

BALLAD TIMES.—THE GODLIE BALLAD.

THE barrenness of Scottish poetical literature between the times of Lyndsay and Ramsay has often been noted. If one were to take the names of Maitland, Scot, and Montgomery, out of that period, it could scarcely be said to have handed down to us any worthy representatives of our National Muse; certainly none who, in range or genius, would be fit successors to the Lyon King at Arms, or give a decent literary ancestry to the Edinburgh wig-maker. The fact was, that the whole energy and activity of the national mind was thrown into and wrought in other channels than those of polite literature. The Church, that old institution which in its day had done much for men, had been for some time wandering in a sort of besotted foolishness, so far away from its ideal purposes; had got so far out of joint with the times, and out of sympathy with the progress of human ideas, that men could brook the arrogancy of its pretensions no longer, and the practical work of its reformation began. The struggle to establish the principle of the right of private judgment in matters of religion, took such a hold upon men, as swallowed up all concern for other matters, and opened the flood-gates to such a torrent of theological discussion that generations had to pass before anything like reason took the place of bigotry and delusion.

The ecclesiastical establishment in our locality was very strong in Popish times. We had the cathedral of St. Machar, with its twenty-nine prebendaries; then St. Nicholas, with sixteen chaplains; St. Clement's; St. Ninian's; St. Catherine's; Mary Magdalene (under St. Nicholas); Chapel of the Virgin (at Bridge of Dee); the Snow Kirk; and King's College Kirk. Add to these the monasteries of Trinity, Grey, Carmelite, and Black Friars, and then we may estimate somewhat the strength of the bulwark, from behind which the disciples of the new ideas had to dislodge their enemy—an enemy who had long sanctified superstition, and hid depravity under the garb of religion. Of relics, too, our town could boast an abundant supply. “A piece of the true cross; a fragment of the cross of St. Andrew, gifted by Robert III.; an arm of St. Fergus; some-

thing of St. Duthick, St. Edmund, St. Helen, St. Margaret, St. Catherine, St. Peter, St. Paul, and a bone of the Patriarch Isaac!" were part of the devotional trumpery, the clerical properties of the times. Miracles, too, were wrought; witness the one mentioned by Boece as having taken place at the funeral of Bishop Elphinstone. Not only were the vanes of the cathedral blown down on that occasion, but the Bishop's pastoral staff, breaking, fell into the grave, while a voice was heard saying, "Thy mitre, William, should also be buried with you"; and, adds the historian—"a child was born then at Foveran with one pair of legs, two heads, and two bodies"!

On such a mass of bigotry and superstition, slowly but surely the growing ideas of the Reformation were exercising their disintegrating power. As early as 1521, we find John Marshall, master of the Grammar School, summoned before the Council for entertaining and proclaiming the Luther heresies, but it was not till almost forty years after this, that through many doubtful and dismal struggles, the cause triumphed by its public recognition in 1560. The influence of no individual did more to stave off the day of Papal reckoning than the then Earl of Huntly. As head of one of the most powerful families in the north, in times of political disunion his word was law, and it soon passed into a synonym for success, to say of any undertaking, that "the Gordons had the guidin' o't". For, long after the final expression of the national will in matters ecclesiastical, even as far on as 1580, he, and a number of the "bigger lairds", kept the whole countryside in a state of warlike insecurity, wrangling, fighting, burning, and robbing in every quarter, with no check or hindrance, except it came from the royal army.

But during all this period of mental conflict, of bickering tulzie and bloody fray, where, "wi' droopin' head and drizzelt wing", dwelt our much-loved Muse? It would be a mistake to run off with the idea that because no great name has been handed down to us, belonging to this period, therefore the poetic spirit in our district was dead. Far from it—it was only obscured. It took to the by-paths, because the highway of life was too full of tumult. We found her lately in the seclusion of King's College, "with 'bated breath and whisper-

ing humbleness", smoothing the rough paths of a rugged life-road. And now, away among the hills and dells, by the humble firesides of the peasantry, she inspired unrecorded singers to weave for us, what is to every true Scotchman the crowning glory of his native Muse—our ballad minstrelsy. Out of the turbulence and tumult of those times our ballad singers caught an inspiration which, in the tenderness and simplicity of its utterance, stands unrivalled—alone. Culture may imitate, but can never equal it—the spirit has passed away with the times that gave it birth.

