

Witches of Pittenweem
Edinburgh Magazine
and Literary Miscellany

v.1, p.199-207

THE
EDINBURGH MAGAZINE,
AND
LITERARY MISCELLANY.

OCTOBER 1817.

ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE WITCHES OF
PITTENWEEM, IN THE COUNTY OF
FIFE, ABOUT THE BEGINNING OF
LAST CENTURY.

Hard luck, alake! when poverty and eild
Weeds out o' fashion, and a lanceli bield,
Wi' a sma' cast o' wiles, should in a
twitch

Gie ane the hatefu' name—*A wrinkled
witch.* GENTLE SHEPHERD.

THE wishes, and probably still more,
the terrors of man, in that rude state
of society in which science has not yet
begun to trace effects towards their
causes in the established laws of na-
ture, seem every where to have laid
the foundation of a multiplicity of po-
pular creeds, of which the object is to
connect man with mysterious beings
of greater power and intelligence than
himself. The character which the ima-
gination gave to this intercourse, was
the consequence, in some degree, of
accidental occurrences, but still more,
perhaps, of local circumstances, and of
the social condition of the people. The
vicissitudes of human life, and of hu-
man affairs, however, do not permit the
most prosperous people to ascribe pure
benevolence to these superior beings;
and so much greater is the sensibility
of men to painful and disastrous e-
vents, and the dread of their recur-
rence, than to such instances of good
fortune as either happen very rarely,
or are neutralized by their frequency;
that in the superstitions of every age
and country, perhaps, the number,
and power, and activity, of capricious
spirits, or of such as are decidedly hos-
tile to human happiness, will be found
to predominate, or to have exerted, at
least an equal influence in the com-
mon affairs of life with the beneficent.

This propensity to reduce the invi-
sible beings whose power and know-
ledge were recognised in almost every

great event, to the level of men in
other respects, naturally led to a be-
lief in their occasional manifestation,
both in their own proper form, and
in the assumed garb of humanity.
It was, however, in every respect de-
sirable that the more immediate in-
tercourse between the worlds of matter
and of spirit should be carried on by a
chosen few of the human race, to whom
their fellow mortals might apply,
as to the delegates of invisible power,
on every great emergency.—Such seems
to have been the origin of oracles and
priests, and all the other delusions of
paganism, both in ancient and modern
times.

The light of Christianity, and the
progress of knowledge, which have
done so much to rectify the judgment,
as well as to purify the heart, by dis-
playing the wisdom and goodness of
the Supreme Being, have not yet alto-
gether dispelled the illusions which
had possessed the imagination during
the infancy and helplessness of ration-
al being. On the contrary, some pas-
sages in the Holy Scriptures them-
selves, though evidently applicable on-
ly to the peculiar circumstances of the
theocratical government of the Jews,
or to the first promulgation of the
gospel, have been not only taken in
their most literal sense, but held to
prove the continued succession, through
every age of the world, of a class of
human beings endowed with the
power of infringing the established
laws of nature, and actually in the
practice of exercising this power for
the most insignificant purposes.

In the records of ignorance and cre-
dulity, there is not perhaps a more
melancholy proof of the aberration
of the human mind than that which
is exhibited by the very general be-
lief in witchcraft, which, in this coun-

try, continued to prevail down to the close of the seventeenth century, and which, even at the present moment, is far from being completely eradicated. The sex, age, and condition of the individuals commonly accused of this crime,—the utter improbability of the accusation itself, and of the overt acts by which it was attempted to prove it,—the horrid means by which confessions were extorted,—and the cruel doom which awaited conviction—do not appear to have ever raised any doubts of the reality of their guilt, and very rarely to have excited in the minds of their judges those feelings of commiseration, which nothing but the grossest superstition has ever been able altogether to repress with the sufferings of the greatest criminal.

But we do not mean at present to enter upon the very extensive field to which these general views would conduct us. It may suffice, on this occasion, merely to notice the law and practice of Scotland in regard to the alleged crime of witchcraft; and then to mark the dawn of improvement in public opinion at the commencement of the eighteenth century, displayed in the case of the witches of Pittenweem in Fifeshire. For our acquaintance with these personages we are chiefly indebted to some curious original documents, and to several very rare tracts, printed at the time when the events they describe had very recently occurred.

