

The Witches of Traquair

By James Hogg

There was once a young man, a native of Traquair, in the county of Peebles, whose name was Cohn Hyslop, and who suffered more by witchcraft, and the intervention of supernatural beings, than any man I ever heard of. But the tale is a very old one, and sorry am I to say that I cannot vouch for the truth of it, which I have hitherto, for the most part, been accustomed to do, and which I feel greatly disposed to do at all times, provided the tale bears the marks of authenticity impressed on the leading events, whether I know of a verity that every individual incident related did happen or not.

Traquair was a terrible place then! There was a witch almost in every hamlet, and a warlock here and there besides. There were no fewer than twelve witches in one straggling hamlet, called Taniel-Burn, and five in Kirk-Row. What a desperate place Traquair had been in those days! But there is no person who is so apt to overshoot his mark as the Devil. He must be a great fool in the main; for, with all his high-flying and democratic principles, he often runs himself into the most confounded blunders that ever the leader of an opposition got into the midst of. Throughout all the annals of the human race, it is manifest, that whenever he was aiming to do the most evil, he was uniformly bringing about the most good; and it seems to have been so in the age to which my tale refers.

The truth is, that Popery was then on its last legs, and the Devil, finding it (as then exercised) a very convenient and profitable sort of religion, exerted himself beyond measure to give its motley hues a little more variety; and the plan of making witches and warlocks, and of holding nocturnal revels with them, where every sort of devilry was exercised, was at that time with him a favourite measure. It was also favourably received by the meaner sort of the populace. Witches gloried in their power, and warlocks in their foreknowledge of events, and the energies of their master. Women, beyond a certain age, when the pleasures and hopes of youth delighted no more, flew to it as an excitement of a higher and more terrible nature; and men, whose tempers had been soured by disappointment and ill usage, betook themselves to the Prince of the Power of the Air, enlisting under his banner, in hopes of obtaining revenge on their oppressors. However extravagant this may appear, there is no doubt of the fact, that, in those days, the hopes of attaining some energies beyond the reach of mere human capability, inflamed the ignorant and wicked to attempts and acts of the most diabolical nature; for hundreds acknowledged their principles, and gloried in them, before the tribunals that adjudged them to the stake.

“I am now fairly under the power of witchcraft,” said Cohn Hyslop, as he sat on the side of the Feathen Hill, with his plaid drawn over his head, the tears running down his brown manly cheek, and a paper marked with uncouth lines and figures in his hand, “I am now fairly under the power of witchcraft, and must submit to my fate; I am entangled, enchained, enslaved; and the fault is all my own, for I have committed that degree of sin which my sainted and dying father assured me would subject me to the snares of my hellish neighbours and sworn adversaries. My pickle sheep have a’ been bewitched, and a great part o’ them have died dancing hornpipes an’ French curtillions. I have been changed, and ower again changed, into shapes and forms that I darena think of, far less name; and a’ through account of my am sin. Hech! but it is a queer thing that sin! It has sac mony inroads to the heart, and outlets by the senses, that we seem to live and breathe in it. And I canna trow that the Deil is the wyte of a’ our sins neither. Na, na; black as he

is, he canna be the cause and the mover of a' our transgressions, for I find them often engendering and breeding in my heart as fast as maggots on tainted carrion, and then it is out o' the power of man to keep them down. My father tauld me, that if I aince let the Dell get his little finger into ane o' my transactions, he wad soon hae his hail hand into them a'. Now, I hae found it in effect, but not in belief, for, from a' that I can borrow frae Rob Kirkwood, the warlock, and my aunty Nans, the wickedest witch in Christendye, the Deil appears to me to be a gayan obliging chap. That he is wayward and fond o' sin, I hae nae doubt; but in that he has mony neighbours. And then his great power over the senses and conditions of men, over the winds, the waters, and the element of flame, is to me incomprehensible, and shows him to be rather a sort of vicegerent over the outskirts and unruly parts of nature, than an opponent to its lawful lord.—What then shall I do with this?" looking at the scroll; "shall I subscribe to the conditions, and enlist under his banner, or shall I not? O love, love! were it not for thee, all the torments that old Mahoun and his followers could inflict should not induce me to quit the plain path of Christianity. But that disdainful, cruel, and lovely Barbara! I must and will have her, though my repentance should be without measure and without end. So then it is settled! Here I will draw blood from my arm blot out the sign of the cross with it, and form that of the crescent, and these other things, the meaning of which I do not know. —Hilloa! What's that? Two beautiful deers, as I am a sinner, and one of them lame. What a prey for poor ruined Cohn! and fairly off the royal bounds, too. Now for it, Bawty, my fine dog! now for a clean chase! A' the links o' the Feathen-wood winna hide them from your infallible nose, billy Bawty. Halloo! off you go, sir! and now for the how and the broad arrow at the head slap! What! ye winna hunt a foot-length after them, will ye no? Then, Bawty, there's some mair mischief in the wind for me! I see what your frightened looks tell me. That they dinna leave the scent of other deers on their track, but ane that terrifies you, and makes your blood creep. It is hardly possible, ane wad think, that witches could assume the shapes of these bonny harmless creatures; but their power has come to sic a height hereabouts, that nae man alive can tell what they can do. There's my aunty Nans has already turned me into a goat, then to a gander, and last of a' into a three-legged stool.

