


Auld Robin Gray.

N the rising ground behind the baronial town of Colinsburgh stands Balcarres, a stately old edifice of the Gothic style, amid beautiful terraces which are shrouded with every conceivable garland of loveliness, and over which are wafted the deliciously soft breezes of the Firth of Forth.

It is a glorious pile—the seat of the Lindsays, descendants of De Limesay, an ancient and honourable family which came originally from Normandy. The first of the line in Scotland appears to have been Sir Walter de Lindsay, a baron under David I., in the beginning of the twelfth century. In the course of time the family became divided into many branches: and the Crawfords and Lindsays and Balcarresses—sections of it—have played, as a clan, the lion's part in the formation of our country's history.

Balcarres, then, is the seat of our story. The date of it refers to the spring of the year 1772. In a little room of the old mansion, reached only by long flights of winding stairs, and commanding a view of magnificent beauty and extent—of sea and lake, and rock and beach—sits the eldest daughter of Balcarres, Lady Anne Lindsay, making for herself what she calls “artificial happiness,” to wile away the time which has crawled by slowfootedly indeed since her sister Margaret's marriage and consequent departure to London.

A pen is in the maiden's hand, and envelopes and scraps of envelopes of old letters lie littered about her, for Lady Anne is spinning from the brain snatches of poetry and prose, “leaving

it to posterity to value the webs or not as it pleases." Lonely she feels and pensive, thinking sadly of the beautiful days of the past, those happy days of girlhood when life's pathway seemed strewn with the brightest flowers. She remembers her girlish pranks—she is little more than a girlish nymph even yet—remembers how Robin Gray, the aged herd of Balcarres, had gone one day to the Countess, her mother, with the astounding intelligence—"The young gentlemen, and the young ladies, and all the dogs are run away, my lady!"—and how she, being the eldest, and therefore the most guilty of the criminals, had the biggest penance to perform.

Memories of that sweet, happy May-time crowd around her, for between her and her sister there had always existed "unusually warm feelings of sisterly affection." And so, in an idle hour, having no other source of entertainment save poetizing, she inscribed for endless generations the delightful and universally popular ballad of "Auld Robin Gray."

Oh, tender-hearted daughter of a hundred Earls, what tongue is fit to sound thy praises? Thy country owes thee more than lips can ever tell, for thou hast bequeathed to it and the world at large a song which, containing as it does the essence of a million love-tales, shall be admired and adored while men and women walk this earth and feel the pangs of Cupid's darts!

Like Sir David Wilkie, who stands unrivalled in his own particular sphere of painting, so Lady Anne Lindsay occupies a foremost place among the lady poets of this country, or of any other country, as a ballad writer. She is the word-painter of the plebeian joys and sorrows. Wilkie committed rural scenes and incidents with a loyal brush to canvas; Lady Lindsay gives us an inimitable "speaking-picture" of them—a picture so exquisitely simple and pure, so full of the profoundest pathos, and of such intensity of feeling and thought, that the Minstrel of Tweedside says it is "worth all the dialogues Corydon and Phyllis have had together from the days of Theocritus downwards," while Ritson, a critic of dread and drastic severity

—the more acceptable on that account as an authority—bestows on it the highest eulogy he possibly can, declaring that this species of Scottish song-composition has been carried (in *Auld Robin Gray*) to such perfection that it must either cease or degenerate. This, from a pen so reprehensive, is well-earned praise indeed.

Had Lady Anne penned nothing else than this charming ballad her name would still be a household word wherever the Scottish tongue is heard and sung, for its grandly pathetic air makes many a listener “dry up the tearfu’ e’e.”

