

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WATER KELPIE AND WILL O' THE WISP.

“The water kelpies haunt the ford
By your direction,
An' 'nighted travellers are allured
To their distruction ;
An' aft your moss traversin' spunkies
Decoy the wight that late and drunk is ;
The blazin', curst, mischievius monkeys
Delude his eyes,
Till in some miry slough he sunk is,
Ne'er mair to rise.”

BURNS.

BEFORE the military roads were constructed in the Highlands and bridges built over the fords, many belated travellers lost their lives in crossing the swollen streams and rapid running rivers. Nearly every ford along their course was believed to be haunted by water kelpies, a sort of evil spirits that could transform themselves into various shapes and forms. One of their devices was to take the form of a pony with saddle and bridle, ready to carry any weary traveller through the fords. The “Mill Ford,” which takes its name from the ancient mill of Easter-Elchies, was considered the least dangerous on “the run o' Spey.” It was in the summer season often so shallow that foot travellers crossed easily. Being the highway from Elgin and the “Laich o' Moray” to lower Strathspey, it was much used by people who could not afford to ride through it, but “cast their sheen and waded.”

A shoemaker and his wife went from Inveraven to Elgin on business, the souter to buy leather, which he and his wife were to carry home on their backs. Footsore and weary, they reached the Mill Ford about midnight. The miller being in bed, they laid their burdens on the bank and sat down to rest and refresh themselves before “takin' the foord.” They only sat for a short time when the husband remarked, “There's the miller's shely on the green, wi' the saidle an' bridle on't. There wad be nae hairm.

o' ridin' it through the water. We can turn it back at the ither side. I'll tak' the leather on in front an' ye can loup on ahin' me." As soon as the wife mounted, the beast took the water with a rush. In spite of the souter's efforts, it turned its head down the stream. They tried to dismount, but all in vain. They felt as if they were glued to the back of the fiendish beast, which to their horror opened its mouth and said, "Sit weel, Jannity, an' ride weel, Davie; the first landin' ye'll get will be in the Pool o' Cravie." "Lord preser' us a'!" exclaimed the poor wife. The words were hardly uttered before they felt themselves struggling in the water, and saw nothing but the bundle of leather floating down the Spey.

Davie Stuart, being a pious man, had bought a Bible in Elgin. His wife had wrapped it up carefully with a silk handkerchief and mutch ribbon that she had purchased. They were tied in a bundle on her back. The Bible was the providential means of saving them from a watery grave. It is said that neither book nor ribbon were wet although plunged in the river.

The people of Aberlour being characteristically cautious, we never heard that any of them were entrapped by

"The blazin', curst, mischievous monkeys."

There was a singular deposit of club moss that lay between Tamnabent and the bottom of the Benrinnes hills. It lay in some places to a depth of ten feet. It had evidently been swept down from the hills by a flood or a glacier, as it was mixed with fir trees, many of them with their roots uppermost. Where the peat had been cleared away, the boles and roots of trees were seen in the ground where they had grown before the avalanche of moss had overwhelmed them. On this "Boorach," as it was called, "Will o' the Wisp" hung out his nightly lamp to allure or terrify the belated traveller.

Close to the edge of the moss stood a cluster of primitive cottages. In one of them dwelt "Old Francie" and Meg, his wife, whose marriage is related in a preceding chapter, and the following story was often told by Francie:—

"Ae nicht Meg an' me had jist lyen doon, fan we hears a booboin' comin', as it were, doon the lum. 'God preser' us a'!' said Meg, 'fat's that? The Lord hae a care o' us, Francie, fat can it be?' 'Be,' says I, 'fat can it be, ye gowk, but the win' in the

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lumhead.' 'Get up, man,' says she, 'I ken the howlin' o' the win' ower weel. It's some puir cratur laired in the moss.' Tae get quit o' her din, I jist rises an' draws on my breeks an' gangs tae the door, an' faith, she was richt, for gey weel doon in "The Boorach" I hears something booin' like a bull. I gangs awa' in an' staps my feet in my sheen, an' tak's doon the gun aff the kebars. 'Fat is't, Francie?' says Meg. 'The Lord preser' us, far are ye gaun wi' the gun?' 'Lie still in yer bed,' says I, 'I'm thinkin' there's a stray buck fae Glenfiddich laired in the moss I'll stap doon an' try an' get a shot at 'him.' Sae awa' doon I gangs. I could see naething, the nicht was sae dark, but I hears a boo, boo, booin' again. Sae I gangs on till I thoct I was near the place far the soun' cam' fae. At last I cries oot 'Is onybody there?' 'I'm the Bull o' B——m,' said a weel-kent voice. 'Ye doitit, stupid feel,' says I, 'fat are ye deein' there ower the head in a moss hole?' Wi' that I gangs richt up tae him an' poo's him oot, an' a bonnie job I had. Ye ken he was aye a great, muckle, fashionless cheil, an' he was waur fan he was fou. He had been at B——hy's roup, an' he saw a licht in "The Boorach," an' thoct it was fae his ain window."