"I am a ruined man, Bawty! your master is a ruined man, and a lost man, that's far waur. He has sold himself for love to one beautiful creature, the comeliest of all the human race. And yet that beautiful creature must be a witch, else how could a' the witches o' Traquair gie me possession o' her?

"Let me consider and calculate. Now, suppose they are deceiving me—for that's their character; and suppose they can never put me in possession of her, then I hae brought myself into a fine babble. How terrible a thought this is! Let me see; is all over? Is this scroll signed and sealed; and am I wholly given up to this unknown and untried destiny?" (Opens his scroll with trembling agitation, and looks over it.) "No, thanks to the Lord of the universe, I am yet a Christian. The cross stands uncanceled, and there is neither sign nor superscription in my blood. How did this happen? I had the blood drawn the pen filled—and the scroll laid out. Let me consider what it was that prevented me? The deers? It was, indeed, the two comely deers. What a strange intervention this is! Ah! these were no witches! but some good angels, or happy fays, or guardian spirits of the wild, sent to snatch an abused youth from destruction. Now, thanks be to Heaven, though poor and reduced to the last extremity, I am yet a free man, and in my Maker's hand. My resolution is changed my promise is broken, and here I give this mystic scroll to the winds of the glen.

"Alas, alas! to what a state sin has reduced me! Now shall I be tortured by night, and persecuted by day; changed into monstrous shapes, torn by cats, pricked by invisible bodkins,

my heart racked by insufferable pangs of love, until I either lose my reason, and yield to the dreadful conditions held out to me, or lose all hope of earthly happiness, and yield up my life. Oh, that I were as free of sin as that day my father gave me his last blessing! then might I withstand all their charms and enchantments. But that I will never be. So as I have brewed so must I drink. These were his last words to me, which I may weel remember: ‘You will have many enemies of your soul to contend with, my son; for your nearest relations are in compact with the devil; and as they have hated and persecuted me, so will they hate and persecute you; and it will only be by repeating your prayers evening and morning, and keeping a conscience void of all offence towards God and towards man, that you can hope to escape the snares that will be laid for you. But the good angels from the presence of the Almighty will, perhaps, guard my poor orphan boy, and protect him from the counsels of the wicked.’

“Now, in the first place, I have never prayed at all; and, in the second place, I have sinned so much, that I have long ago subjected myself to their snares, and given myself up for lost. What will become of me? flight is in vain, for they can fly through the air, and follow me to Flanders. And then, Barbara,—O that lovely and bewitching creature! in leaving her I would heave life and saul behind!”

After this long and troubled soliloquy, poor Cohn burst into tears, and wished himself a dove, or a sparrow-hawk, or an eagle, to fly away and be seen no more; but, in either case, to have bonny Barbara for his mate. At this instant Bawtie began to cock up his ears, and turn his head first to the one side and then to the other; and, on Cohn looking up, he beheld two hares cowering away from a bush behind him. There was nothing that Cohn was so fond of as a hunt. He sprung up, pursued the hares, and shouted, Halloo, hahloo! to Bawty. No, Bawty would not pursue them a foot, but whenever he came to the place where he had seen them, and put his nose to the ground, ran back, hanging his tail, and uttering short barks, as he was wont to do when attacked by witches in the night. Cohn’s hair rose up on his head, for he instantly suspected that the two hares were Robin Kirkwood and his aunt Nans, watching his motions, and the fulfilment of his promise to them. Cohn was horrified, and knew not what to do. He did not try to pray, for he could not; but he wished, in his heart, that his father’s dying-prayer for him had been heard.

He rose, and hastened away in the direction contrary to that the hares had taken, as may well be supposed; and as he jogged along, in melancholy mood, he was aware of two damsels, who approached him slowly and respectfully. They were clothed in white, with garlands on their heads; and, on their near approach, Cohn perceived that the one of them was lame, and the other supported her by the hand. The two comely hinds that had come upon him so suddenly and unexpectedly, and had prevented him, at the very decisive moment, from selling his salvation for sensual enjoyment, instantly came over Cohn’s awakened recollection, and he was struck with indescribable awe. Bawty was affected somewhat in the same manner with his master. He did not manifest the same sort of dismay as when attacked by witches and warlocks, but crept chose to the ground, and turning his face half away from the radiant objects, uttered a sort of stifled murmur, as if moved both by respect and fear. Cohn perceived, from these infallible symptoms, that the beings with whom he was now coming in contact were not the subjects of the Power of Darkness.

