belles—

and in a twinkling the springal appears at her side, begging with might and main for the next dance. And now the mirth grows fast and furious as Tam Lutar, the cunning minstrel, sways the crowd, like an old-time Orpheus, with his thrilling melodies.

Never was tripped such country dance before. The ramping, liling throngs, roused by the potent tune, moved merrily along in jiggling, pattering rows. Then the lightfoots or quick reels of Scotland gave place to the foreign or imported steps, and Towsie, taking a skip into the midst of the roysterers, danced *à la France* and treated the spectators to an exhibition of solo moriscos. All went well

Till Robin Roy began to revel,  
And Downie to him draggit;  
“Let be!” quoth Jock, and called him cavil,  
And by the tail him tuggit.

A scene of wild and clamorous commotion followed, and the poet whose chief and patriotic design is to ridicule—for the powerful shafts of satire seldom fail to lay ignorance bare and correct malpractices—the awkward mismanagement of the bow and the neglect into which archery has fallen in his own kingdom, throws all his art and skill into the story to load his mock heroes with the most scathing irony. And mock heroes he assuredly makes them! In furious rage one bent a bow, and, fixing an arrow in the string, let fly with all his might at his antagonist. With inimitably arch humour the minstrel pictures the result.

Through baith the cheeks he meant to pierce him,  
Or through the chafts have shot him;  
But, by ane mile, it cam’ not near him;—  
I cannot tell what ailed him

There,  
At Christ’s Kirk on the Green that day.

With that ane friend of his cried, “Fy!”  
And up an arrow drew;

He bended it sae furiously,  
 The bow in finders flew.  
 It was the will of God, trow I ;  
 For, had the tree been true,  
 Men said, that kenn'd his archery,  
 Then he'd have slain enou'

Fu' soon,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Ane haistie hensour called Harry,  
 Wha was an archer train'd,  
 Tuik up an arrow withouten tarry,  
 Sic turmoil so him tened (*angered*).  
 I wot not whether his hand could vary,  
 Or the man was his freynd ;  
 But he escaped through nichts o' Mary,  
 As man that nae ill mean'd

That time,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

And then

Ane sturdy chield that stude him neist  
 Lousit ane shot with ire ;  
 He meant to pierce him in the breist—  
 The bolt flew ower the byre.  
 Ane cryit, " Fy !" He had slain ane priest  
 Ane mile beyond the myre ;  
 Then bow and bag frae him he keist,  
 And fled as fierce as fire

Off flint,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Like a raging lion Lowrie leapt into the thick of the fray, resolved to show that his hand at least had not yet lost its cunning. Yeomanlike and bravely he fitted the feather in the bowstring, and essayed to send the shaft through Harry's heart; but such was Harry's fortune that, though the arrow struck full and fair as the archer meant it should, his leathern doublet saved him. Nevertheless,

The buff sae bousteously abaisit him  
 That to the earth he dashed doon ;

The t'other for dead imagined him,  
 And fled out of the toon.  
 The wives cam' forth and up they pull'd him,  
 And found life in the loon ;  
 Then with three shouts they raisèd him,  
 And brocht him frae his swoon  
Again,
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Soon, however, the combatants perceive that archery like theirs will never do. The yews are, therefore, flung aside—forks and flails are eagerly seized, and laid with much condescension and, you may be sure, with much greater force upon the shoulders of each hero. Lustily and more lustily fall the blows—what though bones are broken!—stones hurtle ominously through the air, crashing, thick and fast, on heads and backs and everywhere, doing deadly damage—and louder, ever louder grows the clamour as, one by one, the skirmishers fall wounded to the ground, groaning and writhing in their agony. Then the lamentations of women break in once more as the wives and virgins, wringing their hands in woful plight, wander through the crowd, crying dejectedly, “Lo! where lies my love?”

And, just as nowadays, a wordy strife—for the tongue is essentially woman's weapon of warfare—went on between the dames of the vanquished heroes. “Ilk gossip other grievit.” But, a battle of words, however bitter they were, would not suffice. More solid instruments had to be used; and so

Some strak with poles; some gathered stanes,—  
 Some fled and weill escapit.

Among the latter was Tam Lutar, who, minstrel-like, ignominiously sought safety in flight. The waggons which had helped to bring the merchandise to the Fair lay invitingly near, and ever since the commencement of hostilities Tam's eagle eye had watched those wains. Was it wonder, then, that now, when his life was in deadly peril, he sought their welcome shelter—a shelter so protective that he at last reached home

with unbruised bones, says the bard, though many were the foemen who would bear, for all time coming, the scars of that glorious day's renown? And while the minstrel lies safely ensconced beneath the friendly merchant-waggon, the struggle waxed wilder and wilder, till

Heich Hutcheon with ane hazel ryce,  
 To redd, did through them rummel ;  
 He knock'd them down like timid mice,—  
 He was nae baty-bummel (*vain braggart*).  
 Though he was wicht, he was not wyss  
 With sic janglers to jummil,  
 For frae his thoom' they dang ane slice,  
 Till he cried, "Barla-fummil !

