

HIGHLAND DANCING

IN

THE OLDEN TIMES.

“There’s threesome reels, there’s foursome reels,
There’s hornpipes and strathspeys, man.”

—Burns.

“Nae cotillon brent-new frae France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels
Put life and mettle i’ their heels.”

—Burns’ *Tam o’ Shanter*.



BOOK, giving in detail a history of the various forms of dancing among the nations of the world, both secular and religious, would be intensely interesting. So far as we know, such a book has never been written; although we have many books on the subject, but these only treat, as a rule, of the dancing customs of an individual nation or people. We have no end of descriptions of the national dances of the people of Europe, of the *taran'tella* of the Neapolitans; the *bole'ro* and *fandango* of the Spaniards; the *mazourek* and *Krakovieck* of Poland; the *cosack* of Russia; the *red'wac* of Bohemia: the *quadrille*, *cotillon*, and *contre danse* of the French; the *waltz* and *gallopade* of Germany; and the *reel* of Scotland. What is wanted is a philosophic treatise on the dances of all nations. As soon as man, in a rude state, wishes to express elevated feelings, whatever be their cause—joy, devotion, patriotism—he makes use of rhythm, of measured language, and the dance, which is measured movement. This is without doubt the origin of the symbolical dance which, among all nations, in the first stages of civilization, is used as an expression of excited feeling.

Music and dancing, it is reasonable to suppose, must have existed in the rudest and most remote ages, or rather, most likely co-eval with society itself. In proof of this supposition, all our circumnavigators tell us, that music and dancing are common to the natives of America and the South-sea islands; many natives

among whom excel in dancing in a wonderful degree. If we read the history of the Assyrians, or the Persians, or the Egyptians, we also find that dancing was their favourite exercise.

We learn from the Sacred Book, that:—"When David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistines, that the women came out of the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music" (1 Samuel, chap. xviii., v. 6), and we find that after David had ascended the throne, when he went with all his people "from Baale to Judah, to bring from thence the ark of God," that "David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of fir-wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and cornets, and on cymbals; and David danced before the Lord with all his might." We also read in the sacred volume that, many ages after, when "the sceptre had departed from Judah," and the Romans were in possession of Palestine, dancing was one of the chief amusements of that eventful period." "And when the day was come," says St. Mark in his Gospel, "that Herod, on his birth-day, made a supper to his Lords, High Captains, and chief estates of Galilee." And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod, and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, "ask of me whatever thou wilt, and I will give it thee." And he swore unto her, whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth and said unto her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "the head of John the Baptist"; a most extraordinary demand, truly! and although the king was very loth to comply, and, as the sacred penman says, "was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother" (St. Mark, chap. vi., v. 21 to 29).

We learn from ancient history that the games and festivals of the Greeks were uniformly graced with dances composed in honour of their object of adoration, or peculiar rites and ceremonies; nay, dancing was a favourite exercise of the deities; hence one of Apollo's titles is *Orchiestes*, the dancer, as Pinder, Homer, and others, celebrate in their lyric compositions. The Thracians

had their war-dances, as the savages of America and other remote parts of the habitable globe have to this day. Rome, in the days of glory and decline, carried the passion for dramatic dancing to a pitch hardly exceeded by the present theatrical rage for the like entertainment, introduced in the Italian opera. It was towards the close of the fifteenth century that this species of drama was first introduced at modern Rome in the pontificate of Sixtus IV. From Rome it spread gradually throughout the neighbouring provinces, states and empires, till at length it reached England; and has now, for more than two centuries past, been the favourite amusement of those who can relish all that music, poetry, and painting,—grace, elegance, and grandeur of movement,—together with all that the fascinating expression of the human countenance can at once convey. Notwithstanding the prevalence of the opera in Europe, we still find that the national dances retain a place, in defiance of refinement, and all its bewitching beauty, among the pastimes and pleasures of the vulgar.

