

CHAPTER XI.

JOHNNY RUSSELL AND THE BOTTLE O' BARM.

“Three elf-shot were—yet I these ills endured.”

AT one time the belief in fairies was so interwoven with the domestic life of a people cradled and nursed in the wild straths and mountain glens of the North, that in some measure it became identified with their everyday life. The child, seated with its elders by the peat fire of a winter's night, heard the oral traditions of the district recited. The feats and deeds of their clansmen stirred within them a spirit of emulation. It is no wonder that a child reared amid such surroundings was deeply imbued with a sense of the unseen and spiritual. The Grants had their spectral guardian which never failed to warn them of death and danger. The name of “Maggie Mulloch” was “familiar as a household word” in my early days, and so was “Botach-chaursan,” a name that has before now made the writer tremble. “Brownie Clod” does not appear to have had a local habitation. He was a wandering spirit that delighted to travel from place to place, and among poor folks, with his nightly pranks. The writer's grandmother on her annual visit used to relate how a certain man that lived in the Burn of Rothes was so belaboured with clods at his own fireside that he ran out of the house and lay down in one of his carts, intending to spend the night there, but no sooner had he begun to fall asleep amongst “the puckle strae” that he placed in the cart than the shafts were lifted by invisible hands, and the cart was run to the brink of the steep brae, down which it was hurled, landing in the burn below, Johnny and all. Bad and mischievous as “Brownie Clod” was, he was merciful compared to a host of imps that seem to have made the Burn of Rothes a sort of “royal residence.” Poor Johnny Russell was so annoyed and tormented by them that his life became a burden to him.

A favourite pastime with these wicked imps was stealing newborn bairns and substituting one of themselves in their place. Where this was accomplished, woe betide the poor family. An "elf-bairn" was not alone a terror to the poor household where it dwelt, but to the whole place. The writer has heard his maternal grandmother tell how she narrowly escaped the fate of "Kilmeny." It was in the memorable '45 that she first saw the light, in a lonely Highland cottage. Her father being "oot wi' the Prince," the mother was left alone with her child, when one night she awoke in time to clutch the feet of my respected grandmother as she was being carried out of bed by the fairies, who fled up the lum with an impish laugh, disappointed of their prey. After that night, when my great-grandmother had an infant by her side she never went to sleep without having a Bible below her head.

Throwing "the putting stane" seems to have been a favourite game with them. When Johnny Russell went up the burn to pen his sheep, they would leave off their game and begin their tricks upon him, by scattering his sheep and teasing his collie until the poor dog howled with fright. Then they would trip the feet from poor Johnny, and set up derisive laughter at the result.

It was drawing near Yule-time, when Johnny's wife, Janet, remarked that she had "better ha'e her drap ale brewed for Christmas, and," said she, "ye'll just stap doon tae Mrs. Stephen's for a hottle o' barm." Johnny, like a good, obedient husband, "raxed doon" his plaid, and, with his trusty stick, went down the burn on his errand. The footpath led past the Doonies, the very stronghold of the fairies. Of course they saw Johnny, and Johnny saw them at their frolics, but all they did was to remark, "That's Johnny Russell gaun doon the burn for a bottle o' barm." When he reached the Kirkton, he was glad to hear the kindly voice of Mrs. Stephen accost him—"Come awa' ben, Johnny; I'm gled tae see ye lookin' see weel. Foo are ye a' keepin' up the burn, an' foo's Janet?" Johnny answered this friendly greeting with "Gyely, gyely, thank ye. Foo are ye a' yersel's? I houp Sandy's weel; is he at hame the night?" Johnny was glad to hear that they were all "brawly." Before he had time to tell his errand, Sandy Stephen stappit "but" the hoose with a gill stoup in his hand, remarking, "Johnny, A'm richt gled tae see ye, man. I ha'e a drap in this stoup that'll warm yer hairt. Donal' Mac-

