

CHAPTER VII.

THE "MERMAID OF GALLOWAY"—PREFATORY NOTE AND
ACCOMPANYING LETTER.

WHAT was generally considered the gem of the volume was the "Mermaid of Galloway," with its prefatory note, and its accompanying letter:—

"Tradition is yet rich with the fame of this bewitching Mermaid; and many of the good old folks have held most edifying and instructing communion with her by her favourite moonlight banks, and eddyed nooks of streams. She was wont to treasure their minds with her celestial knowledge of household economy, and would give receipts to make heavenly salve to heal the untimely touch of disease. A charming young girl, whom consumption had brought to the brink of the grave, was lamented by her lover. In a vein of renovating sweetness the good Mermaid sung to him—

'Wad ye let the bonnie May die i' yere hand,
An' the mugwort flowering i' the land?'

"He cropped and pressed the flower-tops, and administered the juice to his fair mistress, who arose and blessed her bestower for the return of health.

"The Mermaid's favourite haunts and couches were along the shores of the Nith and Urr, and on the edge of the Solway sea, which adjoins the mouths of these waters. Her

beauty was such that man could not behold her face but his heart was fired with unquenchable love. 'Her long hair of burning gold,' through the wiling links of which appeared her white bosom and shoulders, were her favourite care; and she is always represented by tradition with one hand shedding her locks, and with the other combing them.

"Tradition tells that this world is an outer husk or shell which encloses a kernel of most rare abode, where dwell the Mermaids of popular belief. According to Lowland mythology, they are a race of goddesses corrupted with earthly passions. Their visits to the world, 'though few and far between,' are spoken of and remembered with awe. Their affections were bestowed on men of exalted virtue and rare endowments of person and parts. They wooed in such a strain of syren eloquence that all hearts were fettered by the witcheries of love. When their celestial voice dropt on the ear every other faculty was enthralled. They caught the beloved object in their embrace, and laid him on a couch, where mortal eyes might search in vain into the rites of such romantic and mysterious wedlock.

"Though possessed of the most soft and gracious qualities, yet, when a serious premeditated indignity was offered them, they were immediately awakened to revenge. A devout farm dame, in the time of the last persecution, was troubled in spirit at the wonted return of this heathenish visitant. A deep and beautiful pool, formed in the mouth of Dalbeattie Burn by the eddy of Urr Water, was a beloved residence of the Mermaid of Galloway. 'I' the first come o' the moon' she would seat herself on a smooth block of granite on the brink of the pool, comb her golden links of hair, and deliver her healing oracles. The good woman, in a frenzy of religious zeal, with her Bible in her hand, had the temerity to tumble this ancient chair into the bottom of the pool. The next

morning her only child was found dead in its cradle, and a voice from the pool was often heard at day-close by the distracted mother :—

‘Ye may look i’ yere toom cradle,
 And I’ll look to my stane;
 And meikle we’ll think, and meikle we’ll look,
 But words we’ll ne’er ha’e nane!’

“All the noxious weeds and filth that could be collected were thrown into the pool, until the stream was polluted; and the Mermaid departed, leaving a curse of barrenness on the house, which all the neighbours for several miles around are ready to certify has been faithfully fulfilled.

“William Maxwell, Esq. of Cowehill, is the bridegroom ‘Willie’ of this romance. According to popular history, he was nephew to the ‘Lily of Nithsdale,’ heroine of the sublime song, ‘She’s gane to dwell in Heaven.’”

“THE MERMAID OF GALLOWAY.

“There’s a maid has sat on the green merse side,
 These ten lang years and mair;
 An’ every first night o’ the new moon
 She kames her yellow hair.

“An’ aye while she sheds the yellow burning gowd,
 Fu’ sweet she sings an’ hie,
 Till the fairest bird that woocs the green-wood,
 Is charm’d wi’ her melodie.

“But wha e’er listens to that sweet sang,
 Or gangs the dame to see,
 Ne’er hears the sang o’ the laverock again,
 Nor wakens an earthlie ee.