The poem tells its story with delightful simplicity. It is essentially pastoral, but not the pastoral poetry of the Cockney, nor the pastoral poetry of “the grass,” replete with a refinement that is altogether absurd and unnatural. It is neither of these, but a plaintively sublime and pleasing description of rural life, a sort of beatification of true poverty and love. It is romantic, in that it is pervaded with an extraordinary display of genuine virtue and affection. Lady Lindsay’s mind had a cordial sympathy for whatever tended to elevate her fellow-creatures, and she throws into the word-picture all the majesty of heart-rending sorrow—a sorrow here “so grand and terrible and sublime and holy.” Jeanie’s nature she paints simply, yet with all the colouring its grandeur and sublimity can lay claim to. What a devotion, too, is that of the spotless village heroine, represented as discharging her domestic duties and softening the cares of human existence, as sympathizing with, while the hands toil to supply the staff of life for the suffering parents—that spirit of universal humanity which honours and adorns all who possess it!

There are many versions of the ballad, due, doubtless, to the mystery which for many years hung over its authorship, and allowed varying transcriptions of it to be made during the lifetime of the composer. The poem is seldom, if ever, sung in full, the first stanza being, for musical purposes, invariably omitted. It is here, however, submitted

in its entirety, for it is one of the choicest beauties in the Scottish language.

When the sheep are in the fauld, and the kye's come hame,
 When a' the weary world to rest is gane,
 The waes o' my heart fa' in showers frae my e'e,
 Unkent by my gudeman wha sleeps soundly by me.

Young Jamie lo'ed me weel, and sought me for his bride,
 But, saving a crown, he had naething else beside ;
 To mak' the crown a pound my Jamie gaed to sea,
 And the crown and the pound were baith for me.

He hadna been gane a week but only twa,
 When my father brake his arm, and our cow was stown awa' ;
 My mither she fell sick, my Jamie was at sea,
 And Auld Robin Gray cam' a-courting to me.

My father couldna work—my mither couldna spin—
 I toiled night and day, but their bread I couldna win ;
 Auld Robin fed them baith, and, wi' tears in his e'e,
 Said, " Jeanie, for their sakes, will ye no marry me ?"

My heart it said, " Na !" for I looked for Jamie back ;
 But the wind it blew hard, and his ship was a wrack ;
 His ship it was a wrack—why didna Jamie dee ?
 Or why was I spared to cry, " Wae is me ?"

My father urged me sair, my mither didna speak,
 But she looked i' my face till my heart was like to break ;
 They gie'd him my hand, though my heart was at the sea—
 And Auld Robin Gray was gudeman to me !

I hadna been his wife a week but only four,
 When, mournfu' as I sat on the stane at my door,
 I saw my Jamie's ghaist, for I couldna think it he,
 Till he said, " I'm come hame, love, to marry thee !"

Oh ! sair did we greet, and mickle say o' a',—
 I gie'd him a'e kiss, and bade him gang awa' ;
 I wish that I were dead, but I am na like to dee,
 For, though my heart is broken, I'm but young, wae is me !

I gang like a ghaist, and I carena much to spin,
I darena think o' Jamie, for that wad be a sin ;
But I will do my best a gude wife aye to be,
For Auld Robin Gray—he is kind, kind to me !

For a long time the ballad was sung to an ancient Scottish melody called "The Bridegroom greets when the Sun gaes doon"—a beautiful and pleasing air of which Lady Anne was passionately fond, and which used to be rehearsed at Balcarres by Sophy Johnstone, an old and eccentric friend of the family, described by the authoress as a droll, ingenious fellow, who could shoe a horse more quickly than the smith, who made excellent trunks, played well on the fiddle, sung a man's song in a bass voice, and was by many people suspected of being one—an original being, in the making of whom Nature seemed to have hesitated to the last whether to make her a boy or a girl. But the words warbled by this jockey-coated, strong-voiced woman whom Sir Walter Scott seldom thought of without smiling, were somewhat indelicate, and Lady Lindsay determined to supplant them with something more suitable. The outcome was, as we have seen, the charming ballad before us, written when the authoress was "a pretty, witty, and vivacious young lady" of only one-and-twenty summers.

To the Rev. William Reeves, rector of Wrington, in Somersetshire, musical devotees owe boundless gratitude for the splendid melody to which the ballad is nowadays so universally sung.

From one honest gentleman Lady Anne says she received an excellent hint. The laird of Dalzell, after hearing her sing it, broke out into the angry exclamation—"Oh, the villain ! oh, the auld rascal ! I ken wha stealt the poor lassie's coo—it was Auld Robin Gray himsel' !"

