

XIX.

WILLIAM DUFF,

CLUNIE:

**ARTISTIC WORKER IN WOOD,
HUMORIST.**



One of the most charming beauty spots in all Perthshire is the Loch of Clunie, with its romantic and historic castle, about five miles from Blairgowrie; and those who can recall visiting the place so far back, say, as 1881, or earlier, can hardly fail to associate the event with a genial, courteous, and intelligent old gentleman, who was usually in attendance to give the freedom of the boats, supply any information wanted, and otherwise contribute to the enjoyment of the party in every way within his power. That was William Duff, forester and land steward on the Airlie estate, of which Clunie at that time formed part, but was afterwards purchased by Mr W. H. Cox of Snaigow. If the visitors had time, and their tastes lay that way, he would show them his "armoury," as he called it, comprising an interesting collection of Scottish weapons and other relics from Culloden, remains from the stone age and Roman occupation found in the district, &c. Much more strik-

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ing to the casual visitor than these, however, was his curious assortment of articles which in his leisure he had fashioned out of abnormal tree roots, stumps, and excrescences—chairs, garden seats, tables, desks, &c., all of fantastic design and beautiful workmanship; monstrous-looking animals, all heads and legs and horns; hideous and grotesque faces and heads, and things beyond all name or classification whatsoever—something between a nightmare and a binominal theorem.

SEVERAL VIOLINS

might be seen lying about, too, and perhaps a 'cello, all of his own make; and if bunches of horehound, "feather-foullie," camomile, &c., together with sundry jars, bottles, and retorts were among the oddments that caught the eye it would excite no surprise, for he was, with the rest, a skilled herbalist, and the "true apothecary" for all the countryside. This Stormont favourite was born probably in 1802 at Clunie, his father, Alexander Duff, being land steward on the Airlie estate. William went to Cortachy as a youth, and assisted his father in various ways, ultimately succeeding him in his post—father and son covering over a hundred years of faithful service between them. He came to reside at Clunie in 1837, and died there in 1882. That is the "history" of the man in brief, from the ordinary point of view; there is really not another date worth noting. So heedless of the mad world's doings outside was Willie Duff of Clunie, that he never entered a railway carriage in his life; it is doubtful if he ever saw one, except on a certain occasion shortly after the line was opened to Blairgowrie in 1855, when he happened to be in the town in connection with

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the Clunie rents. All over the Stormont, however, his name is held in kindly remembrance, and of no one can this be said whose life has been in vain. Dealing with his skill as a wood-worker, his first love seems to have been violin making, in which line he did capital work. It is said that when a young man of 17 or 18 years of age he took his first violin to Jamie Sandy, of Alyth, and asked him to varnish it for him. Jamie, seated as usual at his strange bed-bench, took the instrument in his hand, examined it critically, and handed it back with the discouraging remark, "I'll dae naething o' the kind." The young fiddle-maker's countenance fell. "For," added he immediately, "the lad that oan mak' a fiddle like that should varnish it for himsel'. Sit doon there, an' I'll show ye hoo to dae it!" And it was thus that Duff got his first lesson in fiddle varnishing. He became

A GOOD PLAYER ALSO.

An old man used to declare that his rendering of "Delvineside" was not unworthy of comparison with Niel Gow's, which he had heard. Many a "grand nicht" the fiddlers for miles round about had in Duff's house. So far as concerns the work of his hands, however, it is his wonderful creations out of tree roots, &c., by which he is best remembered. His skill in this department was well known all over the district, and the neighbouring gentry were liberal patrons. The Dowager-Countess of Airlie purchased many specimens of his work, including a couple of very elaborate chairs made from sections of a poplar tree, one of which, it is said, was sent to the late Queen. At his death nearly all his effects were scattered, but much of it is still to be found in the Stormont. A memorable in-

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stance of his sportive fancy he fashioned out of a tree root and stuck above his shed. It does not lose anything in the descriptions given of it; but from all accounts it must have been a "most delicate monster," with a pipe in its mouth and a pair of glaring eyes—kindly supplied by the artist. Duff was very proud of his achievement, dubbed it "Veechan Vhor," and maintained that it was a speaking likeness of a neighbour called Anderson. That highly-honoured but innocent individual came along one day, and after examining it remarked that whoever it was meant for must be "an ill-lookin' deevil." Stewart Jack, the first time he saw it, stood stock-still in mute admiration. "What dae ye ca' that, Willie?" asked he at length. "Oh, that's Veechan Vhor, Stewart," replied Duff. "Weel," said he, taking a snuff, "I canna see hoo it would be wrang to fa' doon an' worship it, for it's like naething in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth."

