Historical Tales and Legends of the Highlands

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LOCALITY.

We are in a West Coast village or township, cut off from all communication with the outer world, without Steamers, Railways, even Roads. We grow our own corn, produce our own beef, our mutton, our butter, our cheese, and our wool. We do our own carding, our spinning, and our weaving. We marry and are taken in marriage by, and among, our own kith and kin. In short, we are almost entirely independent of the more civilized and more favoured South. The few articles we do not produce—tobacco and tea—our local merchant, the only one in a district about forty square miles in extent, carries on his back, once a month or so, from the Capital of the Highlands. We occasionally indulge in a little whisky at Christmas and the New Year, at our weddings and our balls. We make it, too, and we make it well. The Salmon Fishery Acts are, as yet, not strictly enforced, and we can occasionally shoot—sometimes even in our gardens—and carry home, without fear of serious molestation, the monarch of the forest. We are not overworked. We live plainly but well, on fresh fish, potatoes and herring, porridge and milk, beef and mutton, eggs, butter, and cheese. Modern pickles and spices are as unknown as they are unnecessary. True, our houses are built not according to the most modern principles of architecture. They are, in most cases, built of undressed stone and moss (coinneach), thatched with turf or divots, generally covered over with straw or ferns held on by a covering of old herring nets, straw, and rope, or siaman.

The houses are usually divided into three apartments—one door in the byre end leading to the whole. Immediately we enter, we find ourselves among the cattle. A stone wall, or sometimes a partition of clay and straw separates the byre from the kitchen. Another partition, usually of a more elegant description, separates the latter from the “culaist,” or sleeping apartment. In the centre of the kitchen a pavement of three or four feet in diameter is laid, slightly raised towards the middle, on which is placed the peat fire. The smoke, by a kind of instinct peculiar to peat smoke, finds its way to a hole in the roof called the “falas,” and makes its escape. The fire in the centre of the room was almost a necessity of the good old Ceilidh days. When the people congregated in the evening, the circle could be extended to the full capacity of the room, and occasionally it became necessary to have a circle within a circle. A few extra peats on the fire would, at any time, by the additional heat produced, cause an extension of the circle, and at the same time send its warming influences to the utmost recesses of the apartment. The circle became extended by merely pushing back the seats, and this arrangement became absolutely necessary in the houses which were most celebrated as the great Ceilidh centres of the district.

The Ceilidh rendezvous is the house in which all the folk-lore of the country, all the old “sgeulachdan,” or stories, the ancient poetry known to the bards, or Seanachaidhean, the old riddles and proverbs are recited from night to night by old and young. All who took an interest in such questions congregated in the evening in these centres of song and story. They were also great centres of local industry. Net-making was the staple occupation, at which the younger members of the circle had to take a spell in turn. Five or six nets were attached in different corners of the apartment to a chair, a bedstead, or to a post set up for the purpose, and an equal number of young gossippers nimbly plied their fingers at the rate of a pound of yarn a-day. Thus, a large

number of nets were turned out during the winter months, the proceeds of which, when the nets were not made for the members of the household, went to pay for tobacco and other luxuries for the older and most necessitous members of the circle.

We shall now introduce the reader to the most famous Ceilidh house in the district. It is such as we have above described. The good-man is bordering on five-score. He is a bard of no mean order, often delighting his circle of admiring friends with his own compositions, as well as with those of Ossian and other ancient bards. He holds a responsible office in the church, is ground-officer for the laird as well as family bard. He possesses the only Gaelic New Testament in the district. He lives in the old house with three sons whose ages range from 75 to 68, all full of Highland song and story, especially the youngest two—John and Donald. When in the district, drovers from Lochaber, Badenoch, and all parts of the Highlands find their way to this noted Ceilidh house. Bards, itinerants of all sorts, traveling tinkers, pipers, fiddlers, and mendicants, who loved to hear or tell a good story, recite an old poem or compose a modern one, all come and are well received among the regular visitors in the famous establishment. In the following pages strangers and local celebrities will recite their tales, those of their own districts, as also those picked up in their wanderings throughout the various parts of the country.