We can readily imagine the fear and trembling with which our sturdy, plodding burgesses eyed the juncture of affairs which brought Huntly with 1000 horse to their doors, in resistance of the Queen's authority over his son. No doubt, too, it was with very mixed feelings that, after the affray of Corrichie, they beheld the Queen's army return with the rebellious Sir John a prisoner, speedily doomed to suffer on the Castlegate. But away in some quiet glen of the Dee, some duddy "wicht o' Homer's craft", who had seen and possibly suffered within sight of the Skares, on the fatal Howe o' Corrichie, strummed to some "auld warl'" tune the record of that "bluidy fecht", and how,

Erle Huntley cam' wi' Haddo Gordone,
 An' countit ane thusan' men;
 But Murry had abein twal hunder,
 Wi' sax score horsemen and ten.

They soundit thi bougills an' thi trumpits,
 An' marchit on in brave array;
 Till the spiers and the axes forgatherit,
 An' then did begin the fray.

Thi Gordones sae fercelie did fecht it,
 Withouten terror or dreid;
 Then mony o' Murry's men lay gaspin'
 An' dyit thi grun' wi' their bleed.

* * * * *

Murn ye hei'lans, an' murn ye lei'lands,
 I trow ye hae muckle need,
 For the bonnie burn o' Corrichie
 Has run this day wi' bleed.

Though Adam Gordon got pardoned for his share in that day's brulzie, did he not nine years after burn the Castle o' Towie—Lady Forbes, her bairns, and servants perishing in the flames? Did not the Master of Forbes pursue the culprit into our town, and through the sanguinary conflict at the Craibstane bring our citizens under the fleecing power of the Regent Morton? Yes! all too true. Yet some humble singer out of that terrible fatality has composed one of the most pathetic ballads in literature. What could surpass the motherly tenderness, yet heroic acceptance of death, expressed in these lines:—

Oh, then out spake her youngest son,
 Sat on the nurse's knee;
 Says, "Mither, dear, gie o'er this house,
 For the reek it smothers me."

"I wou'd gie a' my gold, my bairn,
 Sae wou'd I a' my fee,
 For ae blast o' the westlin' win'
 To blaw the reek frae thee.

"But I winna gie up my house, my dear,
 To nae sic traitor as he;
 Come weel, come woe, my jewels fair,
 Ye maun tak' share wi' me."

Never was the stuff out of which Scottish mothers are made better represented than in these lines. We might go on over "Glenlogie", the beloved of Jeanie Melville; "Willie Macintosh", "The Battle o' Balrinnes", and many other jewels of our local ballad lore, which found their occasions in the circumstances of these times, and had their strains woven at the firesides of the peasantry; but we must follow our Muse to other quarters where she seems to have occasionally peeped in.

When doctrines and creeds were beginning to settle down into something like fixed form, the Kirk of St. Nicholas found itself possessed of "a reader" in the person of WALTER CULLEN. This worthy citizen not only read the "common prayers and scriptures", and instructed the "hail indwellaris of this burght, als veill young as auld, in the Catechisme," but he kept a register of baptisms, marriages, and deaths, which has been found to contain some items of poetry well worth pre-

serving. Whether he merely copied them, or composed them himself, cannot now be definitely settled; at all events, they have become so associated with his name, since some of them appeared in "The Analecta Scotica", and are exactly the kind of thing we might expect a man of his calling to produce, that we cannot do better than treat them, when nothing is known to the contrary, as "Cullen's Godlie Ballets".

Whatever we know of his life is gleaned from his "Chronicle of Aberdene", as the above-mentioned register has been called. He was born 2nd November, 1526, his father being a baillie, and his grandfather a provost, of Aberdeen. He had a brother who fell on the memorable field of Pinkey, and an uncle, latterly minister at Fetteresso, but who had been vicar of Aberdeen prior to 1549. He is ever laying stress on the honourable pedigree of his family, but, apart from this amiable weakness, he seems to have been a cultured, pious man, with a predilection for poetry. Religion so occupied the minds of the educated, and the ballads and songs of the people were so under ecclesiastical ban, that a hundred chances to one anybody with a love of poetry took to religious subjects. Thus it was with Walter Cullen; and we are sure that, in spite of Dr. Johnson's heavy destructive criticism against all religious poetry, we can present the discerning reader with stanzas from these ballads, "which", in the words of a very able critic, "it would be difficult to improve either in feeling or expression".

Here and there throughout the pages of his Chronicle we find in all four ballads, from the first of which we shall give an example in the original spelling. It is entitled, "Ane Godlie Ballet of ane Synnar Cryand on God for merce in tyme of trowbill". It contains nine six-line stanzas, with a refrain of four lines repeated after every verse, and is under date, 1578:—

4.

