

WHITE PETE,

OR

THE HAUNTED SHEIL.

IN the olden time, when supernatural spirits left their proper sphere and held high carnival on this terrestrial ball, many strange and untoward events are reported to have taken place. These supernatural gentry assumed a variety of forms, and discharged multifarious duties, the said duties being almost always antagonistic to the welfare of man. Water-kelpies lured their victims to destruction; spunkies guided belated travellers deep into quagmires and morasses; wraiths, dead-lights, and a variety of other signs and sounds intimated to frail mortals the approaching dissolution of soul and body; ghosts of the murdered and injured haunted the scenes of their wrongs, frightening all and sundry by their hideous appearances and unearthly sounds; fairies, too, frequented the greenwood glade, and, although not reckoned of so dangerous a nature as the before-mentioned, were yet known to be strongly possessed of a desire to whip off people, especially children, to Elfland. Nor did these supernatural beings confine themselves to certain localities: they were equally at home in the busy haunts of men, or the wild and desolate waste. The Highland glens would appear to have been their happy hunting ground, and none were deeper read in their mysteries than the wild and warlike Gael.

At the period of which we write—the beginning of the present century—the most inaccessible and remote Highland glens were dotted with sheilings erected by graziers for greater ease in attending to their flocks, while in these wilds during the summer season. One of the most secluded and lonely of these was Sharroch Sheil. In addition to its lonely situation, it enjoyed the reputation of being haunted, but by what or whom no one could exactly tell.

Sharroch Sheil could boast of a “but and ben,” while the great majority of its compeers consisted of only one apartment. During

the summer and ewe-milking seasons both apartments were occupied; during spring and autumn one only was used by the solitary shepherd who tended the sheep; and for a considerable period it stood empty. Not always, however, for it was often occupied by the illicit distilling apparatus of some daring Highlander. Smuggling was then in full swing, but the power of the hated gaugers was beginning to be felt, and those who distilled whisky, minus His Majesty's licence, had to betake themselves to lonely and secluded spots in the deep corries and ravines of their native mountains. Nor did this always save them, for the gaugers were lynx-eyed, and drew information from rascally informers, the result being that many a smuggling bothy was by them reduced to masses of smoking ruins.

One of the most inveterate smugglers of the period of which we write was Peter Grant, better known as White Pete, so called from the almost woolly whiteness of his hair. Pete possessed a frank and affable disposition, was of tall and symmetrical build, and endowed with a fleetness of foot beyond all with whom he ever came in contact. Many a brush did Pete have with the gaugers, and oftener than once lost almost all his illegal possessions, but his speed and endurance stood him in good stead, and never yet had he been captured. Experience taught him that in a multitude of associates lurked danger, as some one almost always turned informer; he therefore dispensed with the assistance of any comrades, and wrought entirely on his own account.

White Pete, though to a certain extent impregnated with the superstitious beliefs of the time, was, nevertheless, not so deeply imbued with them as the generality of Highlanders, else he would never have thought of commencing distillation alone within the haunted precincts of Sharroch Sheil. When the rigours of winter forced the shepherd to take his sheep to lower altitudes, Peter Grant fitted up the "but" end of the sheiling as a smuggling bothy. During summer he had taken care to cut a large quantity of peats, and these, with his father's hardy Highland cowt, he conveyed to the scene of his illicit operations. A quantity of barley was bought, subjected to the necessary process of fermentation, and conveyed to the friendly miller, by whom it was dried and ground into "maut." It was then taken to the sheil, where it was put through various other processes, and was now ready for distilling into the fiery usquebaugh.

Pete had just reached this stage in his operations when Saturday night arrived, and having arranged everything for Monday morning, departed to spend the Sabbath under his father's roof. The last days of the year were almost reached, but the season was mild and comparatively free from snow. On the Sunday in question it rained the whole day. The streams which drained the valley were swollen into headlong torrents, thundering down their steep and rocky channels in white, foam-crested masses. Towards night the rain ceased, and the sky began to show indications of frost. The evening sped on; the old man produced the "big ha' Bible"; the family engaged in worship, and then, with the exception of Pete, retired to rest. It may seem strange that these rude smugglers and law-breakers, impregnated as they were with the grossest superstition, should thus engage in worshipping their Maker; but so it was. These simple Highlanders were imbued with deep religious feelings, and held inviolable the sanctity of the Sabbath.

