

CHAPTER VIII.

CUNNINGHAM DISCLOSES THE SECRET OF THE "REMAINS" TO M'GHIE
—EXTRACTS FROM THE APPENDIX: FAMILY WORSHIP—THE
WITCHES—THE FAIRIES.

THOUGH Cunningham did not care to disclose the secret that the ballads were imitations, such as the literary critics surmised, yet he acknowledged the fact to a certain extent in replying to his friend George, who had hinted his own opinion in the same direction:—

“ You edify me by your opinion on the ‘ Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song.’ The critics are much of the same mind as yourself. Your conjecture is not very far wrong as to my share of the book. Was it the duty of a son to show the nakedness of his own land? No, my dear friend. I went before and made the path straight. I planted here and there a flower—dropped here and there a honeycomb—plucked away the bitter gourd—cast some jewels in the by-paths and in the fields, so that the traveller might find them, and wonder at the richness of the land that produced them! Nor did I drop them in vain. Pardon the confession, and keep it a secret.”

A third part of the volume contains an appendix in prose, in which are given very graphic and interesting

descriptions of Scottish customs, amusements, superstitions, and beliefs, some of which have entirely died away, their departure not to be regretted; but one custom especially, which should ever remain, we are sorry to fear is not so religiously observed now throughout the country as in olden times, that of Family Worship. From this last we shall quote an extract, as being truly descriptive of what was a common practice in the peasant's dwelling, and as entirely in accord with Burns' immortal poem, "The Cottar's Saturday Night." It is named "Taking the Beuk":—

"On entering a neat thatched cottage, when past the partition or hallan, a wide, projecting chimney-piece, garnished with smoked meat, met your eye. The fire, a good space removed from the end wall, was placed against a large whinstone, called the cat-hud. Behind this was a bench stretching along the gable, which, on trysting nights, was occupied by the children—the best seat being courteously proffered to strangers. The Cottar sire was placed on the left of the fire, removed from the bustle of housewifery. A settee of oak, antiquely carved, and strewn with favourite texts of Scripture, was the good man's seat, where he rested after the day's fatigue, nursing and instructing his children. His library shelf above him displayed his folio Bible, covered with rough calf skin, wherein were registered his children's names and hour of birth; some histories of the old reforming worthies (divines who waded through the blood and peril of persecution), the sacred books of his fathers, lay, carefully adjusted, and pretty much used; and the acts and deeds of Scotland's saviour, Wallace, and the immortal Bruce, were deemed worthy of holding a place among the heroic

divines who had won the heavenly crown of martyrdom. Above these were hung a broadsword and targe, the remains of ancient warfare, which, happily, the hand of peace had long forgot to wield. From the same pin depended the kirk-cut of corn (the name sometimes given to the last handful of grain cut down on the harvest field) braided and adorned with ribbons. Beside him was his fowling-piece, which, before the enactment of Game Laws, supplied his family with venison and fowls in their season. At the end of the lang settle was the window, which displayed a few panes of glass, and two oaken boards that opened like shutters for the admission of air. On the guidwife's side appeared her articles of economy and thrift. A dresser replenished with pewter plates, with a large meal chest of carved oak, extended along the side-wall. Bunches of yarn hung from a loft or flooring made of small wood or rye spread across the joisting, and covered with moor turf. The walls, white with lime, were garnished with dairy utensils (every cottar almost having one or two kye). At each side of the middle entry was a bed, sometimes of very curious and ingenious workmanship, being posted with oak, and lined with barley straw, finely cleaned, and inwoven with thread; these were remarkably warm, and much valued.

“Family worship was performed every evening, but on the Sabbath morning it was attended with peculiar solemnity. At that season all the family, and frequently some of the neighbours, presented themselves before the aged village apostle. He seated himself on a lang-settle, laying aside his bonnet and plaid. His eldest child came submissively forward, and, unclasping the Bible, placed it across his father's knees. After a few minutes of religious silence, he meekly lifts his eyes over his family to mark if they are all around him, and decorous. Opening the Bible, he says—in a tone of