It is a singular circumstance in the history of this delusion in Scotland, that the only statute against witchcraft passed so late as in 1563, * a pe-

riod when the superstition of the dark ages was shaken to its foundation by the spirit of inquiry which, in a few years, led to the complete establishment of the Reformation. It deserves also to be remarked, that the trials for this crime seem to have been most numerous about a hundred years afterwards, † though, during this inter-

cromancie, and credence given thereto in times by-gane, against the law of God : And for avoyding and away-putting of all sik vaine superstition in times to cum : It is statute and ordained be the Queenis Majestie, and the three Estaites foresaidis, that na manner of person nor persones, of quhat-sum-ever estaitte, degree, or condition they be of, take upon hand in onie times hereafter, to use onie manner of *witch-craftes, sorcerie, or necromancie*, nor give themselves furth to have onie sik craft or knowledge theirof, their-throw abusand the people : Nor that na person seik onie help, response, or consultation at onie sik users or abusers foresaidis of *witch-craftes, sorceries, or necromancie*, under the paine of death, alsweil to be execute against the user, abuser, as the seiker of the response or consultation. And this to bee put to execution be the Justice, Schireffis, Stewards, Baillies, Lordes of Regalities and Royalties, their deputies, and others ordinar judges competent within this realme, with all rigour, having power to execute the samen."

It has been doubted whether the framers of this act themselves believed in witchcraft, and whether by denouncing the same heavy penalty against the dupe and the impostor, they ever expected it to be executed at all. The judges and juries, however, never seem to have had any doubts about the matter.

* In the year 1661, the number of commissions upon record for trying persons suspected of *witchcraft* are very considerable: they are,

Jul. 26.—Isobell Johnston in Gullian.—Margaret Nisbet in Spott.

Aug. 2.—Katherine Black, Elizabeth Black, Isobell Crockett, in Stirling.

Sept. 6.—Margaret Moffat, Margaret Elliot, George Watson, James Johnston, Elspeth Yester, Margaret Nisbet, all dwellers in the parochin of Spott.—Jean Hunter, Jean Gligood, Jean Knox, Margaret Howie, Bessie Turnbull, Katherine Johnston, John Harbour, all residenteris within the parochin of Ormiston.—William Hog, Marion Grinlaw, Jean Howison, Elspeth Haliburton, parish of Neatoun.—Margaret Bartan, Isobell Bathgate, in Queensferry.

Sept. 13.—Janet Watson, Bessie Moffat, Katherine Hunter, in Dalkeith.—Ja.

* As this remarkable statute, which brought so many innocent beings to an untimely end, is not very long, we shall here make room for it. The reader cannot fail to perceive, on comparing this simple and concise enactment with the elaborate and voluminous acts of the present age, how much the technical part of the science of legislation has been improved in the intermediate period :

"QUEEN MARIE.—*Ninth Parliament, 14th of June 1563.*

"73. Anentis Witch-craftes.

"ITEM, For-sa-mekkle as the Queenis Majestie, and the three Estaites in this present Parliament, being informed that the heaveie and abhominable superstition used be diverse of the lieges of this realme, be using of witch-craftes, sorcerie, and ne-

val, the nation had not only acquired a thorough conviction of the value of civil and religious liberty, but shed its blood in the most arduous struggles to obtain and secure both, under circumstances of peculiar difficulty and discouragement. If the legal murders which the records of our criminal courts prove to have been committed during this period, had occurred in that comparatively remote age which Shakespeare has penetrated with the light of his genius in his tragedy of *Macbeth*, however much we might lament the infatuation of our forefathers, we should find it less difficult to account for their proceedings. But Sir George Mackenzie, in his "Laws and Customes of Scotland, in matters criminal," so late as 1678, never insinuates a doubt of the reality of witchcraft, though he was led to express his strong disapprobation of the forms of trial then in use in a number of instances. On the contrary, in-

net Scott, George Lumsdell, at Innerleithen.—Isobell Monro, Mary Burges, vagabonds haunting in Strathspey and Murraysland.