It was a condition never deviated from, that every one in the house took some part in the evening’s performance, with a story, a poem, a riddle, or a proverb. This rule was not only wholesome, but one which almost became a necessity to keep the company select, and the house from becoming overcrowded. A large oak chair was placed in a particular spot—“where the sun rose”—the occupant of which had to commence the evening’s entertainment when the company assembled, the consequence being that this

seat, although one of the best in the house, was usually the last occupied; and in some cases, when the house was not overcrowded, it was never occupied at all. In the latter case, the one who sat next to it on the left had to commence the evening's proceedings.

It was no uncommon thing to see one of the company obliged to coin something for the occasion when otherwise unprepared. On one occasion the bard's grandson happened to find himself in the oak chair, and was called upon to start the night's entertainment. Being in his own house he was not quite prepared for the unanimous and imperative demand made upon him to carry out the usual rule, or leave the room. After some hesitation, and a little private humming in an undertone, he commenced, however, a rhythmical description of his grandfather's house, which is so faithful that, we think, we cannot do better than give it. The picture was complete, and brought down the plaudits of the house upon the "young bard" as he was henceforth designated.

Tigh mo Sheanair.

An cuala sibh riamh mu'n tigh aig I——r 'S ann air tha'n deanamh tha ciallach ceart, 'S iomadh bliadhna o'n chaidh a dheanamh, Ach 's mor as fhiach e ged tha e sean; Se duine ciallach chuir ceanna-crioch air, 'S gur mor am pianadh a fhuair a phears, Le clachan mora ga'n cuir an ordugh, 'S Sament do choinntich ga'n cumail ceart.

Tha dorus mor air ma choinneamh 'n-otraich, 'Us cloidhean oir air ga chumail glaist, Tha uinneag chinn air ma choinneamh 'n teintean, 'Us screen side oirre 'dh-fhodar glas; Tha'n ceann a bhan deth o bheul an fhalais A deanamh baithach air son a chruidh 'S gur cubhraidh am faladh a thig gu laidir O leid na batha 'sa ghamhuinn duibh. Tha catha's culaist ga dheanamh dubailt, 'S gur mor an urnais tha anns an tigh, Tha seidhir-ghairdean do dharach laidir, 'Us siaman ban air ga chumail ceart, Tha lota lair ann, do ghrebhail cathair, 'S cha chaith's cha chnamh e gu

brath n’ am feasd, Tha carpad mor air do luath na moine, ’S upstairs ceo ann le cion na vent.
Tha sparan suithe o thaobh gu taobh ann, ’Us ceangail luibte gan cumail ceart, Tha tuthain chaltuinn o cheann gu ceann deth, ’Us maide slabhraidh’s gur mor a neart, Tha lathais laidir o bheul an fhail air, Gu ruig am falas sgur mor am fad, Tha ropan siamain ’us pailteas lion air ’S mar eil e dionach cha ’n eil mi ceart.
On one occasion, on a dark and stormy winter’s night, the lightning flashing through the heavens, the thunder clap loud and long, the wind blowing furiously, and heavy dark ominous clouds gathering in the north-west, the circle had already gathered, and almost every seat was occupied. It was the evening of the day of one of the local cattle markets. Three men came in, two of them well-known drovers or cattle buyers who had visited the house on previous occasions, the other a gentleman who had, some time previously, arrived and taken up his quarters in the district. No one knew who he was, where he came from, or what his name was. There were all sorts of rumours floating amongst the inhabitants regarding him; that he had committed some crime, and escaped from justice; that he was a gentleman of high estate, who had fallen in love with a lowly maiden and run away to spite his family for objecting to the alliance; and various other surmises. He was discovered to be a gentleman and a scholar, and particularly frank and free in his conversation with the people about everything except his own history and antecedents, and was a walking encyclopædia of all kinds of legendary lore connected with the southern parts of the country. His appearance caused quite a flutter among the assembled rustics. He was, however, heartily welcomed by the old bard and members of the circle, and was offered a seat a little to the left of the oak arm chair. It was soon found that he was a perfect master of Gaelic as well as English. It was also found on further acquaintance, during

many subsequent visits, that he never told a story or legend without a preliminary introduction of his own, told in such a manner as to add immensely to the interest of the tale. Being called upon, he told the “Spell of Cadboll.”

These remarks are taken from the introduction to the Highland Ceilidh in the “Celtic Magazine,” at which the following Tales, the reader must assume, have been told by the various characters who frequented the Ceilidh house.