- “ It fell in about the sweet simmer month,
 I’ the first come o’ the moon,
 That she sat o’ the tap of a sea-weed rock,
 A-kaming her silk locks down.
- “ Her kame was o’ the whitely pearl,
 Her hand like new-won milk,
 Her breasts were a’ o’ the snawy curd,
 In a net o’ sea-green silk.
- “ She kamed her locks owre her white shoulders,
 A fleece baith bonny and lang;
 An’ ilka ringlet she shed frae her brows,
 She raised a lightsome sang.
- “ I’ the very first lilt o’ that sweet sang,
 The birds forsook their young,
 An’ they flew i’ the gate o’ the grey howlet,
 To listen the maiden’s song.
- “ I’ the second lilt o’ that sweet sang,
 Of sweetness it was sae fu’,
 The tod leap’d out frae the bughted lambs,
 And dighted his red-wat mon’.
- “ I’ the very third lilt o’ that sweet sang,
 Red lowed the new-woke moon;
 The stars drapp’d blude on the yellow gowan tap,
 Sax miles that maiden roun’.
- “ I hae dwalt on the Nith, quo’ the young Cowehill,
 These twenty years an’ three,
 But the sweetest sang e’er brake frae a lip
 Comes thro’ the green-wood to me.
- “ O is it a voice frae twa earthlie lips
 Whilk make sic mclodie!
 It wad wyle the lark frae the morning lift,
 And weel may it wyle me!

- “ I dreamed a dreary thing, master,
 Whilk I am rad ye rede;
 I dreamed ye kissed a pair o’ sweet lips,
 That drapp’d o’ red heart’s-blede.
- “ Come haud my steed, ye little foot-page,
 Shod wi’ the red gold roun’;
 Till I kiss the lips whilk sing sae sweet:
 An’ lightlie lap he down.
- “ Kiss nae the singer’s lips, master,
 Kiss nae the singer’s chin;
 Touch nae her hand, quo’ the little foot-page,
 If skaithless hame ye’d win.
- “ O wha will sit on yere toom saddle,
 O wha will bruik yere gluve?
 An’ wha will fauld yere erled bride
 I’ the kindlie clasps o’ luve?
- “ He took aff his hat, a’ gold i’ the rim,
 Knot wi’ a siller ban’;
 He seemed a’ in lowe wi’ his gold raiment,
 As thro’ the green-wood he ran.
- “ The summer-dew fa’s saft, fair maid,
 Aneath the siller moon;
 But eerie is thy seat i’ the rock,
 Washed wi’ the white sea faem.
- “ Come wash me wi’ thy lylie white hand,
 Below and aboon the knee;
 An’ I’ll kame these links o’ yellow burning gold,
 Aboon thy bonnie blue ee.
- “ How rosie are thy parting lips,
 How lylie-white thy skin,
 An’ weel I wat these kissing een
 Wad tempt a saint to sin.

- “ Take aff these bars an’ bobs o’ gold, .
 Wi’ thy gared doublet fine;
 An’ thraw me aff thy green mantle,
 Leafed wi’ the siller twine.
- “ An’ a’ in courtesie, fair knight,
 A maiden’s love to win;
 The gold lacing o’ thy green weeds
 Wad harm her lilie skin.
- “ Syne coost he aff his green mantle
 Hemm’d wi’ the red gold roun’;
 His costly doublet coost he aff,
 Wi’ red gold flow’red down.
- “ Now ye maun kame my yellow hair,
 Down wi’ my pearlie kame;
 Then rowe me in thy green mantle,
 An’ take me maiden hame.
- “ But first come take me ’neath the chin,
 An’ syne come kiss my cheek;
 An’ spread my hanks o’ wat’ry hair
 I’ the new-moon beam to dreep.
- “ Sae first he kissed her dimpled chin,
 Syne kissed her rosie cheek;
 An’ lang he woodd her willin’ lips,
 Like heather-hinnie sweet!
- “ O, if ye’ll come to the bonnie Cowehill,
 ’Mang primrosce banks to woo;
 I’ll wash ye ilk day i’ the new milked milk,
 And bind wi’ gold yere brow.
- “ An’ a’ for a drink o’ the clear water,
 Ye’se hae the rosie wine;
 An’ a’ for the water white lilic,
 Ye’se hae these arms o’ minc.

“ But what’ll she say, yere bonnie young bride,
Busked wi’ the siller fine;
Whan the rich kisses ye kept for her lips,
Are left wi’ vows on mine ?