simple and holy meekness—‘ Let us reverently worship our God by singing the (eighth) Psalm.’ He reads it aloud, then gives or recites line after line, leading the tune himself. The ‘ Martyrs ’ is a chosen air, so called in honour of those men who displayed a zeal worthy of the name, and perished in the persecution. All the family join in this exquisitely mournful tune till the sacred song is finished. A selected portion of Scripture is then read, from the sublime soarings of Isaiah, or the solemn morality of Job. As the divine precepts of his Saviour are the sacred rules by which the good man shapes the conduct of his children, Isaiah’s fifty-third chapter, where the coming of the Redeemer is foretold, is the soul-lifting favourite of rustic devotion. It is read with an exalted inspiration of voice accordant with the subject. The family rise as he clasps the book, fall down on their knees, bowing their heads to the ground. The good man, kneeling over his Bible, pours his prayer to Heaven in a strain of feeling and fervent eloquence. His severity of church discipline relaxes in the warmth of his heart.—‘ May our swords become plough-shares, and our spears reaping-hooks: may all find grace before Thee!’ There is not, perhaps, a more impressive scene than a Scottish Sabbath morn presents, when the wind is low, the summer sun newly risen, and all the flocks at browse by the waters and by the woods. How glorious then to listen to the holy murmur of retired prayer, and the distant chaunt of the cottarman’s psalm spreading from hamlet and village!”

The belief in witchcraft was as strong in Nithsdale as it was in Ayrshire, or, indeed, anywhere else; and although there are no scenes to record equal to that

which Tam o' Shanter saw in Alloway Kirk, yet there are traditions of the ongoings of witches and warlocks ludicrous in the extreme. There were trystes or meetings held of these parties in several quarters of the district, when they performed their cantrips in the usual fashion:—

“The noted tryste of the Nithsdale and Galloway warlocks and witches was held on a rising knowe four miles distant from Dumfries, called *Locharbrigg Hill*. There are yet some fragments of the witches' “Gathering Hymn” too characteristically curious to be omitted:—

‘When the gray howlet has three times hoo'd,
 When the grimy cat has three times mewed,
 When the tod has yowled three times i' the wode,
 At the red moon cowering ahin the clud;
 When the stars hae cruppen deep i' the drift,
 Lest cantrips had pyked them out o' the lift,
 Up horsies a', but mair adowe,
 Ryde, ryde, for Locharbrigg Knowe!’

“Roused by this infernal summons, the earth and the air groaned with the unusual load. It was a grand though a daring attempt for man, or aught of mortal frame, to view this diabolical hurry. The wisest part barred their doors, and left the world to its own misrule. Those aged matrons, deep read in incantation, says tradition, ‘could sit i' the coat tails o' the moon,’ or harness the wind to their ragweed chariot—could say to the west star, ‘byde thou me!’ or to the moon, ‘hynte me in thy arm, for I am weary!’ Those carlins of garrulous old age, who had suffered martyrdom on the brow for the cause, rode on chosen broom-sticks, shod with murdered men's bones. These moved spontaneously to

the will of the possessor. But the more gay and genteel kimmers loved a softer seat than the bark of a broomstick. A bridle shredded from the skin of an unbaptized infant, with bits forged in Satan's armoury, possessed irresistible power when shaken above any living thing.

"Two young lads of Nithsdale once served a widow dame, who possessed a bridle with these dangerous qualifications. One of them, a plump, merry young fellow, suddenly lost all his gaiety, and became lean, as if '*ridden post by a witch.*' On his neighbour lad's inquiry about the cause, he only said, 'Lie at the bed stock an' ye'll be as lean as me.' It was on a Hallowmas e'en, and though he felt unusual drowsiness he kept himself awake. At midnight his mistress, cautiously approaching his bedside, shook the charmed bridle over his face, saying, 'Up Horsie,' when, to his utter astonishment, he arose in the form of a gray horse! The cantrip bit was put in his teeth, and, mounted by the carlin, he went off like the wind. Feeling the prick of infernal spur, he took such leaps and bounds that he reached Locherbrigg Knowe in a few moments. He was fastened by the bridle to a tree, with many more of his acquaintance, whom he recognized through their brutal disguise. He looked petrified with affright when the father of cantrips drew a circle around the *knowe*, within which no baptized brow could enter.