I'm slain !"

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

When that he saw his blude sae reid,  
 To fleg nicht nae man let him ;  
 He guessed it had been for auld feid (*feud*),  
 And thocht ane cried, "Have at him !"  
 He gart his feet defend his heid—  
 The fair sairer it sat him—  
 Till he was pass'd out of all pleid (*pleading*) ;  
 He'd have been swift that gat him

Through speed,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

The town Soutar next presents himself. Ill it had fared with that worthy man in the desperate struggle ; and now, at its close,

His body was with blude embroiden,—  
 He groaned like ony ghaist.

To soothe his dolorous grief and smarting pains his wife, a dame with flaxen locks of shining gold, clung lovingly to his arm.

Her glittering hair that was fu' gowden  
 Sae hard in love him laced,  
 That, for her sake, he was not yowden (*tardy*),  
 The seven miles he was chased,

And mair,

At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Then came the Miller.

He was a man of manlie mak',  
 To meet him was nae mowis (*joke*);  
 There durst not ten come him to tak',  
 Sae 'noyed he their nowis (*noses*).  
 Th' ambushment hale about him brak,  
 And bicker'd him with bowis;  
 Syne trait'rously behind his back  
 They hewed him on the howis  
 Behind,  
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Twa that were heidmen of the heird  
 Ran each on each like rams;  
 Then followed feymen, richt unaffeird (*not equipped*),  
 Shower'd blows with barrow-trams.  
 And where their mouths were unageird,  
 They gat upon the gams (*gums*),  
 Till bludy barkit was their beird,  
 As if they'd worried lambs  
 Maist like,  
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

The wives caist up ane hideous yell,  
 When all their younkens yokit;  
 As fierce as lightning-flashes fell,  
 Freiks (*youths*) to the field they flockit.  
 The carles with clubs did other quell,  
 While blude at breists out-bokkit;  
 Sae rudely rang the common-bell,  
 While all the steeple rockit  
 For noise,  
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

When they had bray'd like baited bulls,  
 And fire-wood burnt in bales,  
 They were as meek as ony mules  
 That maimèd are with mails (*a disease*).  
 For faintness these forfochen fules  
 Fell down like flauchter-fales,

When fresh men cam' and hail'd the dules,  
 And dang them doon in dales (*heaps*)  
   Fu' soon,  
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

When all was done, Dick with an aix  
 Cam' forth to fell ane fudder (*cart load*) ;  
 Quoth he, " Where are yon hangit smaiks  
           Wha would ha'e slain my bruder ?"  
 His wife bade him " Gae hame, Gib Glaiks !"  
 And so did Meg, his mudder ;—  
 He turn'd and gave them baith their paiks,  
           For he durst ding nae other,  
   Men said,  
 At Christ's Kirk on the Green that day.

Such is the story of Christ's Kirk on the Green—a humorous tale centuries old, and told by the poet-king of Scotland, James First, the Dunfermlinite. "How few of the sceptered rank," says one writer, "have distinguished themselves as men of genius! and rarer still, how few to rank and genius have added the qualities of the heart, virtue, and public spirit! So rare a phenomenon was James I. of Scotland." Every Scotsman has heard of the scholarly attainments of that inestimable prince; therefore, when we say that James I. was the author of the poem, the assertion is unhesitatingly though most guardedly made.

There are those who ascribe the authorship of the drama to "the Gudeman of Ballangeich," the fifth James Stuart, scholar and poet as well as adventurer, and yet in this wise only do they make their ascription—"Composed, as is supposed, by King James V." A futile, merely suppositive argument on the very face of it, and more futile still when it is remembered that the earliest of those editors who list to the side of the fifth James did not publish the poem until 149 years after that prince's death. Antagonistic to this, let us place the fact that the George Bannatyne manuscripts, finished in 1568, not so very long after the decease of the "Red Tod" at Falkland Palace, have, as was the fashion of the time, "Quod King James I.," written after the poem.