Gyfe thow in jugmentt enter wald
 With ws, thy serwandis pwir,
 Thair swld no flesche in ertht be fund
 Thy jugmentt to induir;
 Thairfor, in place thy jugmentt, Lord,
 Thy mercy we procur.

Haife grace to ws, we pray,
 Nocht for owir sakis, bott for thy lufe,
 O Lord, O Lord, O gracijs Lord,
 Lord town thy wrathe away.

5.

Thy swerd is drawin, thy bow is bentt,
 To plaig ws in thy ire;
 Thy wrythe on ws is kindlitt bauld,
 As hoitt consumyng fyr.
 Hald wp thy hand and spair ws, Lord,
 Maist hummelie we desyre.
 Haife grace, &c.

8.

The bluid of thy dear Sone, our Lord,
 Was sched abunduntlie,
 Nocht for the juist, bot for all sik
 As wikitt synnaris be,
 And do onfenyitlie repentt.
 And turin with speid to the.
 Haife grace, &c.

This is followed, under date 1588, by a snatch of seventeen lines beginning "This warld our all"—crude, and of no consequence. Then under the same date we have—"Ane Godlie Ballett to all thayme that is persecuitt for Godis Word, with grytt comfortt for thair deliverance". The versification is smooth, having a fine easy swing about it, while the apt manner in which he illustrates his theme from the incidents of sacred writ, is as good an example as we know, of an all but universal practice of the times. We have in this and the succeeding specimen modernised the spelling a bit; but this, while it adds to the reader's ease, in no way impairs the worth of the originals.

1.

Whoso do put their confidence
 And trust in me with one accord
 To them I sal be ane defence
 In time of need, thus said the Lord.
 If they stand stiffly at my word,
 Frae plagues great they sall be free,
 Tho' wickitt perish by the sword,
 To mine ane buckler will I be.

2.

Tho' I did all the warld destroy
 Because the wickitt would not mend,
 Yet saved I my servant Noy,
 And from the flood did him defend;
 When Sodom made a wicked end,
 I saved Lot, as ye may see.
 To wickitt tho' great plagues I send,
 To mine ane buckler will I be.

3.

Though Pharoah, with his great army,
 Israel to kill he did intend,
 I led them safely through the sea,
 And fra his host did them defend,
 Where he made a mischievous end
 Both he and all his companie.
 Therefore to all I mak' it kend,
 To mine ane buckler will I be.

He continues in stanzas 4 to 8 giving Scripture illustrations, taking up the theme generally in stanzas 9 to 11, thus:—

9.

Now ye that are my servants sure,
 And entered are with me in band,
 Ye know some time ye stood in fear,
 In tynsall both of life and land;
 For when great kings did you gain-stand
 And Satan with his craft sae slee,
 As then I saved you with my hand,
 And so shall I your buckler be.

10.

And tho' that ye have done me serve,
 According to the law I set,
 Frae ye begin ance for to swerve
 Your righteousness sall be forgot;
 Then I but ony langer let,
 Sall plague you for y'r iniquity.
 Besides the plagues that ye sall get,
 Nae mair I shall your buckler be.

11.

Tho' I the wickett thole you kill
 An' dolent deid do you devour;

This promise true I make you till
 A better life I shall restore,
 To you where that ye sall implore
 To reign with me eternally,
 Where ye sall dwell for evermore
 Where aye I sall your buckler be.
 So be it.

The last of these ballads, and from a literary point of view the best, is given at the end of the Chronicle, with the following introduction :—

“Ane Meditacione concernying the Hevenly Kyngdome and this erthly tabernicle of our mortalatie, collectit and written by me, Walter Cullen, vicar and reader of Aberdeen, to stynd as my last will and desyr, the fyefth day of October, 1584 yeris.”

1.

That kingdom crystal clear,
 That warld whilk wants end,
 Whar dwells a God whose hand frae harm
 His chosen doth defend;
 Perpetual is and sure
 And evermore doth last,
 On that same warld let's our thochts
 And cogitations cast.

2.

There, rivers run of life;
 Here, standing pools of mud,
 The taste whereof infects the soul
 And poisons heart and blood,
 There food of life enough;
 Here hunger, thirst, and cauld;
 There, youth for ever flourishing;
 Here, feeble age and auld.

3.

There, melody and mirth;
 Here misery and moan;
 There, endless joy; but here, annoy,
 And gripes until we groan;
 There, everlasting light
 And glorious, glistening day;
 Here, fulsome fogs and darksome nicht
 And all things that decay.

4.