Cohn, throwing his plaid over his shoulder in the true shepherd-style, took his staff below his left arm, so that his right hand might be at liberty to lift his bonnet when the fair damsels accosted him, and, not choosing to run straight on them, face to face, he paused at a respectful distance, straight in their path. When they came within a few paces of him, they turned gently from the path, as if to pass him on the left side, but all the while kept their bright eyes fixed on

him, and whispered to each other. Cohn was grieved that so much comeliness should pass by without saluting him, and kept his regretful eyes steadily on them. At length they paused, and one of them called, in a sweet but solemn voice, "Ah, Cohn Hyshop, Cohn Hyslop! you are on the braid way for destruction."

"How do ye ken that, madam?" returned Cohn. "Do you ca' the road up the Kirk-rigg the braid way to destruction?"

"Ay, up the rigg or down the rigg, cross the rigg or round the rigg, all is the same for you, Cohn. You are a lost man; and it is a great pity. One single step farther on the path you are now treading, and all is over."

"What wad ye hae me to do, sweet madam? Wad ye hae me to stand still an' starve here on the crown o' the Kirk-rigg?"

"Better starve in a dungeon than take the steps you are about to take. You were at a witch and warlock meeting yestreen."

"It looks like as gin you had been there too, madam, t-hat you ken sac wed."

"Yes, I *was* there, but under concealment, and not for the purpose of making any such vows and promises as you made. O wretched Cohn Hyslop, what is to become of you!"

"I did naething, madam, but what I couldna help; and my heart is sair for it the day."

"Can you lay your hand on that heart and say so?"

"Yes, I can, dear madam, and swear to it too."

"Then follow us down to this little green knowe, and recount to us the circumstances of your life, and I will inform you of a secret I heard yestreen."

"Aha, madam, but yon is a fairy ring, and I hae gotten sac mony cheats wi' changelings, that I hae muckle need to be on my guard. However, things can hardly be waur wi' me. Lead on, and I shall e'en follow."

The two female figures walked before him to a fairy knowe, on the top of the Feathen-hihl, and sat down, with their faces towards him, till he recounted the incidents of his life, which were of a horrible kind, and not to be set down. The outline was thus:—His father was a sincere adherent of the Reformers, and a good Christian; but poor Cohn was born at Taniel-Burn, in the midst of Papists and witches; and the nearest relation he had, a maternal aunt, was the leading witch of the whole neighbourhood. Consequently, Cohn was nurtured in sin, and inured to iniquity, until all the kindly and humane principles of his nature were erased, or so much distorted, as to appear like their very opposites; and when this was accomplished, his wicked aunt and her associate bags, judging him fairly gained, without the pale of redemption, began to exercise cantrips, the most comical, and, at the same time, the most refined in cruelty, at his expense; and at length, on being assured of every earthly enjoyment, he engaged to join their hellish community, only craving three days to study their mysteries, bleed himself, and, with the blood extracted from his veins, extinguish the sign of the cross, thereby renouncing his hope in mercy, and likewise make some hieroglyphics of strange shapes and mysterious efficacy, and finally subscribe his name to the whole.

When the relation was finished, one of the lovely auditors said,— "You are a wicked and abandoned person, Cohn Hyslop. But you were reared up in iniquity, and know no better; and the mercy of Heaven is most readily extended to such. You have, besides, some good points in your character still; for you have told us the truth, however much to your own disadvantage."

"Aba, madam! How do you ken sac wed that I hae been telling you a' the truth?"

"I know all concerning you better than you do yourself. There is little, very little, of a redeeming nature in your own history; but you had an upright and devout father, and the seed of

the just may not perish for ever. I have been young, and now am old, yet have I never seen the good man forsaken, nor his children cast out as vagabonds in the land of their fathers.”

“Ah, na, na, madam! ye canna be auld. It is impossible! But goodness kens! there are sad changelings now-a-days. I hae seen an auld wrinkled wife blooming o’er night like a cherub.”

“Cohn, you are a fool! And folly in youth heads to misery in old age. But I am your friend, and you have not another on earth this night but myself and sister here, and one more. Pray, will you keep this little vial, and drink it for my sake?”

“Will it no change me, madam?”

“Yes, it will.”

“Then I thank you; but keep it. I have had enow of these kind o’ drinks in my life.”

“But suppose it change you for the better? Suppose it change you to a new creature.

“Wed, suppose it should, what will that creature be? Tell me that first. Will it no be a fox, nor a gairder, nor a bearded gait. nor a three-fitted stool?”

“Ah, Cohn, Cohn!” exclaimed she, smiling through tears, “your own wickedness and unbelief gave the agents of perdition power over you. It is that power which I wish to counteract. But I will tell you nothing more. If you will not take this little vial, and drink it, for my sake; why, then, leave it, and follow on your course.”