"All being assembled, hands were joined, and a ring of warlocks and witches danced in the enchanted bound with many lewd and uncouth gestures. In the centre he beheld a thick smoke, and presently arose the piercing yells and screams of hellish baptism which the new converts were enduring. Startled and terrified to furious exertion, he plunged, pulled, and reared; and, praying ardently to Heaven, he shook off the bridle of power; and, starting up in his own shape, he seized the instrument of his transfor-

mation. It was now gray daylight when the conclave dispersed, for their ogres could not endure the rebuke of the sun. He watched his mistress, who, all haste and confusion, was hurrying to her steed. Shaking the bridle over her brow, she started up a 'gude gray mare,' and was hastened home with such push of spur that all competitors were left far behind! The sun was nigh risen as he hurried into the stable. Pulling off the bridle, his cantrip-casting mistress appeared with hands and feet lacerated with travel, and her sides pricked to the bone. On her rider's promising never to divulge his night's adventure, she allowed him to keep the bridle as a pledge of safety. . . .

"Caerlaverock and New Abbey are still celebrated as the native parishes of two midnight caterers in the festivals of glamour. They were rivals in fame, in power, and dread. On the night of every full moon they met to devise employment for the coming month. Their confederacy and their trysting haunts had been discovered, and were revealed by chosen and holy men who ministered to their Creator and fulfilled His dictates.

"Debarred from holding secret conference on the solid sward, they fixed their trystes on the unstable waters which separate their parishes. This tale, so full of character, was taken down by the Editor from the word-of-mouth evidence of the man who saw all that passed; and it must be told in his own simple, expressive language.

"'I gaed out ae fine simmer night to haud my halve at the Pow fit. It was twal' o'clock, an' a' was lowne; the moon had just gotten up—ye mought a gathered preens! I heard something firsle like silk, I glowered roun', an', 'lake! what saw I but a bonnie boat wi' a nob o' gowd, an' sails like new-coined siller. It was only but a wee bittie frae me—I mought amaist touch't it. 'Gude speed ye gif ye gang for

gude,' quo' I, for I dreed our auld carlin was casting some o' her pranks. Another cunning boat cam' aff frae Caerla'rick to meet it. Thae twa bade a stricken hour thegither, sidie for sidie. 'Haith,' quo' I, 'the deil's grit wi' some!' sae I crap down amang some lang coves till Luckie cam' back. The boat played bowte again the bank, an' out louns kimmer, wi' a pyked naig's head i' her han'. 'Lord be about us!' quo' I, 'for she cam' straught for me. She howked up a green turf, covered her bane, an' gaed her wa's. Whan I thought her hame, up I gat, and pou'd up the bane and haed it. I was fley'd to gae back for twa or three nights lest the deil's minnie should wyte me for her uncannie boat, an' lair me 'mang the sludge, or may be do waur. I gaed back, howsoever, an' on that night o' the moon wha comes to me but kimmer! 'Rabin,' quo' she, 'fand ye an auld bane amang the coves?' 'Deed, no, it may be gowd for me!' quo' I. 'Weel, weel,' quo' she, 'I'll byde and help ye hame wi' your fish.' God's be my help, nought grippit I but tades an' paddocks! 'Satan, thy neive's here,' quo' I. 'Ken ye,' quo' I, 'o' yon new cheese our wyfe took but frae the chessel yestreen? I'm gaun to send't t'ye i' the morning; ye're a gude neebor to me. An', hear'st thou me! there's a bit auld bane whomeled aneath thae coves; I kent-nae it was thine.' Kimmer drew't out. 'Aye, aye, it's my auld bane; weel speed ye.' I' the very first pou I gat sic a louthe o' fish that I carried till my back cracked again.' . . .

"The way of restoring milk to the udder of a cow bewitched is curious, and may benefit posterity. A young virgin milked whatever milk the cow had left, which was of bloody mixture and poisonous quality. This was poured warm from the cow into a brass pan, and (every inlet to the house being closed) was placed over a gentle fire until it

began to heat. Pins were dropped in, and closely stirred with a wand of rowan tree. When boiling, rusty nails were thrown in, and more fuel added. The witch instantly felt, by sympathetic power, the boiling medicine rankling through her bosom, and an awful knocking announced her arrival at the window. The sly 'Gudewife' instantly compounded with the mother of cantrips for '*her hale loan of kye,*' the pan was cooled, and the cows' udders swelled with genuine milk."

