

“ RASHIEBOG,”

A BRAES OF ANGUS GENEALOGIST, SMUGGLER, AND
ASTRONOMER.

“ And still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew.”
—*Goldsmith.*



HIS remarkable man was known all over the shire, and even much beyond it, under the name of the little Highland farm which he cultivated—*i.e.*, Rashiebog. This farm lay some ten miles to the north-east of the town of Kirriemuir. Old Rashiebog bulked largely in my mental vision in the days of my childhood. I had so often heard him spoken about as a wonderful character—a Highland cotter or crofter, who, with little or no education of the schools, had somehow acquired a fine knowledge of the science of astronomy—as a man who, though he had lived all his days amid the solitude of the Highland mountains, yet knew the world and the people thereof—yes, and could read them like a book: a man who, although he spurned the religious pretender, was himself deeply imbued with the spirit of true devotion to the Maker of all things; that he said in his own quaint way, “ God is present with us in every breath we draw, round about, behind, before, and a man may be a great theologian, and yet far, far frae the gates o’ heaven.”

I had also been told of his wonderful predictions of the weather to come—of how on one occasion when in Kirriemuir he took home with him provisions to last him six weeks, at the same time informing some of his Kirrie friends that he was doing so as a heavy snow-fall was to take place, so that he would not get back until the end of that time for more—and that this prophecy came true and added yet another bright jewel to his already well-adorned crown of fame.

“ Rashiebog” was an old man, or I should say a man well up in years, before I was born, and he was upwards of fourscore until I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance at his own little

homestead in Glenquiech. It was on a day in the first week of the glorious month of August. The weather was magnificent, the heather was in full bloom, and the sweet fragrance which the soft western wind blew from it was both refreshing and delicious.

The small thatched "clay biggin'" in which our philosopher dwelt, homely and rude as it was, yet, as seen in the bright sunshine of this lovely August morning, was far more picturesque than many a finer dwelling. A few dozen hens of the black Spanish breed were clucking, clucking around the front, and only, door, picking up scraps for their breakfast. Sandy Campbell, who was not confined to any "crue," but could take a dander at his own free will over the hills, was at the present time engaged eating a hearty meal from a big "trough" set at the end of the dwelling-house. The old man told me afterwards that this pig was on the hills all day, and always returned to his meals just as regular as if he had been a hired servant.

"Dauvit" was sitting on a low stone bench in front of the cottage, very busy making "tattie creels" with long saugh wands that grew in the burn near-by. The reader can see the exact figure I saw in our Portrait—the same coat, the same hat, set on the back of his head, for, like other great men that I have known, old Dauvid Ogilvy, so far as the adornment of his person was concerned, had only one suit for Sunday and Saturday and all the other days of the week. Greatness of mind and foppery do not often go together, although strange to say sometimes they do.

He nodded to me in a very friendly way when I came up to his side. We passed the usual salutations of "grand weather," "hope your well," and so on. I then told him I had come to see him without an introduction, and that I was so glad—so very glad—to meet and have a talk with a man so famous as himself. My words of compliment did not seem to elate him in the least. All he said in reply was, "Ay, ay, laddie; an' noo that ye hae seen auld Rashiebog, fat dae you think o' 'im?"

I took a long look at the strongly marked features of the old man—at his firm, determined mouth, his bright, clear eye, and at his broad, high, intellectual forehead—and at once realised that I was in the presence of one of nature's gentlemen—a man who, as Burns said of his Edinburgh friend, Captain Matthew Henderson—"a gentleman who held the patent of his honours immediately from Almighty God."

We first talked about the great and wonderful improvement of agriculture in this part of the country, now and when he was a boy. I could see that old Rashie held, with all the deep thinkers on this subject, that the only way to improve any country was first to make good roads in it. “Ye see,” he said, “this was the way the old Romans always did. When they had subdued a nation at the point of the sword, the next thing they did was at once to begin and mak’ gude roads. In the first forty years of this century that my recollection goes back to, before the days of railways, all our produce had to be carted to Dundee or Arbroath or Montrose, these being the nearest seaports. The farmer had to leave his farm about five o’clock in the morning and walk to the nearest seaport—sell his grain—dine on cheese and bread, washed down with home-brewed ale—and walk home the same night to load his carts and get them away by midnight, so that they might be back by the evening of the next day.” “Each ploughman,” he said, “was allowed from sixpence to one shilling for drink and food.”

“Na, na, you’re right when you say, laddie, that in thae days there was nae dog-carts nor gigs for the master, nor silk gowns for the gudewives—pianos an’ singing masters for the farmer’s daughters. The master had to put up wi’ ‘Shank-Naigie’—the gudewife wi’ home-spun oo, an’ the hissies got a coggie put in their hands an’ were sent to milk the kye, an’ yet there were times even then that bawbies were made like slate-stanes. For the four years before Waterloo, when Bonny was making sic a way o’ doin’ in the warl’, from 1810 to 1814, the average price of a quarter of wheat was £5; and then after 1814, came the grand crash, an’, O! sic times o’ poverty and distress that nothing has been seen like them, thank God, again in this century.”

In the course of that summer in which I first visited old Rashiebog, I had many an interview with the old gentleman. He told me all about his family, that he was now the only representative of the Rashiebog Ogilvys alive; that they were descended from Baron Ogilvy of Lintrathen and Alyth, and were, therefore, scions of the Ogilvie’s of the “Bonnie Hoose of Airlie.” David’s mother, besides, was one of the Royal House of Stewart, so that the blood of kings ran in our old philosopher’s veins.

In 1805, his family entered Rashiebog when he was only eight years of age, and the stocking, he said, belonging to his father at that time was “twenty ewes, two cattle an’ a horse beast.” When

David grew up he could do anything. The ploughs and carts were his "ain mak." The cart ropes were made from his horses' tails. The raips for the cornyard were made from heather. He at one time bought a turnip sowing machine, and when he got it home he would not use it as "he had nae confidence in thae new-fangled things at a'," but still continued to sow his turnip seed with his own home-made hand-box of his own construction. He was the same with clocks and watches. It was a saying of his that there never should be a "tick-tock anower the door o' his Hie'lan' Hame." He was in the habit of measuring his time, and that correctly, by the sun and the stars. A man who knew him well speaks of him thus: "Born and nurtured in the lap of nature our prophet's observatory was conveniently situated. His knowledge and portrayal of the telescope and its objects are worthy of a Herschell or a Nichol. The sky had been his picture and the world at large his picture book. He can descant on the glories of the heavens as a Hervey. He in his old age scans the frailty of the human family and takes his lessons from the book of, and worships, Nature and Nature-God."

Regarding his smuggling adventures, David had many, but he was generally very fortunate, though he made many narrow escapes. His idea of the smuggling was that "there was no sin o't," and among all his encounters with the preventive men, he only lost at one time "an auld pot, no worth tuppence," and he had brewed many a thousand gallons. At last he was taken, summoned for £100 of damages, but he got off for half-a-dozen pounds, and, he remarked, "they might as weel hae fined me a thousand, for I'll never try to pay." At one time one of his friends was fined £200. This not being paid, the man was put in prison. David wrote a letter to the Prince Regent on his friend's behalf, and, in the old man's words, "there sune cam' an order to open the door."

The want of space necessitates that I should close this present sketch. At some future time I will return to the subject, and give more in detail the facts connected with the strange life-history of the wonderful old man, for he really was one of the curiosities of the nineteenth century. This remarkable character passed away to a brighter and better land on the 12th of January, 1892, in the 96th year of his hale, ripe old age.