The idea was treasured up, the result being the second part of the poem, which was written to gratify Lady Anne's aged mother, who wished to know "how the unlucky business of Jeanie and Jamie ended." But it was a fatal mistake—as

sequels generally are—in that it destroyed the true nobility of its characters, and incriminated the kindly old herd of Balcarres, who, “thankfu’ to dee,” slips conveniently into another and brighter world. Luckily, however, Robin Gray *secundus* never became popular, though some of the verses are really beautiful and not unworthy of the authoress, who was quite conscious of its comparative inferiority as a whole, and declared that “the loves and distresses of youth go more to the heart than the contritions, confessions, and legacies of old age.” One seldom comes across the continuation in print, but, in order to show how “the unlucky business” did end, it is given here.

The spring had pass’d ower, ’twas summer nae mair,
And, trembling, were scatter’d the leaves in the air;
“Oh! winter,” cried Jeanie, “we kindly agree,
For wae looks the sun when he shines upon me.”

Nae langer she wept, her tears were a’ spent;
Despair it was come, and she thought it content—
She thought it content, but her cheek was grown pale,
And she droop’d like a snawdrap broke down by the hail.

Her father was sad, and her mither was wae,
But silent and thoughtfu’ was Auld Robin Gray;
He wandered his lane, and his face was as lean
As the side o’ a brae where the torrents hae been.

He gaed to his bed, but nae physic wad take,
And often he said—“It is best for her sake!”
While Jeanie supported his head as he lay,
And tears trickled down upon Auld Robin Gray.

“Oh! greet nae mair, Jeanie,” said he, wi’ a groan,
“I’m na worth your sorrow—the truth maun be known;
Send round for the neighbours, my hour it draws near,
And I’ve that to tell that it’s fit a’ should hear.

“I’ve wranged her,” he said, “but I kent it ower late,—
I’ve wranged her, and sorrow is speeding my date;
But a’s for the best, since my death will soon free
A faithfu’ young heart that was ill matched wi’ me.

“ I lo’ed and I courted her mony a day,
The auld folks were for me, but still she said nay ;
I kentna o’ Jamie, nor yet o’ her vow ;—
In mercy forgi’e me—’twas I stole the cow !

“ I caredna for crummie, I thought but o’ thee—
I thought it was crummie stood ’twixt you and me ;
While she fed your parents, oh ! did you no say
You never would marry wi’ Auld Robin Gray ?

“ But sickness at hame, and want at the door—
You gied me your hand, while your heart it was sore ;
I saw it was sore,—why took I your hand ?
Oh ! that was a deed to my shame o’er the land !

“ How truth, soon or late, comes to open daylight !
For Jamie cam’ back, and your cheek it grew white,—
White, white grew your cheek, but aye true unto me—
Oh ! Jeanie, I’m thankfu’—I’m thankfu’ to dee !

“ Is Jamie come here yet ? ” and Jamie he saw—
“ I’ve injured you sair, lad, so leave you my a’ ;
Be kind to my Jeanie, and soon may it be !
Waste nae time, my dauties, in mourning for me.”

They kissed his cauld hands, and a smile o’er his face
Seemed hopefu’ of being accepted by grace ;
“ Oh ! doubtna,” said Jamie, “ forgi’en he will be—
Wha wadna be tempted, my love, to win thee ? ”

The first days were dowie, while time slipt awa’,
But saddest and sairest to Jeanie o’ a’
Was thinkin’ she couldna be honest and right,
Wi’ tears in her e’e, while her heart was sae light.

But nae guile had she, and her sorrow away,
The wife o’ her Jamie, the tear couldna stay ;
A bonnie wee bairn—the auld folks by the fire—
Oh, now she has a’ that her heart can desire.

Half a century passed away, yet the years only served to
deepen the mystery which had so long hung over its authorship.

During that time *littérateurs* had never ceased to ask of one another the engrossing question—"Who wrote the ballad?" But so carefully guarded was the secret that, beyond a few very intimate friends, none knew for certain the name of the unknown writer, albeit twenty guineas were offered to whoever should clear away the darkness.