THE SPELL OF CADBOLL.

In olden days the east coast of Scotland was studded with fortresses, which, like a crescent chain of sentinels, watched carefully for the protection of their owners and their dependents. The ruins remain and raise their hoary heads over valley and stream, by river bank and sea shore, along which nobles, and knights, and followers “boden in effeyre-weir” went gallantly to their fates; and where in the Highlands many a weary drove followed from the foray, in which they had been driven far from Lowland pastures or distant glens, with whose inhabitants a feud existed. Could the bearded warriors, who once thronged these halls, awake, they would witness many a wonderful change since the half-forgotten days when they lived and loved, revelled and fought, conquered or sustained defeat. Where the bearer of the Crann-taraidh or fiery cross once rushed along on his hasty errand, the lightning of heaven now flashes, by telegraphic wires, to the farthest corners of the land. Through the craggy passes, and along the level plains, marked centuries ago with scarce a bridle path, the mighty steam horse now thunders over its iron road; and where seaward once swam the skin curach, or the crazy fleets of diminutive war galleys, and tiny merchant vessels with their fantastic prows and sterns, and carved mast-heads, the huge hull of the steam propelled ship now breasts the waves that dash against the rugged headlands, or floats like a miniature volcano, with its attendant clouds of smoke obscuring the horizon.

The parish of Fearn, in Easter Ross, contains several antiquities of very distant date. One of these shattered relics, Castle Cadboll, deserves notice on account of a singular tradition regarding it, once implicitly credited by the people—namely, that although inhabited for ages no person ever died within its walls. Its magical quality did not, however, prevent its dwellers from the suffering of disease, or the still more grievous evils attending on debility and old age. Hence many of the denizens of the castle became weary of life, particularly the Lady May, who lived there centuries ago, and who being long ailing, and longing for death, requested to be carried out of the building to die. Her importunity at length prevailed; and, according to the tradition, no sooner did she leave it than she expired.

Castle Cadboll is situated on the sea-shore, looking over the broad ocean towards Norway. From that country, in the early ages of Scottish history, came many a powerful Jarl, or daring Viking, to the coasts, which, in comparison with their own land, seemed fertile and wealthy. There is a tradition of a Highland clan having sprung from one of those adventurers, who with his brother agreed that whoever should first touch the land would possess it by right.

The foremost was the ultimate ancestor of the tribe; his boat was almost on shore, when the other, by a vigorous stroke, shot a-head of him; but ere he could disembark, the disappointed competitor, with an exclamation of rage, cut off his left hand with his hatchet, and flinging the bloody trophy on the rocks, became, by thus “first touching Scottish ground,” the owner of the country, and founder of the clan. The perfect accuracy of this story cannot now be vouched for; but it is an undeniable fact that the Clan Macleod have successfully traced their origin to a Norwegian source; and there is a probability that the claim is correct from the manifestly Norwegian names borne by

the founders of the Clan Tormod and Torquil, hence the Siol Tormod—the race of Tormod—the Macleods of Harris; and the Siol Torquil, the race of Torquil—Macleods of Lewis—of whom came the Macleods of Assynt, one of whom betrayed Montrose in 1650, and from whom the estates passed away in the end of the seventeenth century to the Mackenzies.

The Macleods of Cadboll are cadets of the house of Assynt, but to what branch the Lady May of the legend belonged, it is difficult to decide, so many changes having occurred among Highland proprietors.

The cliffs of this part of Ross-shire are wild and precipitous, sinking with a sheer descent of two hundred feet to the ocean. The scenery is more rugged than beautiful—little verdure and less foliage. Trees are stunted by the bitter eastern blast, and the soil is poor. Alders are, however, plentiful, and from them the parish has derived its name of Fearn. There is a number of caves in the cliffs along the shore towards Tarbat, where the promontory is bold, and crowned with a lighthouse, whose flickering rays are now the only substitute for the wonderful gem which was said of yore to sparkle on the brow of one of these eastern cliffs—a bountiful provision of nature for the succour of the wave-tossed mariner.

During the reign of one of the early Stuart kings—which, is of little moment—Roderick Macleod ruled with a high and lordly hand within the feudal stronghold of Cadboll. He was a stout and stern knight, whose life had been spent amidst the turmoil of national warfare and clan strife.