In Spain the *Fandango*, and *Les Follies de' Espagne*, are still performed with castinets. In France the *contre-dances*; in Flanders, a number of droll dances; in Naples they still preserve a number of peculiar dances of a grotesque character; in France they have similar dances of a rural cast; in Venice they have a favourite dance called *Furlanda*. The peasants of the Tyrol also preserve several old dances. The Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, Tartars, Persians, Chinese, Indians, Arabians, Egyptians, and numerous nations of Africa and America, have at this day their national dances, which they preserve with as much care as they do their religious rites and ceremonies. On the authority of Dr. Livingstone, we are told that the question, "What do you dance?" means, what tribe do you belong to?—being a south African phrase, where each tribe has its own peculiar dance. To bring the matter home to our own islands, have we not the hornpipe of the English, the jig of the Irish, the Scottish measure of the lowlanders, and the Reel of the Highlanders, each danced with that life and spirit peculiar to each nation or province to which these dances belong.

The Scottish Highlanders are acknowledged by all to excel in those steps and figures called *reels* and *strathspeys*, which they still go through with vivacity, agility and grace.

The variety of dances that in former times made part of the amusements or mirthful exercises of the Gael, may be divided into

four classes :—1. Dances of one performer. 2. Dances of two. 3. Dances of three or more. 4. Dances of character or dramatic cast.

Class 1. A dance performed by one person is strictly considered a sort of character of consequence, in some measure dramatic. Of a female, the character assumed is *a' Cailleach*, or old wife; and the person who dances it is dressed in a very grotesque style, having a huge bunch of keys hanging by her apron-string, and a staff to support her, for she affects to be very stiff, and lame of one leg. When the tune strikes up she appears hardly able to hobble on the floor; by degrees, however, she gets on a bit, and as she begins to warm she feels new animation, and capers away at a great rate, striking her pockets, and making her keys rattle; then affecting great importance as keeper of the good things of the store-room, *ambry* and dairy. Meanwhile some of the company present join the person who plays the tune, and sing words suitable to the character the dancer assumes—generally some nonsense of a comic cast, with which the matron or *Cuilleach* seems wonderfully delighted.

If it be a male dancer, the individual personifies some droll character, and is fantastically dressed for the occasion; or perhaps assumes the appearance of a rustic or day-labourer; then for example, the dance called *a' Chraig Leith*, is danced by one man with a flughter-spade, who sings at the same time telling how he fared after his day's *dary* or labour. It is supposed that this is the same sort of dance mentioned in "The Complaint of Scotland," and therein called "the speyde." *Gille Cullum da' pheigin* is generally danced by one man, who performs it with great address over naked broad-swords laid on the floor; but sometimes this dance is danced by two, three, or four men, when so done they do not reel, but only change places. *A' Cuthaich chaoil dubh* is a kind of wild fantastic dance that requires great strength and agility to go through the various steps and movements, and is danced by one man. *Fear Druim a Chairi* is also danced by one male only.

Class 2. Dances of two, or *two-some* dances, as they are called by the lowlanders. These dances are performed generally by a male and female, and have a remarkably agreeable effect when done with spirit and grace; the couple are of the same age and generally youthful; the tunes played during the dances are various and changed at pleasure.

Class 3. Are reels and strathspeys, and are so well known as to need no description. All professors of the art of dancing teach Scotch reels and strathspeys as they do cotillons and country-dances. Mrs. Grant of Laggan, who spent the best of her days in Strathspey, thus archly expresses her opinion of the children of fashion approving "with air constrained the rural balls;"—

"The nymph that went to trace the source of Tay,
Or lead the sprightly dame by rapid Spey,
With conscious triumph smiles aside to see
This faint affection of the rural glee;
Short pleasure languid imitation feels,
While polish'd courtiers pant in active reels."