Nov. 7.—Barbra Hood, Helen Beishes, in Yeamouth.—Eupham Adair, Helen Breckenrig, in Crichton.—Margaret Walker, (spouse to William Curry,) Janet Curry, her daughter, in Pentland.—Isobell Ryrie, in Forfar.—Agness Williamson, in Haddington.

Nov. 13.—Margaret Liddell, Kathrine Key, in Newburgh.—Elspeth Grinlaw, in Queensferry.

Dec. 17.—Helen Cothall, Helen Guthery, Elspeth Guthery, in Forfar.—Isabell Smith, in Atholl.

Who had all confessed themselves guilty of the "abominable crime of witchcraft, in entering into paction with the devil, renouncing their baptism," and otherways, &c.

In 1662, the number is still more considerable, but the commissions seem to have been granted under certain qualifications; for instance, Jan. 12, 1662. Commission is granted to Sir Archibald Douglas, Sheriff-principal of Roxburgh, and others, "to try and judge Bessie Thomson, Malie Johnston, Agnes Quarie, and Malie Turnbul, who have confessed themselves to be guilty of witchcraft, with these qualities, That if they shall be found guiltie ypon voluntar confessions, by renouncing of baptism, paction with the divell, or committing of malities, without any sort of torture or other indirect meanes used, and that the tyme of their confessions and pactioning with the divell, they

deed, this eminent lawyer stoutly defends the popular belief against the more liberal views of "many lawyers in Holland and elsewhere." The same belief prevailed in England posterior to the middle of the seventeenth century. At the assizes held at Bury St Edmond's for the county of Suffolk, on the 10th March 1664, before Sir Matthew Hale, *Rose Cullender* and *Amy Dugy*, widows, were found guilty of witchcraft, "upon a long evidence," and hanged a few days after.* In the absurdity of the accusation, the insufficiency of the evidence, and the iniquity of the verdict,—the unhappy women asserting their innocence in their last moments,—this remarkable trial is in no degree exceeded by any similar one in Scotland.

It was not till 1735, by the 9th Geo. II. c. 5, that prosecutions for witchcraft, and for imputing witchcraft to others, were prohibited; and it does not appear that the wisdom of the legislature in this repeal had been anticipated by the progress of knowledge among the great body of the people, to such an extent as has been sometimes alleged. So late as 1792, a person was brought to the stake in Scotland for the crime of witchcraft, under the authority of the sheriff-depute of the county of Sutherland.† In 1743, a body of dissenters, who have since become numerous and respectable, published an act of their presbytery, in which, among the national sins enumerated as the causes of God's wrath against Scotland, is to be found the repeal of the penal statutes against witches, "contrary to the express law of God;" and the same doctrine is still taught from their pulpits, and firmly believed by their hearers, and finally believed by the far greater number of their adherents. We happen to know, indeed, that a belief in witches and witchcraft prevails even at this day a-

wer of compleat age, sound judgment, no wayes distracted, or under any earnest desire to dy, and reiterat the former confessions made by them judiciously; that then, and in those cases, the saids commissiōners cause the sentence of death to be execute upon them, and no otherways."

* *Trial of Witches*, &c. taken by a person then attending the Court, printed in 1716.

† Arnot's *Criminal Trials*, p. 412.

mong the lower orders in Scotland generally, whatever may be their religious persuasion.

In many of our parishes, traditional tales of witches, and specific instances of their preternatural power, are still current, only a few of which have passed through the press. Of the works on this curious subject, "Satan's Invisible World discovered," by "Master George Sinclair, late Professor of Philosophie at the Colledge of Glasgow," seems to have been received with peculiar favour, the Lords of Council having, by an order, dated at Edinburgh, 26th February 1685, prohibited and discharged all persons "from printing, reprinting, or importing into this kingdome, any copie or copies of the said book, during the space of eleven yearis after the date hereof, without license of the author, or his order." The last edition of it which we have seen was printed in 1814; and the editor, without the slightest intimation of any doubts as to the truth of the marvellous narratives it contains, has enriched his work with "some additional relations which have happened in the shire of Renfrew, towns of Pittenweem, Calder, and other places." The Renfrewshire witches, indeed, have been thought to merit the honour of a separate "History," which was published in 1809 by "the Editor of the Paisley Repository." We are sorry that we cannot do as much justice to the old ladies of Pittenweem, who, notwithstanding the very laudable exertions of their minister and magistrates, had the singular good fortune to escape the flames, through the obstinacy of the Privy Council, who could not be prevailed on to bring them to trial. What could be done, however, by these active enemies of the Evil One was not spared. The witches were imprisoned and tortured, and confessed in the usual manner. One of them was starved in prison, and the rabble enjoyed "three hours' sport" in murdering another, by the *permissive power* of the legal guardians of their lives and properties on earth, and of their sadly guide to heaven.*