In the second place, the Fifthites claim that the mention of the plays of Peebles in the opening stanza is an infallible argument, they holding that these plays belong to a more modern era than that of the poet-king. But the feasts of Beltane, for which Peebles was so famous, are, in common parlance, as old as the very hills themselves. So much for the second argument—it also is abortive. An antiquity of language and phraseology runs through the whole poem—an antiquity more antiquated than is encountered in the poems of James V.'s reign. In fact, the present-day reader finds it difficult, very difficult indeed, to understand the phrases and words which crop up here and there without the aid of a glossary. The accurate and learned Lord Hailes, whose argumentative criticisms favour the claims of the Gaberlunzie King, only says, after all, that his readers will observe that he speaks doubtfully of James I. being the author,—an admission which, if nothing else, is a direct acknowledgment that James I., in his opinion, may have been the author.

But there is a purpose, a striking purpose, and a double meaning in the poem. It gives us an admirable portrayal of ancient Scottish life, and, were its only merit that of being descriptive of the humours and manners of our ancestors four and a half centuries ago, it must always be esteemed a very valuable relic. Its chief end, however, is the preservation of archery as a military art in Scotland, the practice of which had been sadly neglected while James was a prisoner in England. His first step on coming home was to pass acts ordaining "every person after twelve years of age to busk himself as an archer." He did not stop there. He appointed wapenshaws to be held four times a year with bow and arrows. And he went further still. He ridiculed, with all the ironical satire his genius could launch forth, the awkwardness of the peasantry in managing the bow. That scathing sarcasm we find in "Christ's Kirk on the Green."

When Tytler puts this argument forward for those who stand

on the earlier platform, Lord Hailes scoffs at its triflingness, and wonders what effect ridicule in a poem could produce among an illiterate peasantry at a time when, probably, not one in a thousand of them could read, and when printing had not yet been introduced into Scotland. Evidently his lordship forgets that in the olden times many of the peasantry could repeat poems,—that, though poems were not printed, they were transmitted orally from mouth to mouth,—that the evenings in James I.'s reign were whiled away “in reading of romances, in piping and in singing.” Witness the result of such a custom—our splendid array of grand old ballads! On the other hand, the statutes of James V. make it perfectly obvious that the use of the bow in war was, with the introduction of fire-arms, quite laid aside. It is not likely then that the immortalized Fitz-James would write so disparagingly and ironically of the archery of his kingdom, even though it continued to maintain its ground as an amusement or exercise.

So much for the authorship of the poem; now for the site of “Christ's Kirk on the Green.” And here let me say that much controversy also enshrouds the scene of action. Sibbald, the chronicler of early Scottish poetry, says, without any reservation whatever, that if there was no church at, or village near, St Andrews called Christ's-kirk or Cross-kirk, the author has perhaps given that name to the college church of St Salvator, a term which he might think unfit for a popular poem. One tradition indeed asserts that it was a village within or near—a very fallible tradition apparently—the parish of Lesly in Aberdeenshire. Had it been a village—and it must thenadays have been a considerable village—would it have wholly disappeared off the face of the earth within the space of a century or two and nobody have known aught concerning it? No! Methinks it was only what the poem calls it—a kirk standing on or beside the village-green.

Leslie in Fife is believed to have been the scene, and the occasion the annual fair which took place, as we have seen, in

September—a suitable season, by the way, for the open-air dancing manœuvres detailed in the opening stanzas. Allan Ramsay, who wrote two other cantos to the drama which he makes the prelude of a village wedding, supposes right away that the Fifan Leslie was the locality when he writes:—

Now frae th' east nook o' Fife the dawn  
Speel'd westlines up the lift ;

and Professor Tennant, in Anster Fair, bears similar testimony when, in Canto II., verse 29, he speaks of

The upland hamlet, where, as told in song,  
Tam Lutar play'd of yore his lively rants.

If it were the Aberdeenshire Lesly, would the kitties, being in that case Highland girls, have been dressed in “kirtillis of Lynkome or lincum licht?” Probably not. Besides, the Fifan Leslie was famed in the good old days for its games. Was it not, gloriously or ingloriously, the Donnybrook of Scotland? Had it not its bull-fights too?—and is there not still the famous bull-stone, with its ring, to which the baited beasts were fastened previous to the commencement of the sport? Had it not its cock-fights also?—and is the Barrace Yett, or Gate of Combats, leading from the space of ground within which the combatants were enclosed, not still pointed out? Yea, of a surety this was the very scene of the noisy festival!

But again, another and stronger and decisive argument arises out of the poem itself. The names of the principal characters are by no manner of means Aberdonish. In “Peebles to the Play,” mentioned in the fourth line, the *dramatis personæ* have Border names to suit the locality; so also in “Christ’s Kirk on the Green,” the names, if not altogether Fifish, certainly belong to a district not far distant.