Class 4. Are of a dramatic cast, as already stated, such as *Damsha nam Boc* (dance of the he-goats). This dance is performed by three men, who reel fantastically, leap, bound and bleat, as he-goats do; and stooping on all fours, they jump alternately over each other, causing by this means much merriment and laughter. *Fidh an gunn*, (weave the gown) is generally danced by three persons who *set* and *reel*, but who instead of doing so in the ordinary manner, keep invariably their faces one way. *Damhsa an Chlesca*, (the cloak dance) is performed by one person (supposed to be a young gentleman who is returned from his travels abroad), attended by his man-servant. The young laird comes in as if newly arrived, looks round the company with seeming wonder, and after wandering through the apartment while the tune is playing he all at once stops, throws off his mantle, plaid or cloak, and away his staff, affecting at the same time considerable emotion; his servant who is by, picks up the cloak and staff, and puts on the one, and places the other in his hand, endeavouring at the same time to quiet his master, who seems to be pacified, and foots it away again to the same tune, till he tires, and throws away his mantle and staff again; which his man takes up, and presents them as before; repeating the same several times, till at last the servant recollecting that he has a letter, he pulls it out of his pocket and offers it to his young master, who says he is unable to read, owing to a phlegmon on his posterior which marvellously affects his eye-sight and that

We will describe at some length the dance called *Crait an Dreachan* (the wrens croft), which is danced by one man who personifies a farmer. The character comes into the hall, and begins with telling the story of his difficulties in labouring the farm of

Crait an Dreathan; he then stops short and desires the piper or fiddler to play up the tune peculiar to the dance; and then he dances the tune once over and stops to relate some of the particulars of his story, then renews the dance and so on. As there is some fear that some of our national dances will become obsolete, this among the number, it will be well to present the reader with the words of this comic performance in the original, and subjoin a literal translation for those who are unacquainted with the Gaelic.

CRAIT AN DREATHAN.

1.

Bha mise roimh so mo thuanach,
an Craitan Dreathan; agus ma bha,
ma' ta bha i duileach trabha: Bha
i ga faidhaich standlcaoh, clochack
carnach, claon-foidach, ach duleach
treabha mar bha i, threabh mise i.

Seid suas!

(Here he dances the tune once over).

2

An deig sin thainig buidh-eann
mhor, mhor saigheadoirim feath
na duicha, agus cha do stad iad
leam riabh, gus an d' thainig iad
cean Bhothel-brig.

Seid suas!

(Dances).

3

Ach an uair a biodh each ri'
Saigh dearach, bhidhinsa ann's na
peasarchan.

Seid susa!

4

Bhamibeath'inachspais-deireach,
agus thachair truir bhaintighear-
nan orm, and thug mi treis do
dhithis dibe, agus suadha an treas
te a ton re usc.

Seid susa!

5

Nuair cha each thun a bhlaire,
theasamh mifheinanna' croabhmhor
sgithich a chunnaig mi thall, agus
tharuing mi mho chlaidhiomh, agus
rinn mi mar sud, agus mar sud.

Seid susa!

THE WREN'S CROFT.

1.

I was formerly the farmer of the
Wren's Croft; and if I was, indeed
it was very difficult to labour; it
was wild, balky, stony, cairney, and
the furrow ill to clear; yet difficult
as it was, I laboured it.

Blow up!

2

After that there came a great com-
pany of soldiers to the country, and
they forced me to join them; and
then never halted till they brought
me to Bothwell-brig.

Blow up!

3

But when the rest would be
soldiering, I would be always found
among the pease.

Blow up!

4

I was one day out strolling, and
I met three ladies; I passed two of
of them, and let the third
. . .

Blow up!

5

When the rest went to the battle,
I myself stood in a large thorn tree
I saw over the way; and I drew
my broad-sword, and I laid about
me thus, and so, so.*

Blow up!

* Here he draws his sword or stick, and strikes at the legs and shoulders of his company.

6

'Naar thainig me da-thigh, rinn Fionghol Donn a'gam fhein an Cath-ta so danh; agus chuir i andeargan' cridhghuirm, agus an gorm an' crithe'n uaine, agus cearsle dhubh na cheann deire, agus chaithe mi mar sud fhein e.

