

CHAPTER XI.

CONTRIBUTES TO "BLACKWOOD"—WINNING THE HARVEST KIRN—NOTICE OF THE CAMERONIANS—CAMERONIAN BALLADS: "THE DOOM OF NITHSDALE," "ON MARK WILSON, SLAIN IN IRON-GRAY," "THE VOICE LIFTED UP AGAINST CHAPELS AND CHURCHES," "THE CAMERONIAN BANNER."

BESIDES the *London Magazine*, and other periodicals to which he was a regular contributor, we find him engaged also on the literary pabulum of *Blackwood*, after it had become fairly afloat. To this Magazine he supplied monthly, in 1819-21, a series of tales under the title of "Recollections of Mark Macrabin, the Cameronian," which for humour, and glowing description of Scottish manners, sectarian feeling, and superstitions, are inimitable. The scenes of the tales are laid in Nithsdale, but the declared narrator of them was too "Kenspeckle," which somewhat roused the ire of himself and his friends of the Cameronian connection, for the freedom taken with his name and his doings. He kept a grocery store, with a sign above his door entrance, on which was painted in flaming colours an open Bible, and underneath, in prominent letters, "Mark Macrabin, Cameronian, Dealer in Scottish Hose, and Cheap Tracts, Religious and Political." This was a sufficiently catching signboard for the "guid and the godly" of Kirkmahoe, and Mark drew largely by the clap-trap he adopted.

Although Cunningham disavowed any desire on his part to hold the Cameronians up to ridicule, yet their religious propensities and doings were enlarged upon in a way which made them suspicious of being exposed as a laughing-stock to the community at large. Old James M'Ghie, George's father, belonged to the covenanting body, not by original descent, however, but by a "tender conscience." He had been precentor in the Parish Church of Kirkmahoe before the induction of the Rev. Dr. Wightman to the charge, but on the Rev. Doctor one day appearing in the pulpit arrayed in a black gown, which had been presented to him by a distinguished lady in the parish, James took fright at the "rag of Popery," and went over to the Cameronians, who were then a pretty strong body at Quarrelwood. Mark Mac-rabin, Cameronian, general dealer in groceries, hose, and cheap religious and political tracts, is made to narrate a series of tales, the principal incidents of which had come under his own experience. Among them are an account of the Buchanites, who, fleeing from Irvine, took up their residence at Cample, in the parish of Closeburn; Adventure with the Gipsies; the Witch of Ae; the Last of the Morisons; Janet Morison's Lyke-Wake; and the Harvest Kirn of Lillycross. These are all descriptive of Scottish life in its most natural and characteristic forms.

What, in our opinion, greatly enhances the value of Cunningham's tales is their descriptiveness, true to the life, of scenes and customs which have now gone by, but which are deserving of remembrance. In the series of tales contributed to *Blackwood*, there are many such;

but there is one especially to which we would refer, which was great in its time, but has now of necessity passed entirely away. This was the closing day of the cutting of the harvest, called the Har'st Kirn, when the grain was wholly cut by the hook, before the invasion of scythes and reaping machines. On the harvest-field, as on the battle-field, there were often scenes of deftness displayed, though not with the same sanguinary issue, save in a cut finger or so; but the blood occasionally got up from a jealousy of superior prowess, and then a "Kemp" was the result: this was who should cut their rig of corn soonest by dexterity and force of arm. When this took place, the greatest effort was made to "cut the gumpin'" on the rival; to advance so far ahead of him as to be able to cut across his rig, which was considered the greatest insult to the lagging fellow, intimating his inferior skill and want of ability in the contention. When the cutting of the harvest was about to be finished, the greatest struggle arose, so as not to be the last at the landing, which was called "couping the kirn" on the luckless reaper, which was regarded a disgrace, and dreadful were the efforts put forth by all parties, half-divested of their clothing, and the perspiration streaming, to be the first out, or at all events not the last. As a man and a woman were employed on each rig, it was often painful to witness the fair one in distress, with her neck and bosom bare, thrusting in the sickle with a will greater than her strength, and then to hear the cry of her brawny partner, "Mak' straps, mak' straps, and I'll do the cutting," and away he went like a whirlwind, a sheaf in every "louchter." Cunning-

ham gives the following graphic description of such a scene in the vale of Ae, the correctness of which we guarantee from personal experience on like occasions forty years ago:—

“My fair Cameronian looked over the field while she whet her sickle, and whispered to me, in a tone approaching to intercession, ‘Dinna forget that I have bribed thee to do thy best wi’ the promise o’ a gliff at gloaming under the Tryste bower birks. I would rather add a whole night to the hour than Ronald Rodan and yon govan widow should waur us. Sae nae a single word—that look was a full vow to do thy utmost—sae here’s for the kirn.’ And the harvest-horn winding as she spoke, the sickles were laid to the root of the ripe grain, and the contest commenced. Those on the haft and those on the point of the hook exerted themselves with so much success, that Hamish Machamish was compelled to cheer up his lagging mountaineers by the charms of his pipe. But the music which breathed life and mettle into the men of the mountains seemed not without its influence on those of the plains.

