

TALES TOLD IN ROTHIEMURCHUS.

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THE beautiful district of Rothiemurchus is doubtless well-known to most readers of this Journal, as it is a good base for some of the best excursions among the Cairngorms.

Rothiemurchus, 'the plain of the fir-trees', is the district lying between the north face of the western Cairngorms and the right bank of the Spey. In the second volume of this Journal, Mr. A. I. McConnochie says, 'The situation and aspect of Rothiemurchus are unsurpassed. Abounding in mountains and glens, and diversified with brattling burns, mountain tarns and lochs, and clad here and there with pine and birch, the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime are so harmoniously blended, that the very name, Rothiemurchus, suggests all that is attractive in Highland scenery.' In 'Memoirs of a Highland Lady,' written by Mrs. Smith of Baltiboys, formerly Miss Elizabeth Grant, is given a picturesque account of the family life of a Highland laird at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Along the western part of this district lie most of the places referred to by Mrs. Smith, the Doune, Ord Bain, Loch an Eilein with its castle and ospreys, Kennapole Hill and its cats' den; from the south of it stretches Glen Eunach, leading to the recesses of Braeriach and the Sgoran Dubh; from its south-east the famous rugged pass, the Larig Ghruamach, leads to Deeside and Braemar.

In Rothiemurchus we have spent many pleasant holidays, in the first of which we made the acquaintance of the old carpenter of Inverdrue, William Gordon, then somewhat bent and enfeebled with rheumatism, but in his earlier days a fine specimen of the stalwart and active Highlander. To the end of his life his face lit up and his voice rang firm as he recounted long tramps across the hills and through the glens; and with quiet conviction of their

absolute truthfulness he told stories of the supernatural, which he insisted are not to be classed as 'superstitious' because they dealt with things that actually happened. He held the ancient Highland belief that those born at midnight are endowed with prescience of coming deaths, and, having himself been so born, he had numerous strange experiences to relate. He did not believe in the existence of fairies, and when he told a fairy tale he prefaced it by saying roundly that it was a lie.

Some of his stories are here reproduced, not with the picturesque speech in which he told them, nor with the divagations into local genealogy and topography, and the personal allusions that, while they so often broke the thread and delayed the progress of the narration, yet added to it a rugged charm, but with as near an approach to his simple style as our southron pen is capable of.

The first time we heard William Gordon tell a story was on the first day we met him. A bazaar was to be held in the Inverdrue schoolroom; he was doing some carpentry work, and we were hanging up drapings. Falling into chat, we chanced to say something about Highlanders and their superstitions. He was silent for a considerable period, and then said that perhaps Highlanders were superstitious, but he would tell us something he had seen himself. Then followed the first story set down here. The other stories were told at later times, usually at the close of the day when we were seated at the kitchen fire indulging in tobacco and gossip—a Highland *ceilidh*.

1. I was sent with a mate to do some work at Gaick Lodge in preparation for the shooting season. Two women were at work inside, cleaning the house. At mid-day, when we men knocked off for dinner, we were sitting having a smoke, when we saw a woman busy washing clothes at the bend of the burn above the Lodge. As I thought both the women were inside the house, I was somewhat surprised, and took occasion to pass the windows and saw them both there. I went back again and saw the stranger woman still at her clothes-washing. I then

spoke to the older woman at the house about what I had seen; but she took it as a matter well-known to her, and simply remarked, 'Aye! is she washing there the day?'

2. When I was a youth I served my apprenticeship at the Boat of Insh. Our workshop was on the east side of the Spey, near the waterside, overlooking the ferry and the ford, and we had charge of the ferry boat. The two older men at the place had a quarrel, and for a time were not on friendly terms, so that when one of them went to the neighbouring town of Kingussie and did not return before nightfall, the other refused to sit up to ferry him over, and went off to bed. I knew that the absent man would probably return in liquor, and might recklessly try to swim his horse across the stream if the boat did not answer his hail; and being fearful as to consequences I decided to sit up and await his return. The serving-maid also sat up, and to pass the time started baking. In order that we should readily hear and answer the hail for the boat, we kept open the back door of the house, which gave access to the river bank.