“O, dear madam! ye ken little thing about me. I was only joking wi’ you for the sake o’ hearing your sweet answers. For were that bit glass fu’ o’ rank poison, and were it to turn me intil a taed or a worm, I wad drink it aff at your behest. I hae been sac little accustomed to hear aught serious or friendly, that my very heart clings to you as it wad do to an angel coming down frac heaven to save me. Ay, and ye said something kind and respectfu’ about my auld father too. That’s what I hae been as little used to. Ah, but he was a douce man! Wasna he, man? Drink that bit bottle o’ liquor for your sake! Od, I wish it were fu’ to the brim, and that’s no what it is by twa thirds.”

“Ay, but it has this property, Cohn, that drinking will never exhaust it; and the hanger you drink it, the sweeter it will become.”

“Say you sac? Then here’s till ye. We’ll see whether drinking winna exhaust it or no.”

Cohn set the vial to his hips, with intent of draining it; but the first portion that he swallowed made him change his countenance, and shudder from head to heel.

“Ah! sweeter did you say, madam? by the faith of my heart, it has muckle need; for sickan a potion for bitterness never entered the mouth of mortal man. Oh, I am ruined, poisoned, and undone!”

With that poor Cohn drew his plaid over his head, fell flat on his face, and wept bitterly, while his two comely visitants withdrew, smiling at the success of their mission. As they went down by the side of the Feathen-wood, the one said to the other, “Did you not perceive two of that infatuated community haunting this poor hapless youth to destruction? Let us go and hear their schemes, that we may the better counteract them.”

They skimmed over the lea fields, and, in a thicket of brambles, briers, and nettles, they found not two hares, but the identical Rob Kirkwood, the warlock, and auntie Nans, in close and unholy consultation. This bush has often been pointed out to me as the scene of that memorable meeting. It perhaps still remains at the side of a little hollow, nigh to the east corner of the Feathen arable fields, and the spots occupied by the witch and warlock, without a green shrub on them, are still as visible as on the day they left them. The two sisters, having chosen a disguise that completely concealed them, heard the following dialogue, from beginning to end.

“Kimmer, I trow the prize is won. I saw his arm bared; the red blood streaming; the scroll in the one hand, and the pen in the other.”

“He’s ours! he’s ours!”

“He’s nae mair yours.

“We’ll ower the kirkstyle an’ away wi’ him.”

“I hiked not the appearance of yon two pale hinds at such a moment. I wish the fruit of all our pains be not stolen from us when ready for our lord and master’s board. How he will storm and misuse us if this has befallen!”

“What of the two hinds? What of them, I say? I like to see blood. It is a beautiful thing blood.”

“Thou art as gross as flesh and blood itself, and hast nothing in thee of the true sublimity of a supernatural being. I hove to scale the thunder-cloud; to ride on the topmost billow of the storm; to roost by the cataract, or croon the anthem of hell at the gate of heaven. But *thou* delightest to see blood,—rank, reeking, and baleful Christian blood. What is in that, dotard?”

“Humph! I like to see Christian blood, howsomever. It bodes luck, kimmer—it bodes luck.”

“It bodes that thou art a mere block, Rob Kirkwood; but it is needless to upbraid thee, senseless as thou art. Listen then to me: It has been our master’s charge to us these seven years to gain that goodly stripling, my nephew; and you know that you and I engaged to accomplish it; if we break that engagement, woe unto us. Our master bore a grudge at his father; but he particularly desires the son, because he knows that, could we gain him, all the pretty girls of the parish would flock to our standard.—But, Robin Kirkwood, I say, Robin Kirkwood, what two white birds are these always hopping around us? I dinna hike their hooks unco wed. See, the one of them is lame too; and they seem to have a language of their own to one another. Let us leave this place, Robin; my heart is quaking like an aspin.”

“Let them hap on. What can wee bits o’ birdies do till us? Come, let us try some o’ yon cantrips the deil learned us. Grand sport yon, Nans.”

“Robin, did not you see that the birds hopped three times round us? I am afraid we are charmed to the spot.”

“Never mind, auld fool! It’s a very good spot. Some of our cantrips! some of our cantrips!”

What cantrips they performed is not known; but, on that day fortnight, the two were found still sitting in the middle of the bush, the two most miserable and disgusting figures that ever shocked humanity. Their cronies came with a hurdle to take them home; but Nans expired by the way, uttering wild gibberish and blasphemy, and Rob Kirkwood died soon after he got home. The last words he uttered were, “Plenty o’ Christian blood soon! It will be running in streams!—in streams!—in streams!”

We now return to Cohn, who, freed of his two greatest adversaries, now spent his time in a state bordering on happiness, compared with the life he had formerly led. He wept much, staid on the hill by himself, and pondered deeply on something nobody knew what, and it was believed he did not know well himself. He was in love over head and ears in love; which may account for anything in man, however ridiculous. He was in love with Barbara Stewart, an angel in loveliness as well as virtue; but she had hitherto shunned a young man so dissolute and unfortunate in connexions. To this was attributed Cohn’s melancholy and retirement from society; and it might be partly the case, but there were other matters that troubled his inmost soul.