We give an extract from a long and interesting account of Fairy superstition as it existed in Nithsdale; and, indeed, the description holds true with regard to every district in the South of Scotland. We can speak from personal knowledge as to the famous Ayrshire haunt of that weird people on the banks of the Doon, the Cassills Downans, immortalized by Burns; but though in our young enthusiasm we searched the place at all hours of the night, in the hope of seeing some of the elfin band, for long all was silence and desertion, till at last we did, in our perseverance, meet with the Fairy Queen who afterwards became our wife. No wonder, then, we have such an attachment to the fairy superstition:—

"There are few old people who have not a powerful belief in the influence and dominion of fairies; few who do not believe they have heard them on their midnight excursions, or talked with them amongst their woods and their knowes, in the familiarity of friendship. So general was this superstition that priestly caution deemed it necessary to interpose its religious authority to forbid man's intercourse with these '*light infantry of Satan!*'

“They were small of stature, exquisitely shaped and proportioned, of a fair complexion, with long fleeces of yellow hair flowing over their shoulders, and tucked above their brows with combs of gold. A mantle of green cloth, inlaid with wild flowers, reached to their middle; green pantaloons, buttoned with bobs of silk, and sandals of silver, formed their under dress. On their shoulders hung quivers of adder slough, stored with pernicious arrows; and bows fashioned from the rib of a man buried where ‘*three Lairds’ lands meet,*’ tipped with gold, ready bent for warfare, were slung by their sides. Thus accoutred, they mounted on steeds, whose hoofs would not print the new ploughed land, nor dash the dew from the cup of a harebell. They visited the flocks, the folds, the fields of coming grain, and the habitations of man; and woe to the mortal whose frailty threw him in their power! A flight of arrows, tipped with deadly plagues, was poured into his folds, and nauseous weeds grew up in his pastures; his coming harvest was blighted with pernicious breath, and whatever he had no longer prospered. These fatal shafts were formed of the bog reed, pointed with white field flint, and dipped in the dew of hemlock. They were shot into cattle with such magical dexterity that the smallest aperture could not be discovered but by those deeply skilled in fairy warfare, and in the cure of elf-shooting. Cordials and potent charms are applied, the burning arrow is extracted, and instant recovery ensues.

“The fairies seem to have been much attached to particular places. A green hill, an opening in a wood, a burn just freeing itself from the uplands, were kept sacred for revelry and festival. The Wardlaw, an ever green hill in Dalswinton barony, was, in olden days, a noted fairy tryste. But the fairy ring being converted into a pulpit, in the times of persecution, proscribed the revelry of unchristened feet.

Lamentations of no earthly voices were heard for years around this beloved hill. In their festivals they had the choicest earthly cheer; nor do they seem to have repelled the intrusion of man, but invited him to partake of their enjoyments.

“A young man of Nithsdale, being on a love intrigue, was enchanted with wild and delightful music, and the sound of mingled voices, more charming than aught that mortal breath could utter. With a romantic daring peculiar to a Scottish lover, he followed the sound and discovered the fairy banquet. A green table, with feet of gold, was placed across a small rivulet, and richly furnished with pure bread and wines of sweetest flavour. Their minstrelsy was raised from small reeds and stalks of corn. He was invited to partake in the dance, and presented with a cup of wine. He was allowed to depart, and was ever after endowed with the second sight. He boasted of having seen and conversed with several of his earthly acquaintances whom the fairies had taken and admitted as brothers!

“Mankind, measuring the minds of others by their own enjoyments, have marked out set times of festivity to the fairies. At the first approach of summer is held the ‘Fairy Raid;’ and their merry minstrelsy, with the tinkling of their horses’ housings, and the hubbub of voices, have kept the peasantry in the Scottish villages awake on the first night of summer. They placed branches of rowan tree over their doors, and gazed on the fairy procession safely from below the charm-proof twig. This march was described to the Editor with the artless simplicity of sure belief by an old woman of Nithsdale:—‘I’ the night afore Roodsmas, I had trysted wi’ a neighbour lass, a Scots mile frae hame, to talk anent buying brows i’ the fair. We hadna suttan lang aneath the haw-buss till we heard the loud laugh o’ fowk