ON ANOTHER OCCASION

Stewart happened to come into Duff's room, where a poor old man, twisted out of all shape by rheumatism, was sitting among the curios as like another himself as could be. Stewart went straight up to him, and, giving him a huge slap on the back, turned to Duff with the query—"Man, Willie, whaur did ye get this grand rit!" (root). Stewart was born 15 years before, and died 19 years before Duff, but the two are associated in many a story. The earliest of these is when Duff and his brother Alexander were boys. Their mother had been washing at the side of the loch, and the two youngsters having got hold of a big tub, started out on a voyage of discovery. Stewart

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was roofing a house near by, and shouted to their father to come quick as the lads had "circumnavigated the loch and landed on the island!" The last, again, deals with Stewart's coming to Duff one day with an invincible apple he had taken off one of the trees on this same island. "What kind o' apple dae ye ca' that, Willie?" asked he. "Oh, something between a codlin' and a pippin, I think." "Weel," said the slater, as he tried to get into it, first with his teeth, then with his trowel, without any success, "I'm thinkin' that gin that had been in the garden o' Eden it would have dung Eve an' the devil an' a' to gar Adam eat it!" A curious half-witted couple were Gilbert Clark and his wife, who used to go about the district begging. "Gibbie" leading his wife with a "stræ raip" about her waist. They had a very good friend in Duff, who, however, frequently got his own amusement out of them by setting the poor beggars on the top of a knowe near the old castle, and starting them to sing—and such singing. Gibbie had a rare scent for funerals, never missing one, the food and drink being generally plentiful on such occasions. At one of these he had managed to imbibe so much of the latter that he fell asleep in a ditch by the roadside, awakening just as the sombre cortege was passing along with its burden. Gibbie sat up, and, under the impression that they were returning from the burying-ground, cried out—"Weel, lads, hae ye delivered the corp a' richt?" One of Duff's amusing stories was

ABOUT ANOTHER FUNERAL

in Lintrathen. Deceased was the wife of a gamekeeper, and the coffin had to be carried, old style, all the way to Glenisla. Just as the

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party were about to start, the chief mourner, ordering them to "haud a wee," ran into the house and speedily reappeared with his big gamebag slung across his shoulder and his gun comfortably tucked under his arm. "Ye see," explained he, in reply to looks of inquiry, "I'll maybe get a baff at a hare as we gae owre the hill!" Our Clunie wag once provoked a Frenchman to a duel with swords, and managed to use his weapon so well that he disarmed his opponent, and chased him in thorough bloodthirsty style all over the place, Mounseer shouting for quarter with all his might. Duff didn't kill him. Speaking of the Frenchman recalls the French-horn player, Johnnie Small, whom our friend persuaded into the belief that he was a great poet, advised him to get his powerful rhymes printed, and to see the minister about taking a number of copies. Johnnie went to the minister, and submitted some of his productions for a strictly candid favourable opinion. That gentleman, being, one regrets to note, quite evidently no judge of poetry, condemned said productions body and soul; there was a sudden rise of temperature, and the poet returned the compliment, a volcanic eruption ensuing. One of Duff's own favourite quotations was from a Dundee precursor to M'Gonagall as follows:—

When I am laid in death's dark bed,
An' my grey locks wi' earth are happit,
An' nature's plaid is owre me laid,
An' a' the corners nicely clatted,
You'll mind upon auld Johnnie then,
His tartan plaid an' hairy sporan,
His axe, his pipes, his philabeg,
His sneeshin' mull an' whisky hor(a)n!

Tinkers came about the district frequently, and found comfortable quarters at the Lime Kilns, not far from the loch. Duff was a

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splendid mimic, and delighted to sit for an hour or two listening to the loud-voiced squabblers, returning home to go over the whole performance again, the voice and gesture of each of the speakers being reproduced to perfection. A decent old Highlander called Tam Macfarlane was another favourite subject of his; he was so good at him that he deceived Tam's own son on one occasion. But the most amusing instance of this wit was in connection with two men in the district who got the credit of ill-treating their wives. Their cottages were not far from each other near the Loch of the Lowes. One night Duff and a companion had been at some social gathering in Dunkeld, and were returning in the small hours of the morning in jolly humour. When they reached the first of the cottages—occupied, let us say, by M'Dougall, the other by Thomson—Duff, being ready for sport at any time, went to the window, and began tapping vigorously, calling out all the while in the

FAMILIAR WHINING VOICE

of Tam Macfarlane—"Ochone, ochone! Get up at the instant, Mr M'Dougall!" "Is that you, Tam?" asked the individual addressed. "Indeet an' it iss that same," replied Tam, "an' it will be that damt rascal Jamie Tamson's wife that will be murdered before you get along to help her if you be not quick, Mr M'Dougall!" "Michty me, dae ye tell me sae? The wratch! Rin along, Tam, and dae what ye can till I come!" Duff and his chum ran along all right, and roused Thomson in similar manner—to haste, for the love of goodness, to rescue M'Dougall's poor wife. The conspirators got behind a dyke,

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and were witnesses of the meeting of the two worthies, and the man who could not enjoy Duff's narrative of that historic event was hopeless. As already hinted, his skill as an herbalist was in frequent demand, and was always at the service of his neighbours without fee or reward, save in the pleasure of alleviating some of the ills that flesh is heir to. It was the same with all those kindly offices he was glad to show strangers visiting the loch and castle: "tips," of course, he was offered frequently, but they were invariably refused. A fine, lovable soul was Willie Duff of Clunie, and it will be many a year ere his memory withers.