“The Highland sickles, though kept in incessant and rapid motion, could not prevent the haft and the point from advancing before them, forming a front like the horns of a crescent. The old bandsmen enjoyed the contest, and, from their conversation alone, I learned how the field was likely to go. ‘I’se tell thee what, Lucas Laurie,’ said Saunders Creeshmaloo, ‘as sure as the seven stars are no aught—and the starry elwand will never measure the length o’ the lang Bear—that sang-singin’ haspin’ o’ a callant, Ronald Rodan, and that light-ended, light-headed—I mean, widow woman, Keturah, will win the kirn o’ Crumacomfort—they are fore-

most by a lang cat loup at least.' 'Heard ever ony body the like o' that, Saunders Creeshmalooof,' said his fellow expounder of shooting stars: 'ye have an ee that couldnae tell that a pike-staff was langer than ane o' Tam Macgee's spoolpins! I sall eat a' the corn, chaff and a', without butter, that the ballad-making lad has cut afore our ain sonsie lass o' Lilly-cross, and this mettled stripling that's her marrow. I wish, however, that the lad bairn wad take counsel, and no lose time by keeking aye in the maiden's face ilka loucher he lays down; and may I be suppered wi' shooten stars on the summit o' Queensberry gin they dinna win the kirn.' I adopted this self-denying counsel, and rejoiced to find the sacrifice was rewarded with success.

"'It's a bonnie sight, gudeman o' Crumacomfort,' said another bandsman, as he hooded a stook behind me; 'I say it's a bonnie sight to see sae mony stark youths and strapping kimmers streaking themselves sae cidently to the harvest darke. Hech! but that sonsie widow, Keturah, be a prood ane—she's marrowed wi' the proodest piece o' man's flesh in the vale o' Ae. He's a clever lad, though he be a prood ane; he casts his sickle sae glegly round the corn, and rolls a loucher like a little sheaf, and yet looks sae heedless a' the while, as gin he were framing some fule ballad. I wad counsel him to cast aside that black-and-blue bird bonnet wi' its hassock o' feathers. See, see, how he makes them fan the hot brow o' the widow, and oh! but she blinks blithely for't. Conscience, gudeman! wer't no for thy well-faured Mary and her marrow, they wad win the kirn—they're within a stane-cast o' the landing.'

"The Highland piper, whose music had augmented as we proceeded, now blew a perfect hurricane, and the sickles moved faster and faster; but though they kept time with the music like the accuracy of a marching regiment, they

failed to obtain the smallest visible advantage, and the unintelligible clattering and murmuring they raised resembled the outcry of a disturbed flock of geese. 'Deel blaw ye south for a pose o' gowd, and take ye to the Highlands wi' the same wind again, gin I can make ye gain the half length o' my chanter on thae brainwude bairns on the haft and point. God, gin I had them in Glentourachglen, where deel hate grows but brakens, wi' a straught blade, instead o' a bowed ane in my neeve, I wad turn the best o' them !' So saying, Hamish Machamish relinquished the contest in despair, and the wind, as it forsook his instrument, grunted a long and melancholy whine, like the wind in a cloven oak. As we approached the landing, the old bandsmen ran on either side, and looked on the concluding contest with accuracy of eye which counted every handful that remained unshorn. 'Conscience ! but that sonsie woman, Keturah, merits to be married,' said an old man, whose chin as he walked almost touched the stubble ; 'and she sha'na want a man though I should take her mysel'—she maks the corn fa' afore her like the devouring fire.' 'And she wad be a useful woman t'ye, Roger,' said another old man, whose prolonged cough as he spoke seemed like a kirkyard echo ; 'she wad make ye a drib buttered gruel, and have 'aye something cozie and warm for ye whan ye daundered hame at gloaming.' 'And I can tell ye,' said one of their companions, 'gin that callant, Ronald Rodan, wad give up the gowk-craft o' ballad making, and bide by the craft o' cutting corn, and passing the sharp coulter through the green-sward, he wadnae hae his fellow atween Corsincon and Caerlaverock ; and I should nae grudge him my daughter Penny Holiday, wi' a tocher o' twal hundred as bonnie merks as e'er were minted.'