The hero of this adventure never failed to attend all the roups that took place round about, and of course he never failed to get "roarin' fou" at them. Francie was not by any means the only one who had upon such occasions rescued "The Bull o' B——m" from a perilous situation, and they were not likely to soon forget their encounter with him.

Besides fairies and kelpies, other supernatural manifestations were by no means uncommon in our parish. A well-known veracious man solemnly declared that one night he had his supper along with his fellow servants, but being more of a serious turn of mind, he left them at their diversions in the kitchen and went off to bed. His bedroom lay at the further end of a wide farmyard. In crossing it, to use his own words, "My hair stood on en' an' my knees knockit thegither at the sicht that I saw. The yaird was fou' o' a' kin's o' dogcairts and coaches. A hearse was stan'in' at the front door o' the hoose. Hoo I got through them tae my bed that nicht the Lord kens; I canna tell. It wasna verra lang after fan the mistress dee'd, an' the yaird was filled wi' carriages an' a hearse exactly as I saw it that nicht I gaed early tae bed."

At the time that this vision appeared a belief in "the evil e'e" had not entirely died out on Speyside. The possessors of this malignant influence seem to have directed it principally against innocent and harmless children. If a child was more than ordinarily prococious or beautiful in was in danger of "the evil e'e." Alexander M'Lagan, the author of that wonderfully graphic poem, "The Evil E'e," writes—

"An evil e'e hath looked on thee,
My pair wee thing, at last;
The licht has left thy glance o' glee,
Thy frame is fading fast.
Wha's freens, wha's foes in this cauld world
It's e'en richt ill to learn;
But an evil e'e hath looked on thee,
My bonnie, bonnie bairn."

Many mothers of "bonnie, bonnie bairns" lived in perpetual fear of an evil e'e blighting and shortening the child's life. They would shake their heads and say, "I fear that bairn's nae lang for this warl." It does appear strange that in many cases the prediction came true. "Whom the gods love, die young," said the ancients, and we practically admit the truth of the saying, for we often say that certain individuals are "too good to live long."

We know how hardly superstition dies out amongst a highly imaginative people, but it is still more strange that they should have believed that they could counteract the evil purposes devised against them by drinking water off a crooked sixpence. A very astute and worthy Speyside matron never allowed her two fair, buxom daughters to go to a dance or merry-making without "tastin' aff a saxpence." On one occasion the lover of one of them, while waiting to take her to a dance, took up the glass of water intended for her. In hurriedly drinking it he was nearly choked by the sixpence. In his excitement he threw it in the fire, thereby incurring the wrath and indignation of the worthy dame for the loss of her "lucky saxpence." The same worthy wife had a cow "bewitched." Her milk was turned to water, and the proper antidote against this sort of spell was at once gone through. A quantity of the liquid drawn from the cow was put into a pot and hung upon the fire. When the contents began to boil a long-bladed knife was drawn through it in the form of a St. Andrew's cross. This operation was repeated until the sun set, when the pot was lifted off the fire and carried to the middle of

the field where the cow grazed, and was poured into a hole made beside a "yirdfast stane." By this means the cow was cured and the spell broken. It seems incredible that such an operation as this was actually gone through on Speyside less than sixty years ago. Even at a later date a cow belonging to a worthy villager of Aberlour "lost her milk." After many fruitless attempts had been made to restore it, several neighbours declared that "the coo was witched," and one of them volunteered to cure her. At sunrise he went with a pail to the burn and filled it with water from beneath the bridge, gathering at the same time a number of water-worn pebbles from the bed of the burn. He put the pebbles into the water and carried it home. After being boiled, he took out the stones and gave the cow a drink of the water. What was left of it he poured on her back. "The water," said he, "for this purpose has tae be ta'en fae a stream at the spot far the livin' an' the dead cross. It will cure ony coo bewitched."

There were many supernatural manifestations believed in that there was no divination against. When "the death watch" or "chackymill" was heard in the old wooden box-bed, mantle-shelf, or chest of drawers, no one, young or old, doubted "the warning." that a death was impending.

Of all the birds of ill omen, the magpie, or "pyet," was most to be dreaded as the bringer of evil tidings. If one alighted near a dwelling and gave utterance to its peculiar crackling notes, news of the death of a relative would soon be received; if two of them crossed the road in front of a traveller, ill luck would attend his errand. No doubt but that the habits of this gamekeeper persecuted bird in some measure account for the idea that it possessed a foresight of domestic calamities.

There were few farm houses that had not an ash or rowan tree growing in or near the yard (garden). In one or other of the trees a pyet had its nest. In an old ash tree that grew near the old house of Kinermony a pair of pyets had a nest for generations. Every year the birds returned and occupied the nest. After hatching and rearing their young, the two old birds and their brood disappeared in a mysterious way, but a pair never failed to return the following year exactly at the same time. The magpie, unlike the gregarious rook, is a solitary and hermit-living bird rarely seen and avoiding notice.

When the cock, the very counterpart of the pyet, crowed boldly at the midnight hour, the awakened household, in a state of fright and consternation, wondered who would be the victim of this mysterious announcement. We can hardly at the present time believe that the greater number of our forebears believed that birds, and even beasts, were made the medium of announcing to them the irrevocable voice of fate.