When the family had thus retired to rest, White Pete left his father's roof and hied on towards Sharroch Sheil, determined to commence distillation once the midnight hour had passed. The way was wild and lonely, totally devoid of human habitation, and the burns brattled and brawled with strange unusual sounds as the hardy Highlander pursued his journey. His way lay for most part along the side of the main stream, but latterly he skirted the edge of a rather extensive morass. This morass caused him to make a slight detour, but to have gone straight forward would have landed him among interminable quagmires and peat-hags. Now he had almost reached the sheiling, but between him and it rolled the Sharroch Burn—an impassable barrier, yet he must cross, and without a moment's hesitation he struck up the side of the stream. On he sped, until having passed several smaller tributaries, the proportions of the foaming torrent were considerably lessened. Backing the few yards of level ground that lay at the burnside, Pete took a race, sprang with all his might, and alighted safely on the other side.

Reaching the sheiling, and judging it now to be past midnight, for he remembered these were not the days of clocks and watches, Pete commenced operations. With the aid of flint and flourish he managed to procure fire, and soon the cheery peat flames were leaping and dancing in the capacious fireplace. The "pot" he filled from the cask containing the wort, or wash, adjusted the

“head” and “worm,” turned a small stream of water upon the spiral form of the latter to keep it cool, and thus cause condensation, and sat down by the side of the fire to wait until the “pot” boiled. It was necessarily some time before the contents of that large vessel reached the desired temperature, and Pete, after having piled on plenty of fuel, stretched himself in front of the glowing heat to await the time for further action.

For a time he regarded the dancing flames, and amused himself by tracing shadowy forms among the ever-varying embers of the half-consumed peats. Now he saw some ancient feudal keep, replete with all its long-forgotten glory, and his vivid imagination conjured up scenes of what might have transpired within. Slowly it devolved into a chaotic mass, and from out the ruins of its battlements emerged two doughty warriors, who confronted each other with menacing aspect. Again the scene changed. The mail-clad warriors vanished as had done their feudal residence, and their place was taken by the sylph-like form of a young and beautiful woman. This vision was evidently a pleasing one, for a smile played round the smuggler’s lips. Under its benign influence a soothing train of thought pervaded his mind, and his eyes gradually closed.

But although his eyes were closed he was not properly asleep. He was in that comatose state which generally precedes sleep, and in which the consciousness of our surroundings is in great measure retained. Such a state is generally induced by pleasing fancies, and our waking thoughts are gradually and imperceptibly carried forward into the realms of dreamland. Such was the case with White Pete. The beauteous forms in the glowing embers recalled pleasant recollections of the past. Gradually these thoughts became obliterated, and the real merged into the ideal as the “wild brood of fancy” gained the ascendancy. Now in company of a “fickle fair” one, he strayed by the side of a purling stream. His arm encircled her waist, and her head rested on his shoulder. On his cheek he felt her breath, sweet and pleasant as the ottar of roses; and the pleasures of the Turkish heaven would have paled before the honied words that passed between them.

Now, by some strange transformation, the scene was changed from the sweet and soothing enchantments of Nature, to the artificial pleasures and gaieties of the ball-room. And such a ball-room! it shone with an indescribable, dazzling splendour, under

myriads of lamps of the intensest brilliancy. Through the intricate mazes of dances which he had never before beheld, Pete led his fair partner with the ease and grace of a polished gallant. The music was supplied by a number of curious looking instruments, and was of that low, dreamy cadency that renders motion scarcely perceptible, yet one of the most exquisite of pleasures. Intoxicated with the depth of his feelings, Pete felt in a perfect Elysium, and on the faces of the other pleasure-seekers could be traced a like happiness. The enjoyment was at its height when the harsh and discordant notes of the great Highland bagpipe broke on their ears. Before its powerful note the mellow-toned instruments became silent, consternation was depicted on every face, the dancers halted, the lights went out, and Pete found himself sitting bolt upright in front of the almost consumed peat-fire in haunted Sharroch Sheil.