About the month of March 1704, there lived in the town of Pittenweem a noted witch, Beatrix Laying by name, who came to one Patrick Mortoun, a blacksmith, with an order for some nails, which this person, being otherwise employed at the time, refused to execute. The witch went

June 1704, at which "the minister and some of the elders were present," where a bailie and another member of the town council were "elected and nominated to goe from this burgh to Edinburgh to morrow, and deal with Sir Thomas Moncrief of that ilk, as justiciar within the regality of St Andrews, to grant comissiones to some gentlemen and burgesses in this part of the country, for sitting as justices in this burgh, for taking trial of these persones incarcerated in the tolbooth, as suspect guilty of witchcraft; and if Sir Thomas refuse to make applicatione to the counsell, to take such other methods as they shall think fitting for that effect." It was also resolved at the same time to apply "for advice to the presbyterie." Sir Thomas, it would appear, had not given these officious gentlemen much encouragement; for, on the 12th July thereafter, there is another entry in the records, nominating two new commissioners "to consult and advyse with the members of the commission of the General Assembly of the Kirk now sitting at Edinburgh, and crave their concurrence; and also to take the advyse and concurrence of her Majestie's Advocate, and of St Robt. Forbes, one of the clerks of her Majestie's Privy Council, and principal agent for the royal burrows, what method and course may be taken in addressing the Privy Council, for getting these persones put to trial and condign punishment, with all convenient diligence." On the 20th July, these last commissioners report that the Privy Council had ordained the suspected witches to be transported to Edinburgh and judged there, requiring at the same time information of the names and confessions of the accused, and the witnesses' names who were to be cited. It is possible enough, that a trial on the spot before some "gentlemen and burgesses in this part of the country," would have been more acceptable to these enlightened guardians of the burgh, as they had at first wished; for, either for want of evidence, or on some other account, the witches were not transported to Edinburgh, nor ever brought to trial. On the 12th August, all of them, five in number, were liberated on bail, apparently in consequence of the interference of the "Erle of Balcarres and Lord Anstruther," commissioners of the Privy Council, with whom the bail bonds were lodged.

* The better educated classes of Scotland seem by this time to have become rather sceptical about the existence of witches. In the records of the burgh of Pittenweem, we find a minute of a meeting, dated 1st

away muttering threats of course, and soon after was detected by the blacksmith in the use of a charm, of which even the literal description is not without its difficulties. "Patrick Mortoun, with another person in company, carrying some fish by the said Beatrix Layng's door, they saw a vessel with water placed at the door, with a *burning* coal in it, upon which he was presently stricken with an impression that it was a charm designed against him; and upon this, a little after, he sickened." * This is the account of the party who had taken so active a concern against the witches, and is given from a pamphlet published in their defence, after their proceedings had drawn upon them the notice of the Privy Council. Convincing, however, as this charm must have been to the magistrates and minister of Pittenweem, as well as to the blacksmith himself, of the *diallerie* of Layng, other proofs were not wanting. The physicians could not understand Mortoun's distemper: At length he was seized with fits; and in due time delated (accused) Layng and a number of other persons as his tormentors, who were forthwith thrown into prison, and subjected to the usual preparatory process of *pricking* or *brodding*, to prevent them from sleeping, and to extort from them a confession of guilt.