Ever since he had been visited by the two mysterious dames, he had kept the vial close in his bosom, and had drunk of the bitter potion again and again. He felt a change within him, a certain renovation of his nature, and a new train of thoughts, to which he was an utter stranger; yet he cherished them, tasting oftener and oftener his vial of bitterness, and always, as he drank, the liquor increased in quantity.

While in this half-resigned, half-desponding state, he ventured once more to visit Barbara. He thought to himself that he would go and see her, if but to take farewell of her; for he resolved not to harass so dear a creature with a suit which was displeasing to her. But, to his utter surprise, Barbara received him kindly. His humbled look made a deep impression on her; and, on taking leave, he found that she had treated him with as much respect as any virtuous maiden could treat a favourite lover.

He therefore went home rather too much uplifted in spirit, which his old adversaries, the witches, perceived, and having laid all their snares open to intrap him, they in part prevailed, and he returned, in the moment of temptation, to his old courses. The day after, as he went out to the bill, he whistled and sung,—for he durst not think, till, behold, at a distance, he saw his two lovely monitors approaching. He was confounded and afraid, for he found his heart was not right for the encounter; so he ran away with all his might, and hid himself in the Feathen-wood.

As soon as he was alone, he took the vial from his bosom, and, wondering, beheld that the bitter liquid was dried up all to a few drops, although the glass was nearly full when he last deposited it in his bosom. He set it eagerly to his lips, lest the last remnant should have escaped him; but never was it so bitter as now; his very heart and spirit failed him, and, trembling, he lay down and wept. He tried again to drain out the dregs of his cup of bitterness; but still, as he drank, it increased in quantity, and became more and more palatable; and he now continued the task so eagerly, that in a few days it was nearly full.

The two lovely strangers coming now often in his mind, he regretted running from them, and wearied once more to see them. So, going out, he sat down within the fairy ring, on the top of the Feathen Hill, with a sort of presentiment that they would appear to him. Accordingly, it was not long till they made their appearance, but still at a distance, as if travelling along the kirk-road. Cohn, perceiving that they were going to pass, without looking his way, thought it his duty now to wait on them. He hasted across the moor, and met them; nor did they now shun him. The one that halted now addressed him, while she who had formerly accosted him, and presented him with the vial, hooked shy, and kept a marked distance, which Cohn was exceedingly sorry for, as he loved her best. The other examined him sharply concerning all his transactions since they last met. He acknowledged everything candidly—the great folly of which he had been guilty, and likewise the great terror he was in of being changed into some horrible bestial creature, by the bitter drug they had given him. “For d’ye ken, madam,” said he, “I fand the change beginning within, at the very core o’ the heart, and spreading aye outward and outward, and I lookit aye every minute when my hands and my feet wad change into chutes; for I expeckit nac less than to have another turn o’ the gait, or some waur thing, kening how wed I deserved it. And when I saw that I keepit my right proportions, I grat for my am wickedness, that had before subjected me to such unhallowed influence.”

The two sisters now looked to each other, and a heavenly benevolence shone through the smiles with which that look was accompanied. The lame one said, “Did I not say, sister, that there was some hope?” She then asked a sight of his vial, which he took from his bosom, and put into her hands; and when she had viewed it carefully, she returned it, without any injunction; but taking from her own bosom a medal of pure gold, which seemed to have been dipped in blood, she fastened it round his neck with a chain of steel. “As long as you keep that vial and use it,” said she, “the other will never be taken from you, and with these two you may defy all the Powers of Darkness.

As soon as Cohn was alone, he surveyed his purple medal with great earnestness, but could make nothing of it; there was a mystery in the character and figures of which he had no comprehension; yet he kept all in close concealment, and walked softly.

The witches now found that he was lost to their community, and, enraged beyond measure at the loss of such a prize, which they had judged fairly their own, and of which their master was so desirous, they now laid a plan to destroy him.

He went down to the castle one night to see Barbara Stewart, who talked to him much of religion and of the Bible; but of these things Cohn knew very little. He engaged, however, to go with her to the house of prayer—not to the Popish chapel, where he had once been a most irreverent auditor, but to the Reformed church, which then began to divide the parish, and the pastor of which was a devout man.

On taking leave of Barbara, and promising to attend her on the following Sabbath, a burst of eldritch laughter arose close by, and a voice, with a hoarse and giggling sound, exclaimed, “No sac fast, canny lad no sac fast. There will maybe be a whipping o’ cripples afore that play be played.”