It was not, however, until the year 1823, when Lady Anne wrote to the author of "Waverley," transmitting to him, fairly and frankly, the Origin, Birth, Life, Death, and Confession, Will and Testament of "Auld Robin Gray," that the clouds were dispelled. Amongst other things the authoress in her memorable letter says:—

"Robin Gray, so called from its being the name of the old herdsman at Balcarres, was *born* soon after the close of the year 1771. My sister, Margaret, had married and accompanied her husband to London; I was melancholy, and endeavoured to amuse myself by attempting a few poetical trifles. There was an ancient Scotch melody, of which I was passionately fond; Sophy Johnstone, who lived before your day, used to sing it to us at Balcarres. She did not object to its having improper words; but I did. I longed to sing old Sophy's air to different words, and give to its plaintive tones some little history of virtuous distress in humble life such as might suit it. While attempting to effect this in my closet, I called to my little sister, now Lady Hardwicke, who was the only person near me, 'I have been writing a ballad, my dear; I am oppressing my heroine with many misfortunes; I have already sent her Jamie to sea, and broken her father's arm, and made her mother fall sick, and given her Auld Robin Gray for her lover; but I wish to load her with a fifth sorrow within the four lines, poor thing! Help me to one!' 'Steal the cow, sister Anne,' said the little Elizabeth. The cow was immediately *lifted* by me ('stown awa', the ballad tells us, by Jeanie's aged sweetheart), and the song completed. At our fireside and amongst our neighbours 'Auld Robin Gray' was always called for. I was pleased in

secret with the appreciation it met with ; but such was my dread of being suspected of writing anything, perceiving the shyness it created in those who could write nothing, that I carefully kept my own secret. . . . It proved its popularity from the highest to the lowest, and gave me pleasure, while I hugged myself in obscurity."

Lady Anne wrote other poems which were to have been published in a volume, entitled "Lays of the Lindsays," but a peculiar indecision of character prevailed—her "Vagrant Scraps" of poesy became vagrants indeed, and the world is to-day the poorer for their want.

Though not possessing the rich golden hair and the "heavenly blue" eyes so characteristic of the Norman race from which she sprung, Lady Lindsay was still a graceful and animated woman,—the charming Lady Anne of her friends and kinsfolk, brimful of good humour and wit, and the Sister Anne of the Prince Regent himself. Born in November 1750, the noontide of her life had passed ere she gave her heart and hand to Sir Andrew Barnard, son of the Bishop of Limerick, a man not blest with a superabundance of this world's gear, but a handsome and highly-gifted gentleman for all that. The union seems to have been most satisfactory, for in her interesting letters she writes that they "were truly grateful for all the blessings conferred on them, but more so for their happiness in each other."

In 1797, while the French Revolution was raging, Lady Barnard accompanied her husband to the Cape of Good Hope, whither he journeyed as Colonial Secretary to Governor Macartney. Then were written those simple yet vivacious accounts of cross-country expeditions in the colony, where Lady Anne became once more a child of nature, and lived her old Balcarres days over again. And when Death came to claim her in 1825, after a widowhood of eighteen years spent in the friendship of Burke, Sheridan, Dundas, and Wyndham, and a host of men and women wise and good, he found a woman "serene, placid, and contented" in her old age.

As a prose writer, Lady Barnard is graphic and natural ; as a biographer, candid and humorous, yet much given up to a family biographer's faults ; while her fame rests on "Auld Robin Gray." It is her monument—a monument so grand and noble, that Scott, when he enumerates the Hon. Mrs Murray's *Heart's Light*, Miss Elliot's *I have heard a lilting*, Mrs Cockburn's *Fortune Beguiling*, and Lady Wardlaw's glorious old ballad of *Hardyknute*, says—"Place *Auld Robin* at the head of this list, and I question if we masculine wretches can claim five or six songs equal in pathos and elegance out of the long array of Scottish minstrelsy."

Happy she lived, for happy is the mind
That still through kindest medium views mankind.