"It was upon his (Mortoun's) accusation allenarly the minister and baillies imprisoned these poor women, and set a guard of drunken fellows about them, who, by pinching and pricking some of them with pins and *elions*, (awls,) kept them from sleep for several days and nights together; the marks whereof were seen by severals a month thereafter. This cruel usage made some of them learn to be so wise, as acknowledge every question that was asked them; whereby they found the minister and baillies well pleased, and themselves better treated." †

Nothing on this subject of witchcraft has ever appeared more extraordinary than the confessions of the accused themselves. But this wonder must cease, when we know the

means by which they were extorted. "Thrusting of pins into the flesh, and keeping the accused from sleep, were the *ordinary* treatment of a witch. But if the prisoner was endowed with uncommon fortitude, other methods were used to extort confession. The *boots*, the *capsie-claws*, and the *pinnewinks*, engines for torturing the legs, the arms, and the fingers, were applied to either sex; and that with such violence, that sometimes the blood would have spouted from the limbs. Loading with heavy irons, and whipping with cords, till the skin and flesh were torn from the bones, have also been the adopted methods of torment." *

Of the treatment which the wretched Layng experienced, in consequence of the ridiculous charge we have mentioned, we have some account in a petition which she presented to the Privy Council about a year afterwards, praying for protection against the rabble, who had murdered another woman a few months before, and which detestable outrage does not seem to have had its proper effect upon the darkened intellects of the rulers of that ancient burgh. †

* Arnot's *Criminal Trials*, p. 413.

† "Act and Protection to Bettie Laing.

"*All the Palace of Holyrudehouse*,
"May 1, 1705.

"Anent the supplication given in and presented to his Grace her Maties High Commissioner, and the Lords of her Maties Privy Council, by Bettie Laing, spouse to William Brown, taylor, and late treasurer of the town of Pittenweem; humbly shewing, that the petitioner having met with most cruell and unchristian treatment in the town of Pittenweem, upon no other ground then bare affection of ane Peter Mortoun, a young man in the said town, who being under a natural disease ^{wh} had some strange effects upon his body, pretended that the petitioner, and other persons he named, wer witches, and tormented him: Upon this very insufficient ground the petitioner was thrown into the tolbooth of Pittenweem, by the minister and magistrates thereof; and because she would not confess that she was a witch, and in compact with the divell, was tortured by keeping her awake without sleep for fyve keeping her awake without sleep for fyve days and nights together, and by continual pricking her with instruments in the shoulders, back, and thighs, that the blood gushed out in great abundance, so that her lyfe was a burden to her;

* *A Just Reproof to the False Reports*, &c. printed in 1705.

† *An Answer of a Letter from a gentleman in Fife to a nobleman*, printed 1705.

Janet Corphat, or Cornfoot, who was afterwards murdered by the rab-

and then urging her continually to confess, the petitioner expressed severall things, as they directed her, to be ride of the present torture; and because she afterwards avowed and publicly told, that what she had said to them of her having seen the divell, &c. was lyes and untruths, they put her in the stocks for severall dayes, and then carried her to the thief's holl, and from that they transported her to a dark dungeon, where she was allowed no manner of light, nor human converse, and in this condition she laye for fyve moneths together; and at last having found means to get out of the said dungeon, she wandered about in strange places in the extremity of hunger and cold, tho' she thanked God she had a competency at home, but dared not come near her own house, because of the fury and rage of the people: And the petitioner being willing to undergooe any legall tryall upon the said cryme whereof she was accused, and for denying of which she had been so inhumanly treated: She confidently presumed his Grace and their Lops. would grant her the common benefit of protection to her person till she wer legally convicted of crymes rendering her undeserving of it: And this she was necessitat to demand of your Lops. for that she having lately returned to her own house at Pittenweem, expecting to have lived safely and quietly with her husband, the rabble there so menaced and threatened to treat her as they had done Janet Cornfoot a little before, &c. &c. His Grace her Maties High Commissioner, &c. &c. declares the petitioner to be under the protection of the Government; and therefore his Grace and the said Lords appoints and ordains the magistrates of Pittenweem to maintain and defend the petitioner against any tumults and mobbs, insult, and violence that may fall upon or be attempted against her, as they will be answerable," &c. &c. &c.

The magistrates, however, were more careful of their own individual interest than the peace of their burgh, or the lives of their fellow citizens, and seem to have held their clergyman in higher veneration than the Commissioners of the Privy Council. In the burgh records there is the following minute on this occasion:

"Act onent the Committie of the Privie Counsell, ther tryal of the process anent the Witches.