Barbara consigned them both to the care of the Almighty with great fervency, wondering how they could have been watched and overheard in such a place. Cohn trembled from head to foot, for he knew the laugh too well to be that of Maude Stott, the leading witch of the Traquair gang, now that his aunt was removed. He had no sooner crossed the Quair, than, at the junction of a little streamlet, called to this day *the Satyr Sike*, he was set upon by a countless number of cats, which surrounded him, making the most infernal noises, and putting themselves into the most threatening attitudes. For a good while they did not touch him, but leaped around him, often as high as his throat, screaming most furiously; but at length his faith failed him, and he cried out in utter despair. At that moment, they all closed upon him, some round his neck, some round his legs, and some endeavouring to tear out his heart and bowels. At length one or two that came in contact with the medal in his bosom fled away, howling most fearfully, and did not return. Still he was in great jeopardy of being instantly torn to pieces; on which he flung himself flat on his face in the midst of his devouring enemies, and invoked a sacred name. That moment he felt partial relief, as if some one were driving them off one by one, and on raising his head, he beheld his lovely lame visitant of the mountains, driving these infernals off with a white wand, and mocking their threatening looks and vain attempts to return. “Off with you, poor infatuated wretches!” cried she:

“Minions of perdition, off to your abodes of misery and despair! Where now is your boasted whipping of cripples? See if one poor cripple cannot whip you all.”

By this time the monsters had all taken their flight, save one, that had fastened its talons in Cohn’s heft side, and was making a last and desperate effort to reach his vitals; but he, being now freed from the rest, lent it a blow with such good-will, as made it speedily desist, and fly tumbling and mewling down the brae. He shrewdly guessed who this inveterate assailant was. Nor was he mistaken; for next day Maude Stott was lying powerless on account of a broken back, and several of her cronies were in great torment, having been struck by the white rod of the Lady of the Moor.

But the great Master Fiend, seeing now that his emissaries were all baffled and outdone, was enraged beyond bounds, and set himself, with all his wit, and with all his power, to be revenged on poor Cohn. As to his power, no one disputed it; but his wit and ingenuity appear always to me to be very equivocal. He tried to assault Cohn’s humble dwelling that same night, in sundry terrific shapes; but many of the villagers perceived a slender form, clothed in white, that kept

watch at his door until the morning twilight. The next day, he haunted him on the hill in the form of a great shaggy bloodhound, infected with madness; but finding his utter inability to touch him, he uttered a howl that made all the hills quake, and, like a flash of lightning, darted into Glendean's Banks.

He now set himself, with his noted sapience, to procure Cohn's punishment by other means, namely, by the hands of Christian men, the only way now heft for him. He accordingly engaged his emissaries to inform against him to holy Mother Church, as a warlock and necromancer. The crown and the church had at that time joined in appointing judges of these difficult and interesting questions. The quorum consisted of seven, including the King's Advocate, being an equal number of priests and laymen, all of them in opposition to the principles of the Reformation, it being at that time obnoxious at court. Cohn was seized, arraigned, and lodged in prison at Peebles; and never was there such a stir of clamour and discontent in Strathquair. The young women wept, and tore their hair, for the goodliest lad in the valley; their mothers scolded; and the old men scratched their grey polls, bit the lip, and remained quiescent, but were at length compelled to join the combination.

Cohn's trial came on, and his accusers being summoned as witnesses against him, it may well be supposed how little chance he had of escaping, especially as the noted David Beaton sat that day as judge, a severe and bigoted Papist. There were many things proven against poor Cohn,—as much as would have brought all the youth of Traquair to the stake; but the stories of the deponents were so monstrous, and so far out of the course of nature, that the judges were like to fall from their seats with laughing.

For instance, three sportsmen swore, that they had started a large he-fox in the Feathen-wood, and, after pursuing him all the way to Glenrath-hope, with horses and hounds, on coming up they found Cohn Hyslop lying panting in the midst of the hounds, and caressing and endeavouring to pacify them. It was deponed, that he had been discovered in the shape of a huge gander sitting on eggs; in the shape of a three-legged stool, which had groaned, and given other symptoms of animation, by which its identity with Cohn Hyslop was discovered, on being tossed about and overturned, as three-legged stools are apt to be.

But when they came to the story of a he-goat, which had proceeded to attend the service in the chapel of St John the Evangelist, and which said he-goat proved to be the unhappy delinquent, Beaton growled with rage and indignation, and said, that such a dog deserved to suffer death by a thousand tortures, and to be excluded from the power of repentance by the instant infliction of them. The most of the judges were not, however, satisfied of the authenticity of this monstrous story, and insisted on examining a great number of witnesses, both young and old, many of whom happened to be quite unconnected with the horrid community of the Traquair witches. Among the rest, a girl named Tibby Frater was examined about that, as well as the three-legged stool, and her examination may here be copied verbatim. The querist, who was a cunning man, began as follows:—“Were you in St John's Chapel, Isabel, on the Sunday after Easter?”

“Yes.”

“And did you there see a man metamorphosed into a he-goat?”

“I saw a gait in the chapel that day.”

“And did he, as has been declared, seem intent on disturbing divine worship?”