pherson, the floater, brocht it doon fae the Braes o' Aibernethy. There was never better fusky brewed in a bothy." The gill stoup was soon empty. Johnny ordered in another gill, "tae treat Sandy." How often the stoup was filled neither of the cronies could ever tell, but it was "weel on in the night" when Johnny rose "tae gang awa'." Mrs. Stephen put the bottle of barm into his "oxter pocket," with the remark, "There, man; that's barm as brisk as a bee. Tell Janet that I'll be stappin' up the burn some day seen tae taste her browst." After leaving the hospitable shelter of Sandy Stephen's house, Johnny rolled his plaid round his shoulders, grasped his trusty stick, and took the road for home. In passing the Manse he saw that the minister and his folks were bedded; the kirkyard looked eerie and dark, and stirred up some strange reflections in Johnny's mind. However, he set off manfully up the burn. The Baron's Craig looked dim and dark against the midnight sky. By the time he reached the Little Doonie, the sweat began to break out on his face, and he felt a strange giddiness in his head and a weakness about his knee joints that made him tumble several times before he reached the Muckle Doonie. Up to this time he had forgotten all about the fairies, but the sight of the rocks hanging over his head and the narrow passage before him brought all the horrors of the situation to his mind, and made him pause before encountering the green-coated gentry at their midnight revelry. He felt himself placed "betweeu the deil and the deep sea." To go lack was impossible; go forward he must, and forward he went. He had hardly entered the narrow passage when a shout of derisive laughter was set up by the wicked imps that thronged around. They buzzed about his head like bees as he passed along the lip of "The Devil's Punch-Bowl." Amidst the rush and noise of the water, he heard a report like a pistol fired off close to his ear. At the same moment he was struck under the left jaw by what he believed to be an "elf arrow." On putting his hand to the place, he felt the warm blood running down his breast. He grew faint, and fell upon the rocky footpath. Consciousness left the worn-out body of poor Johnny Russell. There he lay for some time, until his two sons, Jock and Peter, came along the Doonies to seek their father. On raising his head they found he was alive, but in a woeful plight, his clothes saturated with barm.

They took the empty bottle from his pocket and laid him upon his plaid, in which they carried him home. Poor Janet met them at the door with a wail of sorrow. She clasped her arms round her "puir man," calling out, "Oh, Johnny, speak tae me, Johnny! A'm yer ain wife; speak tae me, man, an' say that ye ken yer ain Janet! Ye're surely haverin'; A'm nae the Queen o' the Fairies! Ye're clean dementit, man; ye're in yer ain hoose, an' nae carriet awa' wi' the fairies. Ye've been carriet hame like a bairn by yer ain Jock an' Peter. Dinna ye ken yer ain bed, wi' yer Sunday's claes hingin' on the nail at the fit? Willawins! willawins! that I sud ha'e lived tae see sic a sight as this, an' tae be ta'en by my ain man for the Queen o' the Fairies. Haigh, sirs! Gweed keep us a'! but he's sair gane nae tae ken his ain wife an' bairns."

During this pathetic appeal, poor Johnny raved on in the belief that he was carried off by the fairies to one or other of the subterranean homes of his enemies. "Lat me back," said he, "tae Janet an' the bairns. A'm sair smitten; yer arrows ha'e hit me hard. Hale my wounds an' lat me gang back tae Janet. Fa'll care for them fan A'm awa'?" So powerful was the force of imagination that nothing could ever persuade Johnny that he was hit by the cork of the bottle of barm. He believed that he was "elf-shot," and, as he said, "wud dae nae mair gweed." The writer had the testimony of his venerable, God-fearing granny that Johnny "never got ower the fricht," but "dwin't awa'" in "the year o' the short corn." A local rhymester wrote the follow-lines, but they never were engraved upon the rustic stone that marks the spot where the dust of Johnny Russell rests in peace:—

" Stranger, this stone will let you know
That Johnny Russell sleeps below;
He with the fairies got a fright,
And after that was never right.
Beside the burn you'll see the spot
Where John believed he was "elf-shot,"
Altho' from them he got no harm;
His death was brought about by barm."