"Undecimo Maij 1705.

"The which day the ballies and counsell, viz. William Borthwick, &c. (thirteen present) being convened, the said ballie represented to the counsell, that one the nyuth day of Maij instant, the Erle of

ble, was also one of those unhappy persons *delated* by this Mortoun. There was another crime, however, imputed to this woman of a not less extraordinary description. Beatrix Layng, who seems to have been Satan's chief minister in those parts, happened to quarrel with one Alexander Macgregor, a fisherman—about what we are not told—and forthwith the Devil in person, with this Janet Cornfoot, and "several others in company," set upon poor Macgregor in his bed, with the felonious intent of murdering him in his sleep. Macgregor, however, awaking in good time, and wrestling manfully, his infernal majesty was glad to beat a retreat with his baffled troops. The truth of the thing could not possibly be called in question, for it was confessed by two of the hags who had assisted on the occasion; * and at last, it would appear, by Cornfoot herself also. This poor woman, of course, retracted her confession to some gentlemen whom curiosity had induced to visit her in prison, but begged them "for Christ's sake not to tell that she had done so, else she would be murdered." †

She was murdered nevertheless; and with circumstances of such almost incredible barbarity, that we shall give the account in the words of the writer

Belcarres and Lord Anstruther, two of her Maties most honorable Privie Counsell, being commissionat to meet here this day for takeing further triall of the murder of Janet Cornfoot, who confest herself guiltie of witchcraft, and anent the way of the townes procedure ag^t Beatrix Laying, and others, accused for that cryme, the saids Lords requyred that the baillies and whole toune counsell should engage in a bond to protect the said Beatrix Laying ag^t any rabble should assault her. Which they unanimously refused to doe, in respect she may be murdered in the night without their knowledge, and the penalty of the bond being fyve hundreth merks, they would be obliged to pay it. The said ballie also informed the counsell, that these Lords of the Committee of Counsell were to meet here on Saturday next, and it was concluded, that the ballie and some of the toune counsell should attend them."

* *A Just Reproof to the False Reports,* &c. p. 7.

† *Account of an horrid and barbarous murder,* in a Letter from a gentleman in Fife to a friend in Edinburgh, Feb. 5. 1705.

to whom we have just referred. The woman had escaped from prison, as it would appear, by the connivance of the minister, who, after the attention that began to be paid to her case by persons of rank and influence, seems to have lost all hope of bringing her to the stake, and was, probably, glad to get rid of her. She was apprehended, however, and sent back to Pittenweem by another active clergyman in the neighbourhood, in the custody of two men, who carried her as a matter of course to the minister, in whose person the offices of priest and king appear to have been harmoniously combined throughout all these proceedings. But the clergyman had nothing to say to her; he was not concerned, he told the rabble; and they might do what they pleased with her.

"They took encouragement from this," says the Fifth gentleman, "to fall upon the poor woman, those of the minister's family going along with them, as I hear; they fell upon the poor creature immediately, and beat her unmercifully, tying her so hard with a rope, that she was almost strangled; they dragged her through the streets, and amongst the shore by the heels. A bailie hearing of a rabble near his stair, came out upon them, which made them immediately disappear. But the magistrates, though met together, not taking care to put her into close custody, for her safety, the rabble gathered again immediately, and stretched a rope betwixt a ship and the shoar, to a great height, to which they tied her fast; after which they swung her to and fro, from one side to another, in the meantime throwing stones at her from all corners, until they were weary. Then they loosed her, and with a mighty swing threw her upon the hard sands; all about being ready in the mean time to receive her with stones and staves, with which they beat her most cruelly. Her daughter in the time of her mother's agony, though she knew of it, durst not adventure to appear, lest the rabble had used her after the same manner, being in a house in great concern and terror, out of natural affection for her mother. They laid a heavy door upon her, with which they prest her so sore, that she cried out to let her up for Christ's sake, and she would tell

the truth. But when they did let her up, what she said could not satisfy them, and therefore they again laid on the door, and with a heavy weight of stones on it, prest her to death. And to be sure it was so, they called a man with a horse and a sledge, and made him drive over her corp backward and forward several times. When they were sure she was killed outright, they dragged her miserable carcass to Nicolas Lowson's house, where they first found her.

