

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST OF THE GORDON LAIRDS OF ABERLOUR.

“ A Norlan’ laird neist trotted up,
Wi’ bawsn’t naig an’ siller whup,
Cried, ‘ There’s my beast, lad, haud the grip,
Or tie’t till a tree.”

Sir A. BOSWELL.

THE history of the numerous lairdships that existed on Speyside during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would make very interesting reading at the present time. The number of lairds that bore the name of Grant is remarkable. J. W. H. Grant, Esq. of Wester Elchies, is the sole proprietor of what at one time constituted five separate lairdships, viz., Elchies, Knockando, Ballintomb, Allachie, and Carron. The last named place was bought by John Roy Grant, a son of the Laird of Freuchie, from the Marquis of Huntly. His name will always be remembered on Speyside for the deed he committed in killing his kinsman, John Grant of Ballindalloch, in a dispute they had about the boundaries of their respective properties. From this cause a lasting feud existed between the families for generations. The deed was committed in 1566. Patrick, his eldest son, succeeded his father in Carron, his brother Robert became laird of the Nether Glen of Rothes, and the third son became famous as James au Tuim, or James of the Hill. The Laird of Elchies seems to have had what was called “the power of pot and gallows,” a power that was usually the prerogative of a feudal lord. I well remember seeing in the bed of the Spey opposite the boat-house a large, flat-topped boulder stone called “The Trial Stane.” When the Laird of Elchies sat in judgment upon a witch, he ordered her to be placed on “The Trial Stane.” If she succeeded in reaching the bank of the river she escaped “scot

free." "The Stane" was very dangerous to the boat in crossing, so the late William Thomson had it and other large stones blown up into fragments at a time when the river was very low.

In these democratic days people would hardly believe in the deference paid to "The Laird." In many respects it amounted almost to servility. Their retainers and servants were ready to serve them even at the cost of their lives. One of the lairds of Glenmoriston had a quarrel with a tenant on his estate. It was beneath the dignity of the laird to kill a man in his position, but his faithful henchman, Donald Grant, waylaid the man that offended the laird, and gave him "the dirk." He was tried for the murder at the assize held in Inverness. Of course he was acquitted, and served the laird for years after. When he died the laird followed him to the grave. As he looked down on the coffin he exclaimed, "Aye, aye, Donal', ye're lyin' there in yer last graith. Ye were aye a true an' faithfu' servant. I could hae trusted ye wi' untold gowd, but I could never trust ye wi' unmeasured fusky."

The small estate of Aberlour had been in the possession of a Gordon for many generations. The Gordons were faithful followers of Prince Charlie. When the last laird of the name died, a note written by the Prince was found hidden away in a recess. It ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR GORDON,
"I am to be at —, and I trust to see you there
with as many men as you can raise to rally round the Royal Standard.

"I am, yours faithfully,

"CHAS. E. STUART."

The note is dated from Dalnacardoch in August, 1745, and addressed to James Gordon, Esq. He was very likely the grandfather of the last laird of that name, who, in the hope of filling his exhausted exchequer, established a distillery close to the mansion house. Being totally devoid of any business qualifications, he involved himself in financial ruin. His creditors took possession of his property, and let the distillery to the late John Grant, who carried it on successfully until the property was sold to the late Alexander Grant. On removing from Aberlour, Mr. Grant established the far-famed Glengrant Distillery at Rothes. Few men on Speyside were better known and more highly respected than was "Glenny," as he was familiarly termed.

When the news spread through the parish that Sandy Grant, the lad that had left it almost penniless many years before, had returned to his sister's house at Garbity almost a millionaire, and that he had bought the estate of Aberlour, and intended to transform it and build a mansion surpassing any castle in the North, it was only a pardonable pride that we all felt in the rich man who had returned to beautify and bless his native parish by the means of his wealth. We can imagine what his feelings were when he put his foot on the estate that he had spent his life to possess. What golden dreams he must have cherished beneath the burning sun of India! Along with the estate of Aberlour he hoped to acquire the farm of Drumfurrich on which he was born. When he made his first appearance in the village his movements were eagerly watched by all eyes, and speculation was rife whether he would remember old Mrs. Cumming and call upon her. She was a fellow-servant with him when he left Elchies for the East. Along with the other servants, she gave him half-a-crown and her blessing when he left. It was amusing to see the number of people who tried to put themselves in his way, but they failed to draw the attention of the rich man. He had no eyes for them; he seemed wholly absorbed in his plans for the future. It is sad to think that he did not live to realise his aspirations. Before the residence that he was building was completed, Death laid his icy hand on the rich laird, and all his plans for the future were paralysed. Fortunately he had arranged before his death to have the body of the Parish Church lengthened and the tower or steeple that gives it such prominence in the village built. It was his intention to replace the wretched "rickle" of a stone dyke that surrounded the graveyard by a new stone wall.

His splendid mansion, with the estate and all his wealth, passed to the only daughter of Dr. Macpherson of Garbity, his niece on the mother's side. She took the name of Grant, and from that time she became identified with the Parish of Aberlour and the history of Speyside. When she attained her majority she came to live in the new mansion. Ninety local gentlemen met there to celebrate the event. The events that followed are so well known in the parish that there is no need to put them on record. They were what may be truly termed "a life drama."

On her death the estate passed to a distant relative. The untimely death of the heiress of Aberlour was felt by everyone in the parish. With no experience of the world and wealth at her command, we can hardly wonder that one in her position was more to be pitied than envied, and it is to be regretted that the wealth acquired by her uncle during the many years of his exile failed to accomplish the objects he had no doubt in view. Her successors were too poor to occupy the mansion house, and for a time the beautiful residence seemed doomed to desolation.

Fortunately, the late Mr. Findlay, proprietor of *The Scotsman*, purchased the estate. The day that he took possession of it and became Laird of Aberlour ought to be marked as a red-letter day in the history of the parish for very many years. When Mr. Findlay became proprietor, he not only brought with him material means, but he had the desire to use it for the improvement of his newly-acquired property and for the benefit of his tenants. He felt, to use his own words, "that a laird or landed proprietor has peculiar responsibilities to fulfil, more especially in reference to his cottar tenants." This responsibility he felt to be widened after he acquired, from the Duke of Fife, some of the finest land and the largest farms in the parish. No landlord ever tried more conscientiously to do his duty and better the condition of the cottars upon his property. He was able and disposed to lay out upon it a great amount of money from which he never expected any return. Those who can remember the conditions of cottar life around the base of Benrinnes and the Conval Hills sixty years ago and see their altered condition at the present day, are able to calculate the benefit that the late Mr. Findlay has conferred upon them. I consider it a fortunate incident in my life to have met him as the Laird of Aberlour. I have met few men who have left upon my mind a more pleasing impression. Free from ostentation, he dispensed his hospitality with a kindly warmth that made the recipient of it quite at home. No one could have been long in his company before discovering that he was a man of high Christian principles, and that his everyday life was regulated by a sense of his responsibilities. His aim was to do "good unto all men," and his beneficence was not confined to Aberlour alone.