"While this conversation passed, the exertions of all seemed redoubled. It was a beautiful sight to see the rows

of tall stooks ranked behind—the standing corn before, diminished to a mere remnant, with half a hundred bright sickles glimmering in perpetual motion at its root, and the busy movement of so many fair and anxious faces shining with the dews of toil—the motion of curling haffet locks and white hands, and so many grey-haired men awaiting to commend the victor. ‘I may gae seek out the kirn-cut o’ corn,’ said old Hugh Halbertson, ‘and dress and deck it out wi’ lily white ribbons as gaily as I please, and a’ for my ain bonny Mary o’ Lillycross.’ Even as the old man spoke, the four sickles on the haft and point reached the end at once, and so close were their companions, that ere John Macmukle concluded his flourish on the harvest horn, the corn was all lying on the bands. Ronald Rodan taking at the same time his horn from the hands of one of the bandsmen, winded it so loud, and even melodious, that Ae water returned the echo from every double of her stream, the shepherd shouted on the hill, and the numerous reapers of neighbour boons, staying their sickles, waved them around their heads at every repeated flourish of the horn. An old bandsman conversant with the traditional ceremonies of winning harvest kirns, took the last and reserved cut of corn, and, braiding it into two locks, crowned my fair Cameronian partner with one, and the buxom Keturah with the other, who stood shedding the moisture with her white hands from her long hair, and giving the cooling breeze free admission to a white and shapely neck, glancing her blue eyes all the while on Ronald Rodan.”

Talk not of the excitement of the Turf—winning the Derby was nothing in comparison to winning the Harvest Kirn!

Though neither Cunningham nor any of his father's family belonged to the Cameronian body, yet many of them, besides the M'Ghies, were his intimate associates while he attended the Dame's school at Quarrelwood, and during his apprenticeship as a mason. And though he talks sometimes rather lightly of them in the way of raillery, yet he cherished for them a great regard, for the noble manner in which they had stood out for their religious principles, some of them even to the death. In his "Recollections of Mark Macrabin" he refers to them at considerable length, and also in an article in *Blackwood*, 1820, he gives a series of Cameronian ballads, prefaced with a brief account of the sect.

"THE DOOM OF NITHSDALE.

" I stood and gazed—from Dalswinton wood
To Criffel's green mountain, and Solway flood
Was quiet and joyous. The merry loud horn
Called the mirthsome reapers in bands to the corn;
The plaided swain, with his dogs, was seen
Looking down on the vale from the mountain green;
The lark with his note, now lowne, now loud,
The blue heaven breathed through the white cloud,
Round a smiling maid, white as winter snowing,
The Nith clasped its arms, and went singing and flowing—
Yet all the green valley, so lovely and broad,
Lay in black nature, nor breathed of a God.

" And yet it was sweet, as the rising sun shone,
To stand and look this fair land upon,
The stream kissed my feet, and away to the sea
Flew where the wild sea-fowl went swimming free.
In the town the lordly trumpet was blowing,
From the hill the meek pipe sent its sweet notes flowing,

And a fair damsel set her brown tresses a-wreathing,
And looking of heaven, and perfume breathing,
And, stretched at her feet, despairing and sighing,
Lay a youth on the grass, like a creature dying.
But mocked was the Preacher, and scorned was the Word,
Green Nithsdale, I yield thee to gunshot and sword.

“ And yet, green valley, though thou art sunk dark,
And deep as the waters that flowed round the ark;
Though none of thy flocks, from the Nith to the Scarr,
Wear Calvin's choice keel or the Covenant's tar—
Come, shear thy bright love-locks, and bow thy head low,
And fold thy white arms o'er thy bosom of snow,
And kneel, till the summer pass with its sweet flowers,—
And kneel, till the autumn go with her gold bowers,
And kneel, till rough winter grows weary with flinging
Her snows upon thee, and the lily is springing,
And fill the green land with thy woe and complaining;
And let thine eyes drop like two summer clouds raining—
And ye may have hope, in the dread dooms-day morning,
To be snatched as a brand from the sacrifice burning.

“ But if ye kneel not, nor in blood-tears make moan,
And harden your heart like the steel and the stone,
Oh! then, lovely Nithsdale—even as I now cast
My shrunk hand to heaven, thy doom shall be passed;
Through thy best blood the war-horse shall snort and career,
Thy breast shall be gored with the brand and the spear—
Thy bonnie love-locks shall be ragged and reft—
The babe at thy bosom be cloven and cleft;
From Queensberry's mountain to Criffel below,
Nought shall live but the blood-footed hawk and the crow!
Farewell, thou doomed Nithsdale—in sin and asleep—
Lie still—and awaken to wail and to weep.

