

CHAPTER XII.

THE WATCH-HOUSE AND DUNCAN MACPHERSON'S RAM.

“Here's fine revolution, if we had the trick to see't.
Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggats with them?
Mine ache to think on't.”

SHAKESPEARE.

THE watch-house is associated in the writer's memory with a host of incidents that left a deep impression of the horrible deeds done by resurrectionists. Few at the present day can remember the agitation caused in Scotland when the dreadful deeds and doings of Burke and Hare were made public. Horror and dread became epidemic, and the whole country was in a fever of agitation at the thought of having the remains of a wife, a mother, or father dragged from their grave and carried off to some dreadful den, there to be hacked and mutilated like a beast. The very thought of such a thing roused the people in many places to desperation. In Aberdeen they demolished the Surgeons' Hall, for they looked upon that detested place as little better than a shambles, where human bodies were bought, like dead beasts, according to their value. The stories told at that time of the deeds done in that human slaughter-house are too horrible to relate. There is little doubt that few of them had any foundation in fact, but they were the means of rousing the deepest feelings of a people who had a great reverence and respect for their dead. They rose up, determined to balk the resurrectionists of their prey. A watch-house was erected in many graveyards; indeed, very few in the north-eastern counties were without an erection of some kind to shelter the watchers of the dead, and their ruins may be seen in many graveyards at the present day.

A short description of a watch-house well remembered by the writer may interest the reader. The one referred to was built of rough stones, and was about ten feet square. It stood on a spot that overlooked the whole of the graveyard. On either side of the door was a narrow slit or window, that opened and closed with

strong wooden shutters. Through these apertures the watchers could reconnoitre unobserved, and, if need be, fire their guns upon the desecrators of the grave. The fire-place was opposite the door, and over it hung two claymores that had done service at Culloden; upon a small table in the centre of the apartment lay an open Bible, a snuff-mull, pipes, and a bottle of usqubae also stood there to refresh the weary watchers. Had the staunchest teetotaller been there, he would have been sorely tempted to fill the quail and taste the contents of the bottle. Few at the present time have any idea of the hardships entailed upon the male population of a small parish, in having to watch over the remains of their friends and neighbours for six weeks. That was the prescribed time necessary. The watch-house in some cases was occupied the whole of the winter months, if an epidemic was prevalent in the parish.

The writer had the following incidents in connection with this subject related to him by his venerable grandmother. A certain woman, reputed to be in league with the enemy of mankind, died, and a very curious controversy arose over her body. Some considered her mortal remains as neither more nor less than the empty tenement of an evil spirit. "Are we called upon," said one party in the parish, "to watch over the remains of a woman leagued with Satan?" To confirm this, it was averred that when her spirit fled, strange sounds were heard behind the bed. The controversy was brought abruptly to a close by the death of a much-respected parishioner, about whose body there was no question.

One dark November night, after the death of the respected parishioner referred to, Jamie Gordon and Johnny Dustan "watched the dead." Owing to the darkness of the night, they were obliged to leave the watch-house and survey the ground, lantern in hand. Jamie Gordon undid the bolt, lifted the latch, and was in the act of stepping out, when lo! in a moment he was upset, overturning the table, and the lamp and lantern were both extinguished. Jamie fought manfully with the beast, for they could see by the dim light of the fire that it was a beast of some kind that they were contending with; but all in vain. They were both vanquished, thrown down, and trodden upon by what they believed to be an evil spirit in the shape of a beast, conjured,

no doubt, by the departed witch in revenge for the disrespect shown to her remains by a section of the parishioners. Johnny Dustan, more self-possessed than his companion, called out, "Sain yersel', Jamie; we're in the pooer o' thè enemy. God gi'e us a gweed reddance." How they escaped the fury of the beast and came to the village they were never able to tell. When morning dawned, everyone hastened to the kirkyard to see and hear all particulars. Every hole and corner were examined, but no explanation could be found of the strange occurrence, until daft Jock Flemin' called out from a distant corner of the graveyard, "Ye're a' feels thegither; Tibbie's quiet enough in her lair. Here's the beast that beat ye baith." And there, sure enough, lay Duncan Macpherson's ram beneath a gravestone!

The history of that ram, as related to me, would require a volume to itself. The pranks he played and the evil deeds done by him are past recording. Left motherless at his birth, he was adopted into Duncan's family of nine children. He shared their meals, slept under the same roof, and, when he had an opportunity, opened the door of the cupboard and helped himself to any delicacy it contained. But as he grew older he learned even worse habits than these. It was said that Duncan conducted family worship in Gaelic. The strange tongue had an irritating effect on the ram, and he had to be banished to an outhouse while Duncan conducted his service. Eventually he had to be tethered in Duncan's yard, a thing that he resented to his dying day. When he "broke his tether," the news flew from house to house with lightning speed, and fear fell upon every wife and bairn in the place. The memory of Duncan Macpherson's ram was fresh in my early days. It was said some folks tried to get Duncan expelled from the place, he being a "Heilanman" and a stranger. They so far took action in the matter as to "tell the minister." He replied to the deputation by quoting several passages from Scripture. Although poor Duncan was not actually driven hence, he was considered an outcast, and was obliged eventually to return to Lochaber.

In a certain parish not far from Speyside a watch-house had been hastily extemporised in an old roofless tomb belonging to an ancient family that once flourished in the parish. Instead of an arch of stone, the vault had been covered over with great oak

beams, which had become rotten through exposure to the weather and the *debris* from the roof lying upon them. A roof was put upon it and a fireplace built, and the watchers took possession of it, all unconscious of danger. Young men from the village and surrounding farm-houses used to resort to the watch-house and spend the "forenichts" in company with the watchers. Upon one occasion a greater number than usual had met in the tomb. It was said that they spent the evening in a pastime very much out of place amongst the dead. However, about midnight or early morning, the treacherous floor gave way, landing the whole company "down amongst the dead men." In clearing out the *debris*, a pack of cards was found, with more broken glass than goes to the making of one bottle. It was said that next morning one of the watchers horrified the whole place by appearing with his hair grey. It had become grey from fright!

The late Dr. Macpherson of Garbity, father of the late heiress of Aberlour House, had a stiff arm. It was said that it was the result of an encounter with watchers. Another student and he had succeeded in snatching a body from a grave, and had placed it between them in a gig, when they were set upon by the watchers.

The writer has seen more than one coffin placed in what was called "irons," to prevent the possibility of the body being snatched from the grave.