Many a battle had he fought, and many a wound received since first he buckled on his father’s sword for deadly combat. Amid the conflicting interests which actuated each neighbouring clan—disagreement on any one of which rendered an immediate appeal to arms the readiest mode of solving the difficulty—it is not to be wondered at that Cadboll, as a matter of prudence, endeavoured to attach to himself, by every means in his power, those who were most

likely to be serviceable and true. Macleod had married late in life, and his wife dying soon after, while on a visit to her mother, left behind her an only daughter, who was dear as the apple of his eye to the old warrior, but, at the same time, he had no idea of any one connected with him having any freedom of will or exercise of opinion, save what he allowed; nor did he believe women's hearts were less elastic than his own, which he could bend to any needful expedient. About the period our story commences, the Lady May was nearly eighteen years of age, a beautiful and gentle girl, whose hand was sought by many a young chief of the neighbouring clans; but all unsuccessfully, for the truth was she already loved, and was beloved, in secret, by young Hugh Munro from the side of Ben-Wyvis.

The favoured of the daughter was not the choice of her father, simply because he was desirous to secure the aid of the Macraes, a tribe occupying Glenshiel, remarkable for great size and courage, and known in history as "the wild Macraes." The chief—Macrae of Inverinate—readily fell in with the views of Macleod, and as the time fixed for his marriage with the lovely Lady May drew nigh, gratified triumph over his rival Munro, and hate intense as a being of such fierce passions could feel, glowed like a gleaming light in his fierce grey eyes.

" Once more," he said, "I will to the mountains to find him before the bridal. There shall be no chance of a leman crossing my married life, and none to divide the love Inverinate shall possess entire. By my father's soul, but the boy shall rue the hour he dared to cross my designs. Yes, rue it, for I swear to bring him bound to witness my marriage, and then hang him like a skulking wild-cat on Inverinate green."

It was nightfall as he spoke thus. Little he knew that at the same moment Hugh Munro was sitting beneath the dark shadows of the alder trees, which grew under the window of the little chamber where May Macleod was weeping

bitterly over the sad fate from which she could see no way of escape. As she sat thus the soft cry of the cushat fell upon her ears. Intently she listened for a few moments, and when it was repeated she stepped to the window and opened it cautiously, leaning forth upon the sill. Again the sound stole from among the foliage, and May peered down into the gloom, but nothing met her gaze save the shadows of the waving branches upon the tower wall.

“ It is his signal,” she whispered to herself as the sound was repeated once more. “Ah me! I fear he will get himself into danger on account of these visits, and yet I cannot, I cannot bid him stay away.”

She muffled herself in a dark plaid, moved towards the door, opened it cautiously, and listening with dread, timidly ventured down to meet her lover.

“ I must and will beg him to-night to stay away in future,” continued she, as she tripped cautiously down the narrow winding stair; “and yet to stay away? Ah me! it is to leave me to my misery; but it must be done, unkind as it may be, otherwise he will assuredly be captured and slain, for I fear Macrae suspects our meetings are not confined to the day and my father’s presence.”

After stealing through many dark passages, corridors, and staircases, in out-of-the-way nooks, she emerged into the open air, through a neglected postern shadowed by a large alder, opposite the spot from which the sound proceeded.

Again she gazed into the shadow, and there leaning against a tree, growing on the edge of the crag, she saw a tall slender figure. Well she knew the outlines of that form, and fondly her heart throbbed at the sound of the voice which now addressed her.

“ Dearest,” said the young Munro in a low tone, “I thought thou wouldst never come. I have been standing here like a statue against the trunk of this tree for the last half-hour watching for one blink of light from thy casement. But it

seems that thou preferest darkness. Ah May, dear May, cease to indulge in gloomy forebodings."

" Would that I could, Hugh," she answered sadly. "What thoughts but gloomy ones can fill my mind when I am ever thinking of the danger you incur by coming here so often, and thinking, too, of the woeful fate to which we are both destined."

" Think no more of it," said her lover in a cheerful tone. "We have hope yet."

" Alas, there is no hope. Even this day my father hath fixed the time for, to me, this dreaded wedding! And now, Hugh, let this be our last meeting— Mar tha mi! our last in the world. Wert thou caught by Inverinate, he so hates thee, he would have thy life by the foulest means."

