

The Story of Major Weir

By Robert Chambers

It must have been a sad scandal to this peculiar community [the “Bowhead Saints”] when Major Weir, one of their number, was found to have been so wretched an example of human infirmity. The house occupied by this man still exists, though in an altered shape, in a little court accessible by a narrow passage near the first angle of the street. His history is obscurely reported; but it appears that he was of a good family in Lanarkshire, and had been one of the ten thousand men sent by the Scottish Covenanting Estates in 1641 to assist in suppressing the Irish Papists. He became distinguished for a life of peculiar sanctity, even in an age when that was the prevailing tone of the public mind. According to a contemporary account: “His garb was still a cloak, and somewhat dark, and he never went without his staff. He was a tall black man, and ordinarily looked down to the ground; a grim countenance, and a big nose. At length he became so notoriously regarded among the Presbyterian strict sect, that if four met together, be sure Major Weir was one. At private meetings he prayed to admiration, which made many of that stamp court his converse. He never married, but lived in a private lodging with his sister, Grizel Weir. Many resorted to his house, to join with him, and hear him pray; but it was observed that he could not officiate in any holy duty without the black staff, or rod, in his hand, and leaning upon it, which made those who heard him pray admire his flood in prayer, his ready extemporaneous expression, his heavenly gesture; so that he was thought more angel than man, and was termed by some of the holy sisters ordinarily ‘Angelical Thomas.’ ” Plebeian imaginations have since fructified regarding the staff, and crones will still seriously tell how it could run a message to a shop for any article which its proprietor wanted; how it could answer the door when any one called upon its master; and that it used to be often seen running before him, in the capacity of a link-boy, as he walked down the Lawnmarket.



After a life characterised externally by all the graces of devotion, but polluted in secret by crimes of the most revolting nature, and which little needed the addition of wizardry to excite the horror of living men, Major Weir fell into a severe sickness, which affected his mind so much, that he made an open and voluntary confession of all his wickedness. The tale was at first so incredible, that the provost, Sir Andrew Ramsay, refused for some time to take him into custody. At length himself, his sister (partner of one of his crimes), and his staff, were secured by the magistrates, together with certain sums of money, which were found wrapped up in rags in different parts of the house. One of these pieces of rag being thrown into the fire by a bailie who had taken the whole in charge, flew up the chimney, and made an explosion like a cannon. While the wretched man lay in prison, he made no scruple to disclose the particulars of his guilt, but refused to address himself to the Almighty for pardon. To every request that he would pray, he answered in screams: "Torment me no more—I am tormented enough already!" Even the offer of a Presbyterian clergyman, instead of an established Episcopal minister of the city, had no effect upon him. He was tried April 9, 1670, and being found guilty, was sentenced to be strangled and burnt between Edinburgh and Leith. His sister, who was tried at the same time, was sentenced to be hanged in the Grass-market. The execution of the profligate Major took place, April 14, at the place indicated by the judge. When the rope was about his neck, to prepare him for the fire, he was bid to say: "Lord, be merciful to me!" but he answered, as before: "Let me alone—I will not—I have lived as a beast, and I must die as a beast!" After he had dropped lifeless in the flames, his stick was also cast into the fire; and, "whatever incantation was in it," says the contemporary writer already quoted,¹ "the persons present own that it gave rare turnings, and was long a-burning, as also himself."

The conclusion to which the humanity of the present age would come regarding Weir—that he was mad—is favoured by some circumstances; for instance, his answering one who asked if he had ever seen the devil, that "the only feeling he ever had of him was in the dark." What chiefly countenances the idea, is the unequivocal lunacy of the sister. This miserable woman confessed to witchcraft, and related, in a serious manner, many things which could not be true. Many years before, a fiery coach, she said, had come to her brother's door in broad day, and a stranger invited them to enter, and they proceeded to Dalkeith. On the way, another person came and whispered in her brother's ear something which affected him; it proved to be supernatural intelligence of the defeat of the Scotch army at Worcester, which took place that day. Her brother's power, she said, lay in his staff. She also had a gift for spinning above other women, but the yarn broke to pieces in the loom. Her mother, she declared, had been also a witch. "The secretest thing that I, or any of the family could do, when once a mark appeared upon her brow, she could tell it them, though done at a great distance." This mark could also appear on her own forehead when she pleased. At the request of the company present, "she put back her head-dress, and seeming to frown, there was an exact horseshoe shaped for nails in her wrinkles, terrible enough, I assure you, to the stoutest beholder."² At the place of execution she acted in a furious manner, and with difficulty could be prevented from throwing off her clothes, in order to die, as she said, "with all the shame she could."