“ I tried much to bless thee, fair Nithsdale, there came
Nought but curses to lay on thy fate and thy fame!

Yet still do I mind—for the follies of youth
 Mix their meteor gleams with the sunshine of truth—
 A fair one, and some blessed moments, aboon,
 Gleaming down the green mountain gazed on as the moon,
 The kisses and vows were unnumbered and sweet,
 And the flower at our side, and the stream at our feet,
 Seemed to swell and to flow so divinely.—Oh ! never,
 Thou lovely green land, and thou fair flowing river,
 Can man gaze upon you and curse you. In vain
 Doth he make his heart hard.—So I bless you again.”

Another is entitled:—

“ON MARK WILSON, SLAIN IN IRONGRAY.

“ I wandered forth when all men lay sleeping,
 And I heard a sweet voice wailing and weeping,
 The voice of a babe, and the wail of women,
 And ever there came a faint low screaming ;
 And after the screaming a low, low moaning,
 All adown by the burnbank in the green loaning.
 I went, and by the moonlight I found
 A beauteous dame weeping low on the ground.

“ The beauteous dame was sobbing and weeping,
 And at her breast lay a sweet babe sleeping,
 And by her side was a fair-haired child,
 With dark eyes flushed with weeping, and wild
 And troubled, he held by his mother, and spake,
 ‘ Oh mither ! when will my faither awake ?’
 And there lay a man smitten low to the ground,
 The blood gushing forth from a bosom wound.

“ And by his side lay a broken sword,
 And by his side lay the opened ‘ Word,’
 His palms were spread, and his head was bare,
 His knees were bent, he had knelt in prayer ;

But brief was his prayer, for the flowers where he knelt
Had risen all wet with his life's-blood spilt,
And the smoke of powder smelled fresh around,
And a steed's hoof-prints were in the ground.

“ She saw me, but she heeded me not,
As a flower she sat, that had grown on the spot;
But ever she knelt o'er the murdered man,
And sobbed afresh, and the loosed tears ran;
Eveu low as she knelt, there came a rush
Like a fiery wind, over river and bush,
And amid the wind, and in lightning speed,
A bright RIDER came, on a brighter steed.

“ ‘ Woe! woe! woe!’ he called, and there came
To his hand as he spake, a sword of flame;
He smote the air, and he smote the ground,
Warm blood, as a rivulet, leapt up from the wound,
Shriek followed on shriek, loud, fearful, and fast,
And filled all the track where this dread one passed;
And tumult and terrible outcry there came,
As a sacked city yields when it stoops to the flame;
And a shrill low voice came running abroad,
‘ Come, mortal man, come, and be judged by God!’
And the dead man turned unto heaven his face,
Stretched his hands and smiled in the light of grace.”

The following one is truly descriptive of what was the stern determination of the Cameronians not to enter a building for the purpose of religious worship; a striking example of which was given when a meeting-house was erected at Quarrelwood, in Kirkmahoe, by a goodly number of the congregation, assisted by friends; a portion of them stood firmly out against entering it when it was ready for sacred service, saying, “ We were driven

to the hills, and on the hills we shall remain!" By-and-by, however, they came round and worshipped along with the other brethren. We think it likely that Cunningham had that occasion in view when this ballad was written:—

“THE VOICE LIFTED UP AGAINST CHURCHES AND
CHAPELS.

“ And will ye forsake the balmy, free air,
The fresh face of heaven, so golden and fair,
The mountain glen, and the silver brook,
And Nature's free bountith and open book,
To sit and worship our God with a groan,
Hemmed in with dead timber and shapen stone?
Away—away—for it never can be,
The green earth and heaven's blue vault for me.

“ Woe! woe! to the time when to the heath-bell
The seed of the Covenant sing their farewell,
And leave the mount written with martyr story,
The sun beaming bright in his bridegroom glory;
And leave the green birks, and the lang flowering broom,
The breath of the woodland steeped rich in perfume;
And barter our life's sweetest flower for the bran,
The glory of God for the folly of man.”

“THE CAMERONIAN BANNER.