At midnight I heard a halloo from the opposite bank, but not in the expected voice. I at once quitted the house, answered the call, and started towards the boat. Before I could reach it, the cry was repeated, and I again answered it. While I was loosing the boat from the big stone to which it was tied, the cry came a third time, and my answer was given with some touch of annoyance. As I neared the opposite bank I looked out for the man's grey horse, but it was not to be seen, nor was there anyone in sight. But the man was in the habit on such occasions of making brief visits to a friend's house on the road near, and, drawing the boat a little way up on the gravel, I went on to the road to look for him. Not finding him there, I began to suspect that some one was playing a joke on me by hiding in the bushes on the river-side. I therefore called out that anyone wishing to use the boat should come out of hiding at once, as I would not stay to be trifled with. No one appeared, and I returned to

the boat. I was surprised to find that I had as much difficulty in shoving the boat off as though she were heavily laden. Thinking that perhaps some people had slipped on board while I was on the road, I looked under the deck that was provided for horses and vehicles, but found no one there. I was alone on the boat, but she rowed just as though a large company were in her. When I had crossed and was again securing the boat, I seemed to hear the steps of people quitting the boat and stepping on the gravel of the river side, and I strained my eyes against the dimly lighted sky in the vain endeavour to see who were there. But I could see no one, and with a feeling not much removed from alarm I went up the bank and towards the house. When I reached the garden gate I found myself unable to move, and stood still for some few minutes, while I distinctly heard, but could not see, some wheeled vehicle come along the road on the far side of the stream and turn down towards the ford. Filled with terror, I rushed into the house and fell down fainting.

When I recovered I found myself surrounded by the whole household, applying various remedies. They were eager in their enquiries as to what had happened, and I told them what I have related above.

Several days later, while we were at work in the shop, we heard a halloo from the opposite bank. I at once said that the voice was that of my strange midnight adventure. We stepped to the window that commanded a view of the opposite landing place of the ferry, and there saw a group of about a score of people waiting to be ferried across. It was at once remarked that they looked like a funeral party, but that they had no coffin with them. My master said that as I had answered the call in the midnight, so now I should answer it in daylight, and I did so. When I embarked the party, I said to them that I had already ferried them across a few nights ago. They made various comments on my story, but an elderly man among them gravely remarked that it was very likely, as they were actually a funeral party coming to a burial at Insh church-

yard, and they were to meet the corpse at the ferry. When we had landed we were halted at the garden gate, and whiskey was served round. While we were standing for this, the hearse was heard and seen driving along the road on the far side of the stream, and turning down towards the ford.

3. One night my wife and I were returning home down the east Speyside road. We had our little child with us, carrying it by turns. As we passed near South Kinrara, my wife with the child being on one side of the narrow road and I on the other, I chanced to turn and look behind me, and saw a corpse light coming along the road after us. I said to my wife, "Come across here, and let this pass." She came across, though she could not see what I spoke of, and asked, "What is it?" "Nothing that will harm you," I answered, "but stand, and let it pass." It passed, and my wife was greatly alarmed as I still spoke of what was invisible to her. As the light moved on, now in front of us, I asked her whether she could not yet see it, and as she could not, I tried an old method of making such things visible to people who have not of themselves the power of seeing them. I said to her, "Put your foot on my foot, and look out under my outstretched arm." She did this, and exclaimed, "I see it now."

A few days later a funeral party passed along the road, to the neighbouring Rothiemurchus churchyard.

4. The first time I saw a corpse light was when I was a small boy. I was out one evening with my grandmother, who was fetching water from a spring not far from the north end of Loch an Eilein. As we walked along I said, "What a bonnie licht is yon," but my grandmother did not answer. Again I spoke, "Grandmother, what a bonnie licht is yon." She said, "You see fine things, laddie; what-like licht is it?" I told her that it was a blue light, and pointed down the valley whereabout I saw it. After we had been in the house awhile we went out again and my grandmother asked me whether the light was still

visible. I replied that it was, and then she said that she also saw it, and she told me what it was, and what it meant.