“ He took his lips frae her red-rose mou’,
His arm frae her waist sae sma’;
Sweet maiden, I’m in bridal speed,
It’s time I were awa.

“ O gie me a token o’ luve, sweet May,
A leal luve token true;
She crapped a lock o’ yellow gowden hair,
An’ knotted it roun’ his brow.

“ O tie nae it sac strait, sweet May,
But wi’ love’s rose-knot kind ;
My head is fu’ o’ burning pain,
O saft ye maun it bind.

“ His skin turned a’ o’ the red-rose hue,
Wi’ draps o’ bludie sweat ;
An’ he laid his head ’mang the water lilies—
Sweet maiden, I maun sleep.

“ She tied ae link o’ her wet yellow hair,
Aboon his burning bree ;
Amang his curling haffet locks
She knotted knurles three.

“ She weaved owre his brow the white lillie,
Wi’ witch-knots more than nine ;
Gif ye were seven times bridegroom owre,
This night ye shall be mine.

“ O twice he turned his sinking head
An’ twice he lifted his ce ;
An’ twice he sought to loose the links
Were knotted owre his bree.

“ Arise, sweet knight, yere young bride waits,
An' doubts her ale will sour;
An' wistly looks at the lily-white sheets,
Down spread in ladie-bower.

“ An' she has preened the broidered silk
About her white hause-bane;
Her princely petticoat is on,
Wi' gold can stan' its lane.

“ He faintlie, slowlie, turn'd his cheek,
An' faintlie lift his ee,
An' he strave to loose the witching bands
Aboon his burning bree.

“ Then took she up his green mantle,
Of lowing gold the hem;
Then took she up his silken cap,
Rich wi' a siller stem;
An' she threw them wi' her lilie hand
Amang the white sea-faem.

“ She took the bride ring frae his finger,
An' threw it in the sea;
That hand shall mense nae ither ring
But wi' the will o' me.

“ She faulded him i' her lilie arms,
An' left her pearlie kame;
His fleecy locks trailed owre the sand,
As she took the white sea-faem.

“ First rose the star out owre the hill,
An' neist the lovelier morn;
While the beauteous bride o' Galloway
Look'd for her blithe bridegroom.

“ Lightly she sang while the new moon rose,
Blithe as a young bride may,

Whan the new moon lights her lamp o' luvè,
An' blinks the bride away.

“ Nithsdale, thou art a gay garden,
Wi' monie a winsome flower;
But the princeliest rose o' that garden
Maun blossom in my bower.

“ Oh, gentle be the wind on thy leaf,
An' gentle the gloaming dew;
An' bonnie an' balmy be thy bud,
O' a pure an' steadfast hue;
An' she who sings this sang in thy praise
Shall love thee leal an' true.

“ An' aye she sewed her silken snood,
An' sung a bridal sang;
But aft the tears drap't frae her ee
Afore the grey morn cam'.

“ The sun leam'd ruddie 'mang the dew,
Sae thick on bank an' tree;
The plow-boy whistled at his darke,
The milk-maid answered hie;
But the lovely bride o' Galloway
Sat wi' a tear-wet ee.

“ Ilk breath o' wind 'mang the forest leaves—
She heard the bridegroom's tongue,
An' she heard the bridal-coming lilt
In every bird which sung.

“ She sat high on the tap-tower stane,
Nae waiting May was there;
She loosed the gold busk frae her breast,
The kame frae 'mang her hair;
She wiped the tear-blobs frae her ee,
An' looked lang and sair.