Seid susa !

6

When I came home, my own brunette Flora made this tartan here; and she put the red into the heart of the blue, and the blue into the heart of the green, and a clue of black at the end, and I wear it as you now see.

Blow up !

7

An deigh sin, bha Crait an Dreathan abaigh; agus bhuaibh mi i; agus bha cearamh brudhaist dheth, agus ma bha mi buidheach, bha; 's mar robh, leig dha;—cha robh tulle a'gam re faighinn.

Seid susa !

7

After that the Wren's Croft was ripe; and I cut down the crop: and I had a quantity of barley on it; of which I made a quarter of brose; and if I was satisfied—well—if I were not—I had no more to get.

Blow up !

The imperative "seid suas" (blow up) is addressed to the musician, who is frequently a bag-piper, but oftener a fiddler.

The violin as well as the bag-pipes are, comparatively speaking, but of recent introduction among the Gael. For the harp is the true instrument of Gaelic song, which we had in common with our brethren the Gael of Ireland, among whom the great bagpipe was never known. The harp was freely cultivated both by the Scotch and Irish so early as the 12th century, and the common people of both countries seem at that early date to have attained considerable skill in its use. So much was this the case that we have competitions recorded which were patronised by Royalty itself. In the year 1564 Mary Queen of Scots paid a visit to the Perthshire Highlands, when she was entertained by the Earl of Athole. The story goes that there was a grand hunt got up in Glen Tilt, at which 2000 deer were driven through the Glen in her presence. To amuse her the harpers from all parts of the Highlands engaged in a friendly competition in her presence, the prize for superior skill being a small exquisitely finished harp. This harp was long afterwards spoken of as "Queen Mary's harp." In this account no mention is made of bagpipes or the fiddle. Yet for many generations the Scotch bag-pipes have been closely associated with peat-reek, kilts, and Scotch whisky, and when:—

"The pibroch resounds, to the piper's loud numbers,"

on the blood-red field of battle, these numbers have been found to be a most reliable backstay of our Highland Regiments in the hour of need. What a picturesque figure, dear to the heart of an artist

is the wandering Scotch bagpiper, dressed in tartan trews, whom we see yet at times on the streets of our lowland towns and cities, pocketing the street-corner penny and refreshing his tough nostrils with "Davie Graham's best sneeshin" from his big horn-mill. This figure has entered into the humorous literature of Scotland. Have we not Habbie Simpson, the famous "Piper O' Kilbrachan" and "Pawkie Adam Glen," who was long a favourite in every farmer's ha' village, and fair in the west of Angushshire, and also the famous "piper," who met Maggie Lauder gaun to Fife, and struck up a merry acquaintance with her on the road-side, making her heels fly to the music of his chanter. One of Scotland's most notable sons, the late Dr. Norman Macleod, speaks to us of the love of the Highlanders for the music of the bagpipes:—

"Dance, my children, lads and lasses,
Cut and shuffle, toes and heels ;
Piper, roar from every chanter
Hurricanes of Highland reels,
Make the old barn ring with laughter,
Beat its flooring like a drum ;
Batter it with 'Tullochgorum,'
Till the storm without is dumb."

There is no ground for assigning a Scottish origin to the bagpipes, much as they are beloved in the Highlands. The instrument is common in all countries, and in its most primitive form is as old as the fabled pipes of the river god Pan. In many European countries the bagpipes were anciently held in esteem: during the reign of Nero they were so much thought of in Rome that they got a place on the coin of the empire. It has been supposed that the bagpipes were first introduced into Scotland by the Scandinavian rovers, some time after the year 900. What confirms to a great extent the certainty of the large bagpipe being of Scandinavian origin is, that in Strut's "Sports and Pastimes" chap. V., there is a representation of a sword-dance, and therein is represented a figure playing on the bagpipes, precisely similar to that on which our modern highland pipers play on at this day.

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