"There was a motion made to treat Nicolas Lowson (another witch) after the same manner immediately; but some of them being wearied with three hours' sport, as they called it, said, 'It would be better to delay her for another day's divertisement;' and so they all went off."

To the disgrace of the country, the rabble, who had been so easily dispersed by the magistrates before, do not appear to have experienced any interruption in this protracted murder, which was perpetrated on the 30th January 1705, in one of the most civilized counties of Scotland, and within a few hours' distance of the metropolis. But this was an enormity which it was impossible for a well regulated government to overlook. The Privy Council had lent a deaf ear, as we have seen, to two sets of commissioners from this priest-ridden junto, who do not appear to have been supported either by the presbytery, or the commission of the General Assembly of the kirk; but this very plain hint was still not plain enough for their comprehension. On the present occasion, it was necessary to operate upon their perverted intellects by a more definite expression of disapprobation. Besides this, Mrs White, a witch of the better order, about this time commenced an action against these magistrates for wrongous imprisonment. These proofs of a remarkable improvement in public opinion seem to have put an end to the legal persecution of old women in that quarter,—though, as appears from the order made upon the petition of Beatrix Laying in May thereafter, formerly referred to—not to the belief in the existence of witches. The following paper, of which the title does not exactly correspond with its contents, is transcribed from the original records, and the proceedings—

of the Privy Council do not seem to have been carried further. The report of the committee represents the murder as of a less atrocious character than the account of it we have taken from the letter of the gentleman of Fife, though the two are by no means inconsistent with each other.

"Approbation of the Report of the Committee anent the Murder att Pittenweem."

"At Edinr. Feb. 15, 1705."

"The Lords of her Majesty's Privy Councill doe heirby nominat and appoynt the Earles of Rothes and Haddingtoun, Lords Yester, Advocat, and Enstruther, to be a committie to inquire into the murder committed upon a woman in Pittenweem, as suspect of witchcraft, and recommends to the said committee to meet to-morrow at twelve o'clock, in the midd-day, and call for Baillie Coutis, in Pittenweem, and know at him, why he suffered the said murder to be committed, and did not keep the publick peace in the place, and appeynts the solicitors to cite the rest of the Magistrates of the said burgh of Pittenweem, to appear before the said committee and answer to what shall be laid to their charge, for their not keeping the peace of the place, as said is, and declares any three of the said committee a quorum, and to report.

"Report of the Committee appointed to inquire after the Murder committed at Pittenweem."

"At Edinburgh, sederunt the Earle of Rothes, the Lord Yester, the Lord Enstruther, and her Majesties Advocat. The baillies compearing, and having given in a sub^t information of the matter of fact, with the double of the precognition taken by them anent the murder of Janet Cornfoot, they find that the said Janet was brought from the parish of Lewichars by two men, to the town of Pittenweem, upon the threttieth of Jan^y last, about six a'clock at night; that the men brought her first to the minister, after she had stayed a little in a private house of the town; and that the minister being for the time at Baillie Cook's house, she was brought before Baillie Cook's door, but not immediately secured as she ought to have been: That when the officer, Peter Innes, after a little time, was found, and sent to secure her, the rable was up, and

that they deforced the officer, and made him flee: That the officer went to the other two baillies and gott their verbal orders, but they concerned themselves no further: That when Baillie Cook heard of the rable, he came out himself and dispersed them, and rescued the poor woman, but found her almost halfe dead, lying within the sea-mark: That she being in that condition, Baillie Cook did not order her to prison, but ordained the officer and four men to take her to a private house: That they carried her to Nicolas Lawson's, other houses being unwilling to receive her: That before Nicolas Lawson's door she was again assaulted, cast down, and murdered. And that it appears the principal actors wer Robert Dalziel, a skipper's son, Walter Watson, in Bruntisland, and one Groundwater, an Orkney man; all three fled."