“ O Banner! fair Banner! a century of woe
Has flowed on thy people since thou wert laid low;
Hewn down by the godless, and sullied and shorn,
Defiled with base blood, and all trodden and torn!
Thou wert lost, and John Balfour's bright steel-blade in vain
Shed their best blood as fast as moist April sheds rain—

Young, fierce, gallant Hackstoun, the river in flood
Sent rejoicing to sea with a tribute of blood;
And Gideon Macrabin, with bible and brand,
Quoted Scripture, as Am'lek fell 'neath his right hand—
All in vain, thou fair Banner, for thou wert laid low,
And a sport and a prey to the Covenant's foe.

“ Fair Banner! 'gainst thee bloody Claver'se came hewing
His road through our helms, and our glory subduing;
And Nithsdale Dalzell—his fierce deeds to requite,
On his house darkest ruin descended like night—
Came spurring and full on the lap of our war,
Disastrous shot down like an ominous star.
And Allan Dalzell—may his name to all time
Stand accurs'd, and be named with nought nobler than rhyme—
Smote thee down, thou fair Banner, all rudely, and left
Thee defiled, and the skull of the bannerman cleft.
Fair Banner! fair Banner! a century of woe
Has flowed on thy people since thou wert laid low.

“ And now, lovely Banner! led captive and placed
'Mid the spoils of the scoffer, and scorned and disgraced,
And hung with the helm and the glaive on the wall,
'Mongst idolatrous figures to wave in the hall,
Where lips, wet with wine, jested with thee profane,
And the minstrel, more graceless, mixed thee with his strain,
Till the might and the pride of thy conqueror fell,
And the owl sat and whoop'd in the halls of Dalzell.
O thou holy Banner! in weeping and wail,
Let me mourn thy soiled glory, and finish my tale.

“ And yet, lovely Banner! thus torn from the brave,
And disgraced by the graceless, and sold by the slave,
And hung o'er a hostel, where rich ruddy wine,
And the soul-cheering beverage of barley divine,
Floated glorious, and sent such á smoke—in his flight
The lark stayed in the air, and sang, drunk with delight.

Does this lessen thy lustre? or tarnish thy glory?
Diminish thy fame, and traduce thee in story?
Oh, no, beauteous Banner! loosed free on the beam,
By the hand of the chosen, long, long shalt thou stream!
And the damsel dark-eyed, and the Covenant swain,
Shall bless thee, and talk of dread Bothwell again."

This interesting relic is carefully preserved by a very worthy family in the parish of Kirkmahoe. It is in a very sad-looking condition, from the brunt of battle and the decay of time, but its bullet-holes render it almost sacred in the eyes of those who possess it, and the stranger, while gazing upon them, has a feeling of reverence for the memory of the brave men who fought and fell under this inspiring Banner.

When and where Cunningham picked up these ballads we cannot tell, but perhaps he got them from the same fair hand who gave him the "Mermaid of Galloway;" or, what is likelier still, from his own fertile imagination—the same source.

His tales of Mark Macrabin were certainly not of a nature to give entire satisfaction to the sect of religionists to which that worthy belonged. "Indeed," as the author said, "he had no idea when he invested his hero with the name of Macrabin, of doing honour to that singular and selfish old being. It was a good name, and as the London apprentice says in *Launcelot Greaves*, 'a good travelling name,' and he made use of it." But notwithstanding this, he speaks kindly of the sect, for he says—"A frequent visitor of their preachings, I have hearkened with delight and edification to the poetical and prophetic eloquence of their discourses. A

guest at their hearths and their tables, I have proved the cheerful and open hospitality of their nature, and have held converse and fellowship with almost all the burning and the shining lights that have distinguished the present house of Cameron. I have made their character my study, and their pursuits my chief business, and collected many curious sayings, and songs, and adventures, which belong to this simple and unassuming race.

. . . . Certainly the most wondrous part of the Cameronian character is the poetical warmth and spirit which everywhere abounds in their sermons and their sayings; and, though profane minstrelsy was wisely accounted as an abomination, yet poetry, conceived and composed in the overflowing and passionate style of their compositions, has been long privately cherished among the most enlightened of the flock. But I by no means claim rank for the Cameronian bards with those who lent their unstinted strength to the strings. Their glimpses of poetical inspiration cannot equal the fuller day of those who gloried in the immortal intercourse with the muse." Who, after reading the foregoing extract, could find fault with the author of the Cameronian Ballads, though in some places flippant expressions may be detected; but yet, after all, there was nothing but a kindly feeling towards them at bottom? No one can possibly doubt this, after reading the affectionate M'Ghie letters, a family who belonged to the denomination. And we all the more respect Cunningham on account of this affection, that while adhering to his own creed he was neither bigoted nor sectarian.