There, syning on his seat,
 Sits Jesus Christ, the Son;
 Here, Satan, roving lion-like,
 From place to place doth run.
 There, Virtue's tent is pitched;
 Here Vice's lodging lies;
 Obedience there, rebellion here,
 No dwelling doth despise.

5.

There, love and fear of God;
 Here blasphemy abounds;
 There, faith and truth; but here deceit;
 Guid dealing, whilk confounds.
 There, Zion Hill is seen;
 Where perfect pleasure springs;
 Here, dungeons deep and dannable
 Whilk death maist bitter brings.

6.

There, all things full of bless;
 Here, nothing else but woe;
 There, no conceit of careful thochts;
 But here, it's nothing so.
 Now then, dear Christians, all,
 Behold, as in ane glass,
 How far the warld that is to come
 This present warld doth pass.

7.

Examine what is said
 And what may spoken be,
 And let affections of the spirit
 According work in thee.
 Say then with blessed Paul,
 In spirit I do desire
 Dissolved to be, and on to Christ
 In heaven's high empire.

Before we part with Cullen and his Register, which, besides the medley of contemporaneous events therein recorded, contains many curious items in the form of recipes, we may note a fragment of poetry also contained in it, of some importance, "preserving", as the editor of the *Spalding Club Miscellany* says, "the name of an author who, it is believed, has not

hitherto been noticed by any historian of Scottish poetry". As given in the *Miscellany*, this fragment is scarcely intelligible, but thanks to a worthy son of Bon-Accord, who has long since won his spurs in the field of poesy, this fragment has been restored, and we now present it, as it appeared almost forty years ago in the pages of the *Scottish Journal*, with the well-known initial "C." (W. Cadenhead) attached to it. The words within brackets, the punctuation, and inverted commas, are the work of the restorer:—

Wa is the man that wantis (to seirch
 Into the time that he hes (heir?
 And wa is the man that (slyghts his friends,
 And of his fais he hes (na fear?
 Wo is the man that wow(s for gold,
 And hes na hoip to cum (by mair?
 And wo is the man that mar(ries ane mayde,
 And then with hir his (geir will share?
 Wo is the man that lysis (in pain
 And hes na hoip to ryise and mend?
 Wo is the man that is cum of gentill (blood,
 And hes na gold nor geir to spend?

Furth throcht yone finest (flewerie scene,
 And at the xii. hour of the day,
 I hard ane kynd chield (maik complaynte,
 In yone wod syid quhair that I lay,
 He sichis oft, and sayis, "Alace!
 All wardlie joy is fra me away."
 Than to him selff he sayis again,
 "Thair is na God bot (goldyne paye!"

Thus a behard the nichtingall
 Sayes, "Man, I mervell at thy fair:
 Is the God ather deid or seik,
 Nor he ma mend the of thy cair?
 Quhat wantis thou? lythis or landis braid?
 Or gold or geir to the ending day?
 The taill is trew I to the tell,
 God will be God quhen gold is away!

Geir will come and geir will gang,
 All warldlie riches is bot ane len;
 The taill is trew I to the tell,
 God will be God quhen gold is gane!"
 The chield med answer yit to the bird,

The bonie bird sat on the mold,
 “ Thow hes hard tale, and say haiff I,
 Men haiff wyn worship throch thair gold;
 Rather ladyis fair and landis braid,
 And castellis bigit of lyme and stane,
 For falt of gold I wes forsaken,
 And than my gold wald sen me nein.”

“ And quhairfor murnis ?” sayis the bird
 “ And all is for ane gay lady.
 Thair com another, than, did hir wed ?
 Quhilk I wint best haid luiffit *me* !
 Giff that thow luiffit that ladie;
 Bot ane sa sorooful and sa trew.
 Peradventour hir knycht ma die,
 Scho will marie the and the low.”
 This knight he deid into despair,
 Na kynd of lyiff was for him (bot pain.
 Of this ballet ye will (nocht larnie,
 But God will be God quhen gold is gane.

Finis Quod, NICOLSOUN.

This very ingenious attempt to make the only remaining stanzas of a forgotten writer intelligible to us now-a-days, if not so successful as one might wish, is nevertheless a wonderful infusion of sense into the lopped lines of the original, as it has come down to us. We fear, too, from meeting with such puzzling words as “ rather”, in verse four, that the transcript we have may not be altogether correct. Mere slips of the pen have often been known to make a curious bungle of an author’s meaning, and we cannot suppose that the kind of inspiration which now and again visited the “ Reader of Aberdene” was sufficient to protect him altogether against a common failing of scribbling humanity.