While these active magistrates displayed so much laudable anxiety to expel the great enemy of mankind and his associates from their jurisdiction, it was not to be expected that they should look with horror on the instruments by which their object was in some degree accomplished. The end was probably thought holy enough to sanctify the means, however irregular. It does not appear that a single individual was ever brought to trial for the "three hours' sport" of the rabble who murdered Janet Cornfoot. Before the baillies made their appearance in presence of the committee of the Privy Council, they had contrived, indeed, to imprison some of the murderers, but according to the writer of the letter to a nobleman, already quoted, "they were not long from the town, when the minister set them at liberty," as it is alleged, by virtue of an order from these magistrates themselves.

The only man accused by Mortoun was one Thomas Brown, who died in prison, "after a great deal of hunger and hardship;" and his remains, as well as those of Janet Cornfoot, were denied Christian burial.

We have said so much of the Pittenweem witches, not because the evidence against them, if Mortoun's pretended fits could deserve such a name, or the murder of two of them, are circumstances in themselves remarkable. Hundreds were brought to the stake in Scotland during the

seventeenth century, on no better grounds. But what is worthy of particular notice in their case, is the visible conflict between statute-law supported by the obstinate credulity of the lower classes, on the one hand,—and the dawn of a purer day which was then rising upon our rulers, and had already begun to dispel the illusions of the most detestable fanaticism, on the other. Yet it is a melancholy thing to reflect how long the night had lasted, and how deep had been its darkness; nor is it less lamentable to perceive how ineffectually the influence of true religion and of science is opposed, in our own days, to the inveterate credulity of a large proportion of our countrymen.

ACCOUNT OF DAVID RITCHIE, THE
ORIGINAL OF THE BLACK DWARF.

THE singular person of whose real history and condition we now propose to detail a few particulars, has already excited the curiosity and contributed to the entertainment of the public in no ordinary degree, under the fictitious character of the BLACK DWARF. OF Ritchie's being the real prototype of that marvellous misanthrope, we do not profess to entertain even the shadow of a doubt. Under that view he has been already described, evidently from high authority, in the Quarterly Review—and also in the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine for June, by a correspondent who has since communicated to us some further curious and well-authenticated information, which corroborates in general his former account, and which, with materials from other sources, enables us to present our readers with the following details.

David Ritchie, commonly called Bowed David, was born at Easter Hap-prew, in the parish of Stobo, Peebles-shire, about the year 1740. His father, William Ritchie, a labouring man, was employed for many years in the slate quarries at that place, as was also one of his sons, who was older than David. The name of our hero's mother was Niven. David used to say, that his deformity was owing to *ill-guillig* in his childhood; but this was not credited, and he is understood to have been mis-shapen from his birth. Whether his pecu-

liar temper arose entirely from this cause or from original disposition, it appears at least to have displayed itself at a very early age; and his father used to observe, that "he was born either to slay or be slain." He was never more than a few months at school, but he had learned to read English very well. He was sent to Edinburgh when young to learn the trade of a brush-maker; but his extraordinary figure attracted so much notice, that he soon left this city in disgust, and retired to his native hills.

How he subsisted on his return to the country we have not heard, but some time afterwards, probably on the death of his father, he attracted the notice of Sir James Nasmyth; and being now settled in the parish of Manor, he formed the plan of erecting a cottage for himself on the grounds of that gentleman, whose permission he seems to have readily obtained. He fixed upon a spot of ground at the bottom of a steep bank on the farm of Woodhouse. The benevolent proprietor directed his servants to lend him what assistance he might require, and gave him possession of the ground rent-free. The dwarf required but little assistance. With incredible labour and perseverance, he first cleared the space to be occupied by his hut and a small garden; scooping out for that purpose a large recess in the side of the hill, which, rising abruptly, formed on the one side a natural wall to the garden. The rest of it was inclosed partly by a wall of considerable height, and partly by the cottage, which occupied another of the sides. The walls both of the garden and the hut were chiefly built by David himself, of such materials as the spot afforded. Though without mortar, they were very solid, and were formed of alternate layers of large stones and turf. Having covered the cottage with a neat thatch-roof, and constructed a small door, and a few rude pieces of household furniture, he proceeded to the cultivation of his garden, in which he displayed very considerable taste, as well as industry. In a short time he contrived to stock it with a few fruit-trees, and with all sorts of flowers, herbs, and culinary vegetables which could be procured in the neighbourhood. His manner of working is described, by persons who used to visit