riding, wi' the jingling o' bridles, and the clanking o' hoofs. We banged up, thinking they would ryde owre us ; we kent nae but it was drunken fowk riding to the fair i' the fore nicht. We glowred roun' and roun', an' sune saw it was the *Fairie Fowks' Raid*. We cowered down till they passed by. A leam o' light was dancing owre them, mair bonnie than moonshine : they were a' wee, wee fowk, wi' green scarfs on, but ane that rade foremost, an' that ane was a gude deal langer than the lave, wi' bonnie lang hair bun' about wi' a strap, whilk glented lyke stars. They rade on braw wee whyte naigs, wi' unco lang swooping tails, an' manes hung wi' whistles that the win' played on. This, an' their tongues whan they sang, was like the soun' of a far awa Psalm. Marion an' me was in a brade lea fiel' whare they cam' by us. A high hedge o' haw trees keepit them frae gaun through Johnnie Corrie's corn, but they lap a' owre't like sparrows, an' gallop't into a green knowe beyont it. We gade i' the morning to look at the tredded corn, but the fient a hoof mark was there nor a blade broken.'

“In the solitary instances of their intercourse with mankind there is a benevolence of character, or a cruelty of disposition, which brings them down to be measured by a mortal standard. In all these presiding spirits there is a vein of earthly grossness which marks them beings created by human invention.

“It is reckoned by the Scottish peasantry ‘*Unco sonsie*’ to live in familiar and social terms with them. They will borrow or lend, and it is counted *uncanny* to refuse a fairy request. A woman of Auchencreath, in Nithsdale, was one day sifting meal warm from the mill : a little cleanly-arrayed beautiful woman came to her, holding out a basin of antique workmanship, requesting her courteously to fill it with her new meal. Her demand was cheerfully complied

with. In a week the comely little dame returned with the borrowed meal. She breathed over it, setting it down basin and all, saying aloud, '*Be never toom.*' The gudewife lived to a goodly age, without ever seeing the bottom of her blessed basin. When an injury was unwittingly done them they forgave it, and asked for amends like other creatures.

"A woman who lived in the ancient burgh of Lochmaben was returning late one evening to her home from a gossiping. A little, lovely boy, dressed in green, came to her, saying—'*Coupe yere dish-water farther frae yere doorstep, it pits out our fire!*' This request was complied with, and plenty abode in the good woman's house all her days.

"There are chosen fields of fairy revelry, which it is reckoned unsonsie to plough or to reap. Old thorn trees in the middle of a field are deemed the rallying trystes of fairies, and are preserved with scrupulous care. Two lads were opening with the plough one of these fields, and one of them had described a circle around the fairy thorn, which was not to be ploughed. They were surprised when, on ending the furrow, a green table was placed there, heaped with the choicest cheese, bread, and wine. He who marked out the thorn sat down without hesitation, eating and drinking heartily, saying '*fair fa' the hands whilk gie.*' His fellow-servant lashed his steeds, refusing to partake. The courteous ploughman '*thrave,*' said my informer, '*like a breckan,* and was a proverb for wisdom, and an oracle of local rural knowledge ever after!

"Their love of mortal commerce prompted them to have their children suckled at earthly breasts. The favoured nurse was chosen from healthful, ruddy complexioned beauty, one every way approved of by mortal eyes. A fine young woman of Nithsdale, when first made a mother, was sitting singing and rocking her child, when a pretty lady came into her

cottage, covered with a fairy mantle. She carried a beautiful child in her arms, swaddled in green silk. '*Gie my bonnie thing a suck,*' said the fairy. The young woman, conscious to whom the child belonged, took it kindly in her arms, and laid it to her breast. The lady instantly disappeared, saying, '*Nurse kin' an' ne'er want!*' The young mother nurtured the two babes, and was astonished whenever she awoke at finding the richest suits of apparel for both children, with meat of most delicious flavour. This food tasted, says tradition, like loaf mixed with wine and honey. It possessed more miraculous properties than the wilderness manna, preserving its relish even over the seventh day.