A few days later a funeral party passed along the road where we had been, and along where the light had shone.

5. When I was a water-bailiff on the Spey fishings, I was out on duty one night with my mate. We sat among the junipers on the west side of Ord Bain, watching a stretch of spawning ground above the Doune. Through the silence of the night there came a sound not unlike the barking of a deer, which indeed I thought it was. The sound passed us, and travelled down-stream in the direction of Rothiemurchus churchyard. As it passed, thinking it made by a deer, I exclaimed, "I wish I had my knife in you." My mate answered, "You would better have it in yourself." I asked what he meant, and he told me that the sound was one familiar to him, and was a *bodach aibhse*, a spirit-cry, like that of a banshee, foretelling a death.

And in a few days a funeral passed along the road taken by the cry.

6. Some years ago, when there was a ferry boat on the Spey near the Doune, a bell hung on the west side of the stream, by which signal might be given by anyone needing the boat. One night when I was on watch as water bailiff near the Rothiemurchus churchyard, I heard three muffled strokes given by the church bell. Thinking for the moment that someone, perhaps a poacher, was testing whether I was about or not, I made my way quickly to the enclosure; but the untrodden snow that covered it showed that no one had been there, and that no human hands had pulled the bell-rope.

The next morning the good-wife at the neighbouring lodge asked me whether I had been out the previous night, and when I said that of course I had, she further asked whether I had heard someone ringing the ferry-bell late in the night, for her daughter, who slept up in the attic of the house, had heard it about midnight. I then told her that it was not the ferry-bell she had heard, but the church

bell, and that no mortal had pulled the rope. "Ah!" said she, "then poor Mr. Rutherford will not be long," naming the minister, then lying ill.

And in but a few days he was dead.

7. My grandmother believed in fairies, and told me a story of a thing that she actually heard and saw when she was living farther down the Spey valley. She was once carting home the peats along with several of her young companions, among whom was a girl who was in general disfavour with them. As they passed a fairy knoll in the valley they heard music proceeding from it. They stood awhile listening to it, and then some of them called out that if the fairies would play another tune they should have this particular girl as their reward. The tune changed, and as they started to resume their journey the girl fell dead.

8. A man preparing for the christening feast of his child went to fetch a jar of whisky, and a friend accompanied him. On their return with the burden, as they were passing a fairy knoll they heard lively dance music proceeding from it, and saw a door standing open in it, and the fairies dancing inside. The man carrying the whisky jar said that he would go in and join the dancers, but his friend would not enter, and went home. When, however, after several days the missing man did not return home, suspicion of foul play was directed against his companion, and his story of the fairy ball was derided. He stood his trial, and was condemned as guilty of murder. But by vigorous pleading he got execution of his sentence delayed for a year.

On the anniversary of the fairy ball he was allowed to go to the fairy knoll. He found again the door open, music being played, and his friend gaily taking part in the ball, the jar of whisky still on his shoulder. Boldly entering, he insisted that his friend should quit the ball and come home. But the dancer replied that they had not yet finished the original reel, and that it would be

absurd to come away so soon. He was incredulous when told that he had been there a whole year, and was convinced only after his return by finding his baby more than a year old.

9. A woman living at Guislich, near Loch Phitiulais, had a baby of a happy, well-tempered disposition. One day she left it in its cradle, alone in the house, while she was milking. When she returned she found it crying, and indeed its whole manner seemed completely altered. It was continually peevish and ill-tempered, and cried frequently. She was much troubled about the change, and held numerous consultations with neighbouring wives. Eventually it was decided that the baby was a fairy changeling, and that her own baby had been taken away. She was advised by those learned in such matters to take the changeling and throw it from Coylum Bridge into the pool of the Druie below, when her own child would be restored to her. This she did; and as the changeling fell from her hands towards the water, it altered in appearance to that of a little old man, who exclaimed that if he had known beforehand what she was about to do, he would have brought disasters upon her. Then he disappeared in the stream. When she got back home she found her own happy baby safe in its cradle.