

CHAPTER XXV.

WILLOX THE WITCHFINDER—TOMINTOUL—WILLIE WATSON.

“How far is't call'd to Forres? What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants of the earth,
And yet are on't?”

SHAKESPEARE'S “MACBETH.”

THE name and fame of Willox and his oracular stone and bridle had not died out in Strathspey and Glenavon in the early years of the present century. In his lifetime his name was a household word over the northern counties of Scotland. It was said that he inherited the magic stone and the witch-finding bridle from his maternal grandfather. They were acquired by him in a singular way. In the gloaming of a summer's evening he surprised and captured a mermaid in her lonely retreat on the shore of Lochindorb. He carried her home in triumph, but she soon began to languish and pine for her watery home. So eventually she purchased her freedom by revealing the place where the magic stone was hidden.

On the banks of the same loch he captured a water kelpie, waiting no doubt to allure some hapless traveller to a watery grave. He must have been a man of action, for he instantly caught the kelpie by the bridle. In spite of its efforts to free itself, he held on till it slipped from the creature's head. In a moment it transformed itself into the shape of a man and pursued its spoiler, roaring and uttering fearful imprecations against him. With the evil spirit close at his heels, he reached his dwelling, where his wife stood inside an open window. He threw in the bridle, and she caught it in her apron as her husband fell exhausted to the ground.

There is no record of how the first possessor of the hardly won relics utilised them for the detection of witches and their craft. It was reserved for his descendant, the subject of this chapter, to benefit the victims of the malignant witches that were to be found

in every parish. His services were in constant demand far and near, and he was not slow to respond to every call. He rode forth single handed, mounted on his long-haired Highland sheltie, with the magic bridle dangling at his belt and the oracular stone in a wallet on his back, to do battle with the powers of darkness.

Ever since Shakespeare's time, the counties of Moray and Nairn were notorious for the number of witches that were at one time within their bounds.

Wilcox, on one of his periodical visits to the Laich of Moray, visited Elgin. One morning he ascended Ladyhill and surveyed the rising city, and said that he could count "twenty reekin' lums" of houses in which a witch dwelt.

It was generally believed that Wilcox, by consulting his marvellous stone, could tell the nature of the spell cast by the witch upon the farmer's cattle or his crops, and how to counteract them. And what was considered of greater importance, he could relieve human beings suffering from the black art of witchcraft. We believe that this wonderful talisman and the bridle are still in the possession of his descendants. The so-called stone is a die of rock crystal he had no doubt picked up near his home on Cairngorm. It is just the sort of article to impress the imagination and credulity of the people around him. No doubt the situation of his home, in one of the wildest and most impassable spots in the whole Grampian range, helped on the superstition.

In September, 1860, Her Majesty the Queen and the Prince Consort passed through Tomintoul on their way from Grantown to Balmoral. Her Majesty gave great offence to the inhabitants by her reference to the village in "Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands." In it she says—"Tomintoul is the most tumble-down, poor-looking place I ever saw. A long street, with three inns, miserable, dirty-looking houses and people, and a sad look of wretchedness about it. Grant told me that it was the dirtiest, poorest village in the whole Highlands."

So greatly has the village been improved since the late Queen Victoria passed through it that it could scarcely be recognised as the same place. Situated in the midst of the grandest mountain scenery in Scotland, it is fast becoming a resort for tourists. Her Majesty records that in passing Inchrory they observed two eagles soaring splendidly above and alighting on the top of the hills ;

and she winds up her record of the expedition thus—"This never-to-be-forgotten expedition will always be remembered with delight."

A few miles beyond Tomintoul the traveller reaches Delavorar, a very lonely and solitary place, where in 1645 Montrose bivouacked with his army on his return from the Battle of Auldearn.

In June, 1689, Claverhouse and his followers were in this place, on their way to Killiecrankie, where he ended his remarkable career.

Two miles further on stands the house of the witchfinder. The next inhabited place is Inchrory, where the Duke of Richmond has erected a shooting lodge. Between this place and Ben Avon the glen is an entire solitude for at least a distance of twelve miles. Loneliness seems to brood over the wild and rugged scene, until the limpid waters of Loch Avon come into view like a lake of molten silver sparkling in the sunshine, overshadowed by the majestic form of Ben Avon.

It is not singular that a man cradled amidst such wild and impressive scenes was looked upon as being surrounded by a mysterious halo. How far Willox believed in his predictions we can only conjecture, but there is no doubt that he possessed all the native shrewdness of his race, with a far-seeing insight into the gullibility of human nature. Were it not for the evidence of historical records, we would not at the present day believe that the ministers of the reformed Kirk of Scotland were not only believers in witchcraft and wizardry, but many of them were zealous in their persecution.

It would appear that so late as Willox's time the votaries of the "Prince of Darkness" abounded in the North. It is said that frequently when he rode through a village or hamlet with his magic bridle at his side, its virtue was so powerful that a witch has rushed from her dwelling and tried to put her head into it. If a woman was suspected of the "black art," the witchfinder was employed to shake his bridle in her face. If any unfortunate creature was afflicted with any physical deformity, a hump-back, a bearded chin, blear eyes, or a biting, radical tongue that railed against neighbours, rich and poor, all such were more or less suspected of "trafficking with Satan."

Within the memory of the writer there died in the Parish of

Aberlour a diminutive object named Willie Watson. His singular appearance and the way he lived placed him outside the pale of common humanity, and invested him with all the attributes of a wizard. He was born in Aberdeen. His parents gave him an excellent education. His dwarfish stature was very little noticed or commented on until he entered the University, where he became the butt for the ridicule of the students. The consequence was that he fled from his home, came to the Parish of Aberlour, and built a hovel with his own hands on the edge of a barren moor, where he spent his life, a confirmed misanthrope. In the latter years of his life he presented a picture well calculated to impress one that he was of the supernatural kind. A little over four feet in height, free from deformity, with a high and well-formed head that was always crowned with a small blue bonnet, the skin of his face was the colour of old parchment, wrinkled to such a degree as to resemble the stomach of a sheep turned inside out. There was not a hair to be seen upon it. His small eyes resembled those of a rat. When he ventured abroad and appeared on the village street, every boy and girl flew to their homes like rabbits to their burrows. Enveloped in a blanket, fastened like a shawl with a bone skewer (believed to be the shin bone of an unchristened bairn), his tiny hands, thrust from between the folds of the blanket, grasped a long, slender pole that overtopped his head about three feet. With it he paddled himself along the village street, pausing every few yards to utter some unintelligible gibberish.

What was he saying? Was the spirit of the prophet upon him, or was he denouncing the sins of the parish?

The writer has seen him emerge from the hole that constituted the entrance to his hovel, go a few steps from it, and point his long pole to the setting sun. When it sank below the horizon, he turned it to the still sunlit crest of Benriennes, gesticulating the while. Was the wizard a fire-worshipper? In the soot-begrimed hovel where he had lived for so many years, how did he spend his time, and what were the communings of his spirit in his lonely solitude? In his isolated life and in his personal appearance he had all the outward attributes of a wizard. If he possessed the power to

O'ercast the night and cloud the moon,
An' make the deil obedient to his croon,

he exercised it wisely.