“He was playing some pranks. But what else could you expect of a gait?”

“Please to describe what you saw.”

“Oo, he was just rampaung about, an' dinging folk ower. The clerk and the sacristan baith ran to attack him, but be soon laid them baith prostrate. Mess John prayed against him, in Latin,

they said, and tried to lay him, as if he had been a deil; but he never heedit that, and just rampit on.”

“Did he ever come near or molest you in the chapel?”

“Ay, he did that.”

“What did he do to you?—describe it all.”

“Oo, he didna do that muckle ill, after a’; but if it was the poor young man that was changed, I’ll warrant he had nae hand in it, for dearly he paid the kane. Ere long there were fifty staves raised against him, and he was beaten till there was hardly life left in him.”

“And what were the people’s reasons for believing that this he-goat and the prisoner were the same?”

“He was found a’ wounded and bruised the next day. But, in truth, I believe he never denied these changes wrought on him to his intimate friends; but we a’ ken wed wha it was that effected them. Od help you! ye little ken how we are plaguit and harassed down yonder-about, and what loss the country suffers by the emissaries o’ Satan! If there be any amang you that ken the true marks o’ the beast, you will discern plenty o’ them here, about some that hae been witnessing against this poor abused and unfortunate young man.

The members of the community of Satan were now greatly astounded. Their eyes gleamed with vengeance, and they gnashed their teeth on the maiden. But the buzz ran through the assembly against them, and execrations were poured from every corner of the crowded court. Cries of—“Phenty o’ proof o’ what Tibby has said.”—“Let the saddle be laid on the right horse.”—“Down wi’ the plagues o’ the land,” and many such exclamations were sent forth from the mouths of the good people of Traquair. They durst not meddle with the witches at home, because, when anything was done to disoblige them, the sheep and cattle were seized with new and frightful distempers, the corn and barley were shaken, and the honest people themselves quaked under agues, sweatings, and great horrors of mind. But now that they had them all collected in a court of justice, and were all assembled themselves, and holy men present, they hoped to bring the aggressors to due punishment at last. Beaton, however, seemed absolutely bent on the destruction of Cohn, alleging, that the depravity of his heart was manifest in every one of his actions during the times of his metamorphoses, even although he had no share himself in effecting these metamorphoses; he therefore sought a verdict against the prisoner, as did also the King’s Advocate. Sir James Stuart of Traquair, however, rose up, and spoke with great eloquence and energy in favour of his vassal, and insisted on having his accusers tried face to face with him, when, he had no doubt, it would be seen on which side the sorcery had been exercised. “For I appeal to your honourable judgments,” continued he, “if any man would transform himself into a fox, for the sake of being hunted to death, and torn into pieces by hounds? Neither, I think, would any person choose to translate himself into a gander, for the purpose of bringing out a few worthless goslings. But, above all, I am morally certain, that no living woman or man would turn himself into a three-legged stool, for no other purpose but to be kicked into the mire, as the evidence shows this stool to have been. And as for a very handsome youth turning himself into a he-goat, in order to exhibit his prowess in outbraving and beating the men of the whole congregation, that would be a supposition equally absurd. But as we have a thousand instances of honest men being affected and injured by spells and enchantments, I give it as my firm opinion, that this young man has been abused grievously in this manner, and that these his accusers, afraid of exposure through his agency, are trying in this way to put him down.”

Sir James's speech was received with murmurs of applause through the whole crowded court: but the principal judge continued obstinate, and made a speech in reply. Being a man of a most austere temperament, and as bloody-minded as obstinate, he made no objections to the seizing of the youth's accusers, and called to the officers to guard the door; on which the old sacristan of Traquair remarked aloud, "By my faith in the holy Apostle John, my lord governor, you must be quick in your seizures; for an ye gie but the witches o' Traquair ten minutes, ye will hae naething o' them but moorfowls an' patricks blattering about the rigging o' the kirk; and a' the offishers ye hae will neither catch nor keep them."

They were, however, seized and incarcerated. The trials lasted for three days, at which the most amazing crowds attended; for the evidence was of the most extraordinary nature ever elicited, displaying such a system of diablerie, malevolence, and unheard-of wickedness, as never came to light in a Christian hand. Seven women and two men were found guilty, and condemned to be burnt at the stake; and several more would have shared the same fate, had the private marks, which were then thoroughly and perfectly known, coincided with the evidence produced. This not having been the case, they were banished out of the Scottish dominions, any man being at liberty to shoot them, if found there under any shape whatever, after sixty-one hours from that date.