"On the approach of summer the fairy lady came to see her child. It bounded with joy when it beheld her. She was much delighted with its freshness and activity. Taking it in her arms, she bade the nurse follow. Passing through some seraggy woods, skirting the side of a beautiful green hill, they walked mid-way up. On its sunward slope a door opened, disclosing a beauteous porch, which they entered, and the turf closed behind them. The fairy dropped three drops of a precious dew on the nurse's left eyelid, and they entered a land of most pleasant and abundant promise. It was watered with fine looping rivulets, and yellow with corn; the fairest trees enclosed its fields, laden with fruit which dropped honey. The nurse was rewarded with finest webs of cloth, and food of ever-enduring substance. Boxes of salves for restoring mortal health, and curing mortal wounds and infirmities, were bestowed on her, with a promise of never needing. The fairy dropt a green dew over her right eye, and bade her look. She beheld many of her lost friends and acquaintances doing menial drudgery—reaping the corn and gathering the fruits. '*This,*' said she, '*is the punish-*

ment of evil deeds!’ The fairy passed her hand over her eye, and restored its mortal faculties. She was conducted to the porch, but had the address to secure the heavenly salve. She lived and enjoyed the gift of discerning the earth-visiting spirits till she was the mother of many children; but happening to meet the fairy lady who gave her the child, she attempted to shake hands with her. ‘What ee d’yc see me wi?’ whispered she. ‘Wi’ them baith,’ said the dame. She breathed on her eyes, and even the power of the box failed to restore their gifts again! . . .

“For the stealing of handsome and lovely children they are far famed, and held in great awe. But their pernicious breath has such power of transformation that it is equally dreaded. The way to cure a breath-blasted child is worthy of notice. When the mother’s vigilance hinders the fairies from carrying her child away, or changing it, the touch of fairy hands, and their unearthly breath, make it wither away in every limb and lineament, like a blighted ear of corn, saving the countenance, which unchangeably retains the sacred stamp of divinity. The child is undressed, and laid out in unbleached linen, new from the loom. Water is brought from a *blessed well* in the utmost silence, before sunrise, in a pitcher never before wet, in which the child is washed, and its cloths dipped by the fingers of a virgin. Its limbs, on the third morning’s experiment, plump up, and all its former vigour returns.

“But matron knowledge has frequently triumphed over these subtle thieves, by daring experiments and desperate charms. A beautiful child of Caerlaverock, in Nithsdale, on the second day of its birth, and before its baptism, was changed, none knew how, for an antiquated elf of hideous aspect. It kept the family awake with its nightly yells; biting the mother’s breasts, and would neither be cradled

nor nursed. The mother, obliged to be from home, left it in charge of the servant girl. The poor lass was sitting bemoaning herself—‘Wer’t nae for thy girning face I would knock the big, winnow the corn, and grun’ the meal!’ ‘Lowse the cradle-band,’ quoth the elf, ‘and tent the neighbours, an’ I’ll work yere wark.’ Up started the elf, the wind arose, the corn was chaffed, the outlyers were foddered, the hand-mill moved around as by instinct, and the *knocking mell* did its work with amazing rapidity. The lass and her elfin servant rested and diverted themselves till, on the mistress’ approach, it was restored to the cradle, and began to yell anew. The girl took the first opportunity of slyly telling her mistress the adventure. ‘*What’ll we do wi’ the wee diel?*’ said she. ‘I’ll work it a pirn,’ replied the lass. At the middle of the night the chimney top was covered up, and every inlet barred and closed. The embers were blown up until glowing hot, and the maid, undressing the elf, tossed it on the fire. It uttered the wildest and most piercing yells, and, in a moment, the fairies were heard moaning at every wonted avenue, and rattling at the window boards, at the chimney head, and at the door. ‘In the name o’ God bring back the bairn,’ cried the lass. The window flew up, the earthly child was laid unharmed on the mother’s lap, while its grizzly substitute flew up the chimney with a loud laugh.”

A long account of the Brownies and their peculiar characteristics is also given, especially of one attached to the Maxwell family of Dalswinton; but, though highly interesting, we must omit it, after what has been already extracted at such length. There is also inserted Lady Nithsdale’s wonderful narrative of her

husband's escape from the Tower of London, on the 23rd of February, 1715, disguised in female apparel, a story which now all the world knows. We do not wonder that the volume created a sensation when it appeared; but it needed little sagacity or penetration on the part of the Ettrick Shepherd to "lay the saddle on the right horse," after his knowledge of Cunningham's lyric powers and legendary lore, and the special references to incidents, real or imaginary, in Kirkmahoe. One thing is clear, Mr. Cromek could not have written the "Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song."