The treatise just quoted makes it plain that the case of Weir and his sister had immediately become a fruitful theme for the imaginations of the vulgar. We there receive the following story:—"Some few days before he discovered himself, a gentlewoman coming from the Castle-hill, where her husband's niece was lying-in of a child, about midnight perceived about the

¹ The Rev. Mr Frazer, Minister of Wardlaw, in his "Divine Providences" (MS. Adv. Lib.), dated 1670.

² "Satan's Invisible World Discovered."

Bowhead three women in windows, shouting, laughing, and clapping their hands. The gentlewoman went forward, till, at Major Weir's door, there arose, as from the street, a woman about the length of two ordinary females, and stepped forward. The gentlewoman, not as yet excessively feared, bid her maid step on, if by the lantern they could see what she was; but haste what they could, this long-legged spectre was still before them, moving her body with a vehement cachinnation and great unmeasurable laughter. At this rate the two strove for place, till the giantess came to a narrow lane in the Bow, commonly called the Stinking Close, into which she turning, and the gentlewoman looking after her, perceived the close full of flaming torches (she could give them no other name), and as if it had been a great number of people stentoriously laughing, and gaping with tahees of laughter. This sight, at so dead a time of night, no people being in the windows belonging to the close, made her and her servant haste home, declaring all that they saw to the rest of the family."

For upwards of a century after Major Weir's death, he continued to be the bugbear of the Bow, and his house remained uninhabited. His apparition was frequently seen at night, flitting, like a black and silent shadow, about the street. His house, though known to be deserted by everything human, was sometimes observed at midnight to be full of lights, and heard to emit strange sounds, as of dancing, howling, and, what is strangest of all, spinning. Some people occasionally saw the Major issue from the low close at midnight, mounted on a black horse without a head, and gallop off in a whirlwind of flame. Nay, sometimes the whole of the inhabitants of the Bow would be roused from their sleep at an early hour in the morning by the sound as of a coach and six, first rattling up the Lawnmarket, and then thundering down the Bow, stopping at the head of the terrible close for a few minutes, and then rattling and thundering back again—being neither more nor less than Satan come in one of his best equipages to take home the Major and his sister, after they had spent a night's leave of absence in their terrestrial dwelling.

About fifty years ago, when the shades of superstition began universally to give way in Scotland, Major Weir's house came to be regarded with less terror by the neighbours, and an attempt was made by the proprietor to find a person who should be bold enough to inhabit it. Such a person was procured in William Patullo, a poor man of dissipated habits, who, having been at one time a soldier and a traveller, had come to disregard in a great measure the superstitions of his native country, and was now glad to possess a house upon the low terms offered by the landlord, at whatever risk. Upon its being known that Major Weir's house was about to be re-inhabited, a great deal of curiosity was felt by people of all ranks as to the result of the experiment; for there was scarcely a native of the city who had not felt, since his boyhood, an intense, interest in all that concerned that awful fabric, and yet remembered the numerous terrible stories which he had heard respecting it. Even before entering upon his hazardous undertaking, William Patullo was looked upon with a flattering sort of interest, similar to that which we feel respecting a regiment on the march to active conflict. It was the hope of many that he would be the means of retrieving a valuable possession from the dominion of darkness. But Satan soon let them know that he does not tamely relinquish any of the outposts of his kingdom.

On the very first night after Patullo and his spouse had taken up their abode in the house, as the worthy couple were lying awake in their bed, not unconscious of a certain degree of fear—a dim uncertain light proceeding from the gathered embers of their fire, and all being silent around them—they suddenly saw a form like that of a calf, which came forward to the bed, and, setting its fore-feet upon the stock, looked steadfastly at the unfortunate pair. When it had contemplated them thus for a few minutes, to their great relief it at length took itself away, and, slowly retiring, gradually vanished from their sight. As might be expected, they deserted the house next morning;

and for another half-century no other attempt was made to embank this part of the world of light from the aggressions of the world of darkness.



It may here be mentioned that, at no very remote time, there were several houses in the Old Town which had the credit of being haunted. It is said there is one at this day in the Lawnmarket (a fiat), which has been shut up from time immemorial. The story goes that one night, as preparations were making for a supper-party, something occurred which obliged the family, as well as all the assembled guests, to retire with precipitation, and lock up the house. From that night it has never once been opened, nor was any of the furniture withdrawn: the very goose which was undergoing the process of being roasted at the time of the occurrence, is still at the fire! No one knows to whom the house belongs; no one ever inquires after it; no one living ever saw the inside of it; it is a condemned house! There is something peculiarly dreadful about a house under these circumstances. What sights of horror might present themselves if it were entered! Satan is the ultimus haeres of all such unclaimed property!