There being wise men who attended the courts in those days, called Searchers or Triers, they were ordered to take Cohn into the vestry, (the trials having taken place in a church,) and examine him strictly for the diabolical marks. They could find none; but in the course of their investigation they found the vial in his bosom, as well as the medal that wore the hue of blood, and which was locked to his neck, so that the hands of man could not remove it. They returned to the judge, bearing the vial in triumph, and saying they had found no private mark, as proof of the master he served, but that here was an unguent, which they had no doubt was proof sufficient, and would, if they judged aright, when accompanied by proper incantations, transform a human being into any beast or monster intended. It was handed to the judge, who shook his head, and acquiesced with the searchers. It was then handed around, and Mr Wiseheart, or Wishart, a learned man, deciphered these words on it, in a sacred language,—“The Vial of Repentance.”

The judges hooked at one another when they heard these ominous words so unhooked for; and Wiseheart remarked, with a solemn assurance, that neither the term nor the cup of bitterness were calculated for the slaves of Satan, nor the bounden drudges of the land of perdition.

The searchers now begged the Court to suspend their judgment for a space, as the prisoner wore a charm of a bloody hue, which was locked to his body with steel, so that no hands could loose it, and which they judged of far more ominous import than all the proofs of these whole trials put together. Cohn was then brought into the Court once more, and the medal examined carefully; and ho! on the one side were engraved, in the same character, two words, the signification of which was decided to be, “Forgiveness” above, and “Acceptance” below. On the other side was a representation of the Crucifixion, and these words in another language, *Cruci, dum spiro, fido*; which words I do not understand, but they struck the judges with great amazement. They forthwith ordered the bonds to be taken off the prisoner, and commanded him to speak for himself, and tell, without fear and dread, bow he came by these precious and holy bequests.

Cohn, who was noted for sincerity and simplicity, began and related the circumstances of his life, his temptations, his follies, and his disregard of all the duties of religion, which had subjected him in no common degree to the charms and enchantments of his hellish neighbours, whose principal efforts and energies seemed to be aimed at his destruction. But when he came to

the vision of the fair virgins on the bill, and of their gracious bequests, that had preserved him thenceforward, both from the devil in person, and from the vengeance of all his emissaries combined, so well did this suit the strenuous efforts then making to obtain popularity for a falling system of faith, that the judges instantly claimed the miracle to their own side, and were clamorous with approbation of his modesty, and cravings of forgiveness for the insults and contumely which they had heaped upon this favourite of Heaven. Barbara Stewart was at this time sitting on the bench close behind Cohn, weeping for joy at this favourable turn of affairs, having, for several days previous to that, given up all hopes of his life, when Mr David Beaton, pointing to the image of the Holy Virgin, asked if the fair dame who bestowed these invaluable and heavenly relics bore any resemblance to that divine figure. Cohn, with his accustomed blunt honesty, was just about to answer in the negative, when Barbara exclaimed in a whisper behind him, "Ah! how like!"

"How do you ken, dearest Barbara?" said he, softly, over his shoulder.

"Because I saw her watching your door once when surrounded by fiends—Ah! how like!"

"Ah, how like!" exclaimed Cohn, by way of response to one whose opinion was to him as a thing sacred, and not to be disputed. How much hung on that moment! A denial would still have subjected him to obloquy, bonds, and death, but an anxious maiden's ready expedient saved him; and now it was with difficulty that Mr Wiseheart could prevent the Catholic part of the throng from falling down and worshipping him, whom they had so lately reviled and accused of the blackest crimes.

Times were now altered with Cohn Hyslop. David Beaton, the governor of the land, appointed by the court of France, took him to Edinburgh in his chariot, and presented him to the Queen Regent, who put a ring on his right hand, a chain of gold about his neck, and loaded him with her bounty. All the Catholic nobles of the court presented him with valuable gifts, and then he was caused to make the tour of all the rich abbeys of Fife and the Border; so that, without ever having one more question asked him about his tenets, he returned home the richest man of all Traquair, even richer, as men supposed, than Sir James Stuart himself. He married Barbara Stewart, and purchased the Plora from the female heirs of Alexander Murray, where he built a mansion, planted a vineyard, and lived in retirement and happiness till the day of his death.

I have thus recorded the leading events of this tale, although many of the incidents, as handed down by tradition, are of so heinous a nature as not to bear recital. It has always appeared to me to have been moulded on the bones of some ancient religious allegory, and by being thus transformed into a nursery tale, rendered unintelligible. It would be in vain now to endeavour to restore its original structure, in the same way as Mr Blore can delineate an ancient abbey from the smallest remnant, but I should hike exceedingly to understand properly what was represented by the two lovely and mysterious sisters, one of whom was lame. It is most probable that they were supposed apparitions of renowned female saints; or perhaps Faith and Charity. This, however, is manifest, that it is a Reformer's tale, founded on a Catholic allegory. Of the witches of Traquair there are many traditions extant, as well as many authentic records, and so far the tale accords with the history of the times. That they were tried and suffered there is no doubt; and the Devil lost all his popularity in that district ever after, being despised by his friends for his shallow and rash politics, and hooted and held up to ridicule by his enemies. I still maintain, that there has been no great personage since the world was framed, so apt to commit a manifest blunder, and to overshoot his mark, as he is.