" Fear not for that, dearest. And this bridal! Listen, May; before that happen the eagle will swoop down and bear thee away to his free mountains, amid their sunny glens and bosky wood, to love thee, darling, as no other mortal, and certainly none of the Clan-'ic-Rath mhearlaich has heart to do."

" Ah me!" sighed May, "would that it could be so. I cannot leave my father until all other hope is gone, and yet I fear if I do not we are fated to be parted. Even this may be the last time we may meet. I warn thee, Hugh, I am well watched, and I beg you will be careful. Hush! was that a footfall in the grove below the crag?" and she pointed to a clump of trees at some distance under where they were standing, and on the path by which he would return.

" By my troth it may be so," said he. "Better, dear May, retire to your chamber, and I shall remain here till you bid me good night from your window."

Again they listened, and again the rustling met their ears distinctly. It ceased, and the maiden, bidding her mountain lover a fond good night, ascended to her chamber, while he, disdaining to be frightened away by sound, moved to his former position below the alder tree. Seating himself at its

root, with his eyes fixed on the window, in a voice low but distinct, he sang to one of the sweet sad lays of long ago a ditty to his mistress, of which the following paraphrase will convey an idea:—

“ O darling May, my promised bride, List to my love—come fly with me, Where down the dark Ben Wyvis side The torrent dashes wild and free. O’er sunny glen and forest brake; O’er meadow green and mountain grand; O’er rocky gorge and gleaming lake— Come,—reign, the lady of the land.

“ Come cheer my lonely mountain home, Where gleams the lake, where rills dance bright; Where flowers bloom fair—come, dearest, come, And light my dark and starless night. One witching gleam from thy bright eye Can change to halls of joy my home! One song, one softly-uttered sigh, Can cheer my lone heart—dearest, come.”

The moment the song ceased the fair form of May Macleod appeared at the casement overhead, she waved a fond farewell to her mountain minstrel, and closed the window; but the light, deprived of her fair face, had no charm for him—he gazed once more at the pane through which it beamed like a solitary star, amid the masses of foliage, and was turning away when he found a heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

“ Stay,” exclaimed the intruder in a deep stern voice, whose tone the young chief knew but too well, “Thou hast a small reckoning to discharge ere thou go, my good boy. I am Macrae.”

“ And I,” answered the other, “am Hugh Munro, what seek’st thou from me?”

“ That thou shalt soon know, thou skulking hill cat,” answered Macrae, throwing his unbuckled sword, belt, and scabbard on the ground, and advancing with extended weapon.

“ Indeed! then beware of the wild-cat’s spring,” Munro promptly replied, giving a sudden bound which placed him

inside the guard of his antagonist, whose waist he instantly encircled with his sinewy arms with the design of hurling him over the crag on which they stood. The struggle was momentary. Munro, struck to the heart with Macrae's dagger, fell with May's loved name on his lips, while Macrae, staggering over the height, in the act of falling so wounded himself by his own weapon as to render his future life one of helpless manhood and bitter mental regret.

Macleod was soon after slain in one of the many quarrels of the time, while his daughter May, the sorrowing heiress of the broad lands of Cadboll, lived on for fifty years one long unrelieved day of suffering.

Fifty years! alas for the mourner—spring succeeded winter, and summer spring, but no change of season lightened May Macleod's burden! Fifty years! year by year passing away only brought changes to those who lived under her gentle sway, and among the dependents of her home; youth passed into age, young men and maidens filled the places of the valued attendants of her girlhood; and the lady, solitary, still a mourner, in her feudal tower grew old and bent, thin and wan, but still in her heart the love of her youth bloomed fresh for her betrothed.

And then disease laid hold of her limbs—paralyzed, unable to move, she would fain have died, but the spell of Cadboll was on her, death could not enter within its walls.

Sickness and pain, care and grief, disappointment, trust betrayed, treachery, and all the ills which life is heir to, all might and did enter there. Death alone was barred without. Sadly her maidens listened to her heart-breaking appeals to the spirit of Munro, her unwed husband, the murdered bridegroom of her young life, to come to her aid from the land of shadows and of silence. They knew her story of the fifty years of long ago, and they pitied and grieved with her, wondering at the constancy of her woman's heart.