- “ First sang to her the blythe wee bird,
Frae aff the hawthorn green ;
Loose out the love curls frae yere hair,
Ye plaited sae weel yestreen.
- “ An’ the spreckled lark frae ’mang the clouds
Of heaven came singing down—
Take out the bride-knots frae yere hair,
An’ let these lang locks down.
- “ Come, bide wi’ me, ye pair o’ sweet birds,
Come down an’ bide wi’ me ;
Ye shall peckle o’ the bread, an’ drink o’ the wine,
An’ gold yere cage shall be.
- “ She laid the bride-cake ’neath her head,
An’ syne below her feet ;
An’ laid her down ’tween the lily-white sheets,
An’ soundly did she sleep.
- “ It seem’d i’ the mid-hour o’ the night,
Her siller bell did ring ;
An’ soun’t as if nae earthlie hand
Had pou’d the silken string.
- “ There was a check touch’d that ladye’s,
Cauld as the marble stanc,
An’ a hand cauld as the drifting snaw
Was laid on her breast-bane.
- “ O cauld is thy hand, my dear Willie,
O cauld, cauld is thy cheek ;
An’ wring these locks o’ yellow hair,
Frae which the cauld draps dreep.
- “ O seek another bridegroom, Marie,
On these bosom faultds to sleep ;
My bride is the yellow water lilie,
Its leaves my bridal sheet !”

Among many others, Mr. Roscoe was captivated with this ballad, and made repeated inquiries about Jean Walker (Cunningham's future wife), to whom was attributed the letter at the end accompanying it, which he said was the finest thing ever written, and had more than the spirit of Burns. She was also accredited with the songs—"She's gane to dwell in Heaven," "Thou hast sworn by thy God, my Jeanie," "The Pawkie Loon the Miller," and "Young Derwentwater." The letter accompanying the "Mermaid of Galloway" was addressed to Mr. Cromek:—

“ . . . A weed turns a flower when it is set in a garden. Will these songs be better or bonnier in print? I enclose you a flower new pou'd frae the banks of blythe Cowehill. It has long grown almost unkend of. Gentility disna pou' a flower that blooms i' the fields: it is trampled on as a weed when it is no' in a flower-pot. I see you smiling at the wretched lilt of the sweet-singing Mermaid. Well, come again to Galloway—sit down i' the gloaming dewfall on the green merse side among the flowers; and if a pair of lillie arms, and twa kissing lips and witching een, forbye the sweet music of a honey-dropping tongue, winna gaur ye believe in the liltin' glamour of the Mermaid ye may gang back to England singing—'Praise be blest!' How will your old-fashioned taste and the new-fangledness of the public's agree about these old songs? But tell me, can a song become old when the ideas and imagery it contains are drawn from nature! While gowans grow on our braes, and lilies on our burn-banks, so long will natural imagery and natural sentiment flourish green in song.

“I am, perhaps, too partial to these old songs: it is

because they recall the memory of parental endearments. The posies of our fathers and our mothers I hold it not seemly for a daughter to let wither."

Well done, Jean Walker! if you wrote this. You are entitled to be the matè of Allan Cunningham. Your spirit seems to be entirely akin to his, and you write poetically even in prose. At the close of this letter the editor appends the following note:—

"That the peasantry of Scotland possess a greater portion of natural taste and information than the vulgar class of any other nation is considered paradoxical by their unbelieving brethren on this side of the Tweed. Were evidence required to establish this fact, a Scottish peasant would exclaim— 'Where are your ballads and songs, the beauteous fugitives of neglected or unknown rustic bards? Where are your sacred reliques of poetic devotion, with which every Scotchman's heart is filled?—the plaint of despair, the uplifting raptures of love, or the heart-warming lament of domestic misfortune? With us they live; with you they have never existed, or have perished!'"

We have not yet done with the volume, but only with the poetical part of it, and in another chapter we shall refer to what is given in prose, to which we attach special importance. While we now know that the ballads were in a great measure only imitations, we have confidence, from personal knowledge and otherwise, in the truth of what is described in the latter portion of the work. We must say, however, that, with

regard to some of the songs, our opinion is that certain expressions, lines, and even verses, had better been omitted; but, as we have already said, our countrymen sixty years ago were not so fastidious as now. Besides, it should be remembered that the ballads profess to be of far older date than this; and as we know from the musings of some of the ancient ballad-mongers, they were anything but refined, it behoved that these imitations, as relics of bygone ages, should be in conformity with the style when these prevailed, otherwise their pretended genuineness would have been at once detected. Compared with some of the songs in Herd's Collection of 1769 they are almost purity, and Herd was not alone. So that there was almost an absolute necessity to have some unrefinement to preserve the mystification intended. When Cunningham avowedly wrote, in his own name, songs of his own day, no coarseness of expression was introduced, or anything but what might be chanted in the presence of parents by the maiden without a blush.