

## FAIR HELEN OF KIRKCONNELL.

In the burial ground of Kirkconnell, near the Border, is the grave of Helen Irving, recognised by tradition as *Fair Helen of Kirkconnell*, and who is supposed to have lived in the sixteenth century. It is also the grave of her lover, Adam Fleming—a name that once predominated in the district. Helen, according to the narration of Pennant, 'was beloved by two gentlemen at the same time. The one vowed to sacrifice the successful rival to his resentment, and watched an opportunity while the happy pair were sitting on the banks of the Kirtle, that washes these grounds. Helen perceived the desperate lover on the opposite side, and fondly thinking to save her favourite, interposed ; and,



receiving the wound intended for her beloved, fell and expired in his arms. He instantly revenged her death ; then fled into Spain, and served for some time against the Infidels : on his return, he visited the grave of his unfortunate mistress, stretched himself on it, and expiring on the spot, was interred by her side. A cross and a sword are engraven on the tombstone, with "HIC JACET ADAMUS FLEMING ;" the only memorial of this unhappy gentleman, except an ancient ballad

of no great merit, which records the tragical event.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, 1772, vol. ii. 101. According to a note in Graham's *Songs of Scotland* (iii. 172), the tombstone presents only the engraving of a sword, along with some letters now unintelligible, while the remains of an upright cross stand by. The above transcript from the stone would seem to shew that Pennant's description was correct.



I wish I were where Hel-en lies, For night and  
 day on me she cries, I wish I were where Hel-en  
 lies, On fair Kirk-con-nell lee.

I wish I were where Helen lies,  
 For night and day on me she cries,  
 I wish I were where Helen lies,  
 On fair Kirkconnell lee.

Curst be the hand that shot the shot,  
 Likewise the gun that ga'e the crack,  
 Into my arms Burd Helen lap,  
 And died for love of me.

Oh, think na ye my heart was sair,  
 To see her lie and speak nae mair!  
 There did she swoon wi' mickle care,  
 On fair Kirkconnell lee.

I loutit down, my sword did draw,  
 I cuttit him in pieces sma',  
 I cuttit him in pieces sma',  
 On fair Kirkconnell lee.

Oh, Helen fair, without compare,  
 I'll mak a garland o' thy hair,  
 And wear the same for evermair,  
 Until the day I dee.

I wish my grave were growing green,  
 A winding-sheet put ower my een,  
 And I in Helen's arms lying,  
     On fair Kirkconnell lee.

Oh Helen chaste, thou were modest ;  
 Were I with thee I wad be blest,  
 Where thou lies low and takes thy rest,  
     On fair Kirkconnell lee.

I wish I were where Helen lies,  
 For night and day on me she cries ;  
 I wish I were where Helen lies,  
     On fair Kirkconnell lee.

The above is chiefly from the traditionary copy preserved by Mr Charles K. Sharpe, as he had been accustomed to hear it sung in Annandale in his childhood.<sup>1</sup> It is nearly the same with one presented in the Statistical Account of the parish, 1794. A version in the *Border Minstrelsy* gives the second verse thus :

Curst be the heart that thought the thought,  
 And curst the hand that fired the shot,  
 When in my arms Burd Helen dropt,  
     And died to succour me—

being manifestly an editorial improvement.

The copy in the Statistical Account is prefaced with a number of verses, apparently of genuine antiquity, but referring to an earlier period of the story, and in an inferior strain of poetry. They are repeated in the *Border Minstrelsy* as a *first part* of the ballad :

My sweetest sweet, and fairest fair,  
 Of birth and worth beyond compare,  
 Thou art the causer of my care,  
     Since first I loved thee.

<sup>1</sup> *Additions to Stenhouse : Johnson's Museum*, ii. 210\*.

Yet God hath given to me a mind,  
The which to thee shall prove as kind  
As any one that thou shalt find  
Of high or low degree.

Yet, nevertheless, I am content,  
And ne'er a whit my love repent,  
But think my time it was weel spent,  
Though I disdained be.

The shall'est water makes maist din,  
The deepest pool the deadest lin,  
The richest man least truth within,  
Though he disdained be.

O Helen fair, without compare,  
I'll wear a garland of thy hair,  
Shall cover me for evermair,  
Until the day I die.

O Helen sweet and maist complete,  
My captive spirit's at thy feet,  
Thinks thou still fit thus for to treat  
Thy prisoner with cruelty?

O Helen brave ! this still I crave,  
On thy poor slave some pity have,  
And do him save, that's near his grave,  
And dies for love of thee !<sup>1</sup>

Odd as the idea is, one could almost suppose that these verses were intended to express the feelings of the unsuccessful lover while pressing his suit.

<sup>1</sup> [Sinclair's] *Stat. Acc. Scot.*, xiii. 275.