Still more sadly did they listen to her appeals to be carried out from the castle to the edge of the precipice, where the

power of the spell ceased, there to look for, meet and welcome death; but they knew not the story of the spell, and they deemed her mad with grief.

Terrified at last by her appeals to the dead, with whom she seemed to hold continual conversation, and who seemed to be present in the chamber with them, though unseen, and partly, at length, worn out with her unceasing importunities, and partly to gratify the whim, as they considered it, of the sufferer, tremblingly they agreed to obey her requests and to carry her forth to the edge of the cliff. A frightened band, they bore the Lady May, lying on her couch, smiling with hope and blessing them for thus consenting. Over the threshold, over the drawbridge, her eyes, fixed on the heavens, brightened as they proceeded. Hope flushed with hectic glow upon her pale suffering face, grateful thanks broke from her lips. Hastening their steps, they passed through the gate, wound along the hill side, and as the broad expanse of ocean, with the fresh wind curling it into wavelets, burst upon the sight, a flash of rapture beamed on her countenance, a cry of joy rushed from her pallid lips—their feeble burden grew heavier; a murmur of welcoming delight was uttered to some glorious presence, unseen by the maidens, and all became hushed eternally. The Lady May lay on her couch a stiffening corpse. The spell of Cadboll had been broken at last. A Macleod inhabited it no more, and decay and ruin seized on the hoary pile of which now scarcely a vestige remains to tell of the former extent and feudal strength of Castle Cadboll.

PRINCE CHARLIE AND MARY MACLEOD.

The fate of the Chevalier and his devoted Highlanders forms one of the most romantic and darkest themes in the history of Scotland, so rich in historical narrative, song, and tradition—

Still freshly streaming When pride and pomp have passed away, To mossy tomb and turret grey, Like friendship clinging.

In the contemplation of their misfortunes, their faults and failings are forgotten, and now that the unfortunate Chevalier's name and memory have become "such stuff as dreams are made of," every heart throbs in sympathy with the pathetic lyric "Oh! wae's me for Prince Charlie."

In the present day, when it is not accounted disloyal to speak kindly of the Prince, or of those who espoused his cause—one cannot help indulging in admiration of the courage and cheerfulness with which he bore trials, dangers, and "hairbreadth 'scapes by flood and field," nor wonder at the devotedness of the poorer Highlanders; their affection to his person; the care with which they watched over him in his wanderings; and, above all, the incorruptible fidelity which scorned to betray him, though tempted by what, in their poverty, must have seemed inconceivable wealth.

The history of the rising, and particularly of what followed after Culloden, relating to Prince Charlie, although generally minute, gives but little idea of the wonderful

dangers he incurred, and the escapes he made. One should, in order to form a moderately correct idea of his hardships, have listened to those who had been out with him, as they, in the late evening of their days, talked of the past, and of the “lad they looed sae dearly,” or heard their descendants, who were proud of their forbears, having been out in the ’45, when—

The story was told, as a legend old, And by withered dame and sire, When they sat secure from the winter’s cold, All around the evening fire.

His capabilities of enduring cold, hunger, and fatigue prove that his constitution was of a very high order, and not what might have been expected from the descendant of a hundred kings brought up in the enervating atmosphere of courts. The magnanimity was surprising with which he bore up under his adverse lot, and the very trying privations to which he was subjected. The buoyancy of spirit with which he encountered the toils that hemmed him round, seemed to gather fresh energy from each recurring escape while wandering about, a hunted fugitive.

His appearance when concealed in the cave of Achnacarry as described by Dr Cameron, who was for a time a companion of his wanderings, is not suggestive of much comfort, but rather of contentedly making the most of circumstances. “He was then,” says Dr Cameron, “bare footed; he had an old black kilt and coat on, a plaid, philabeg, and waistcoat, a dirty shirt, and a long red beard, a gun in his hand, a pistol and dirk by his side. He was very cheerful and in good health, and, in my opinion, fatter than when he was at Inverness.” His courage and patience during his wandering drew forth even the admiration of his enemies, while his friends regretted that one capable of so much was so wanting in decision of character when it was urgently required by his own affairs, and the fortunes and lives of those who had perilled all for his sake. His friends, rich and poor, “for a’ that had come and gane,” were