Astonished beyond measure he could scarcely realize whether the scene he had just beheld was real or imaginary. The gloomy and cheerless surroundings of the sheil, garnished with the multifarious requisites of smuggling, presented but a sorry resemblance to the apartment of princely magnificence in which he had just been. But then the notes of the bagpipe that had so rudely broken the charm still sounded in his ears. At first he thought that the sound must be the result of the vivid dream which he now believed his former experiences to have been, but as it still continued he became aware that it, at least, was real. The piper was evidently in the "ben" end of the sheil. But, hark! what was that? Yes, there could be no doubt about it; the notes of the bagpipes were accompanied by the scuffle of dancing feet on the mortar floor.

Springing to his feet, now thoroughly aroused, he listened to the unwonted music. Had an assembly of fairies taken possession of the "ben" end? Or was it a repetition of such an orgy as heroic Tam o' Shanter witnessed in "Alloway's auld haunted kirk," and the piper; the arch fiend himself? Or had he after all desecrated the Sabbath, and these nocturnal visitors been sent to execute condign punishment upon his devoted head? These ideas flashed through his mind with lightning rapidity, but were immediately banished by thoughts of escape. The outer door stood open, but close beside it, in the partition that divided the building, stood the door that communicated with the "ben" end. It by rare chance

happened to be shut, but to venture so near what might be the infernal presence, was an ordeal from which the hardy smuggler shrank. But he was doomed to suffer a new and more alarming danger. His rapidly pulsing heart almost ceased to beat, his hair began raising the bonnet from his brow, and a cold sweat distilled from every pore, when he heard the low and confused murmur of voices in which he thought his own name was mentioned. Suddenly, clear and distinct sounded the awe-inspiring tones of one evidently in authority, "We'll hae White Pete throo a reel."

Oh, horror! was he who had so lately commingled with beings more perfect than the houris of the Mahomedan paradise now to be dragged into the dance of demons, to be knocked and buffeted about by them, and afterwards—but thought failed to comprehend the dread finale. His only chance of escape lay in flight, and bracing up his scattered energies, Pete dashed for the open door. While standing in the sheil, confronting the door of the "ben" end, his terror had been bad enough, but once he gained the outside, it was added to in a tenfold degree. His back was now turned to his enemies, and his lively imagination pourtrayed a whole host of supernatural beings swiftly following in his flying footsteps. Down the gentle incline he dashed towards the Sharroch Burn. To cross had cost him a long detour, to recross never cost him a thought. With a flying leap he plunged into the seething torrent, battled for a moment with the wild waters, and by the aid of an overhanging willow, scrambled out on the opposite bank. A less resolute and athletic man would assuredly have been swept to destruction.

The morass now lay before him. To skirt it never once entered his mind; he took a bee-line for home. Utterly oblivious of the fact that the supernatural gentry of the Sheil were precluded from crossing a running stream, Pete kept up his headlong flight. Now he pitched head foremost over some unseen peat bank; now he was up to the waist in the slimy depths of a treacherous quagmire. Nothing could retard his progress; and in an incredibly short space of time Pete again reached his father's door. And what a spectacle he presented. His garments were drenched from head to heel with the water of Sharroch Burn, and sticking fast with peat and green slime—evidences of his hasty retreat. His bonnet and he had long ago parted company, and his fine white hair had assumed a hue that could hardly be classified. Small wonder though his father and mother were alarmed at his extraordinary appearance, and

listened, awe-inspired, as he breathlessly narrated the narrow escape he had just had. The Bible was produced, and the goodman read a chapter, and offered up a prayer, thanking the Deity for Pete's deliverance from the powers of darkness, after which they again retired to rest. The news of the extraordinary adventure soon became bruited abroad, and for a time Pete was the hero of the rural community; but his thirst for glory was not great, and he sought not to add to his laurels by again commencing illicit distillation in Sharroch Sheil.

A probable explanation of the foregoing has been offered by one deeply read in the mysteries of smuggling. According to his theory White Pete had fallen asleep, and his thoughts winged an airy flight into the realms of dreamland. The fire beneath the "pot" had heated the contents of that vessel almost to the boiling point, at which stage it often emitted a hollow, ever-varying, rumbling noise, not unlike what we occasionally hear from one of our larger domestic pots. That sound had evidently pervaded Pete's dreams, and upon waking he had mistaken it for the notes of the bag-pipes. His dazed condition aided the delusion, a change in the rumbling had been construed into the awful voice which caused him to beat a hasty retreat, a few seconds at most, perhaps, covering the whole duration of his terror.

