



Charlottetown's Public Buildings in Earlier Days.

Tam O'Shanter

By Dr. John Cavan.

(CONTINUED)

THERE was however a supreme terror yet awaiting our cavalier---one that acted so to speak as a focus concentrating all the terrors of goblin-land. "Alloway's auld haunted kirk" had to be passed, and every stride of his grey mare brought him nearer to this focus of terror. The poet with rare art at this juncture, and a fine appreciation of the circumstances intensifies the terrors of the night. The Doon about whose "bonnie banks and braes" the poet has sung so sweetly is irritated and swollen with the terrible rain tempest and pours all its floods with a wild impetuosity. The wind in augmented strength roars through the groaning woods---the flashes of the lightning come more and more frequently, and the thunder at every clap crashes nearer and nearer. The dreaded bourne is well nigh reached. Tam peers anxiously through the storm to catch a glimpse of the old Kirk Alloway, and learn if all be tranquil there. If a normal condition of things there reigned, if the ancient ruin stood silent and lonely as was its wont in the garish days of summer, then might the tempest work its worst, Tam could bear it. But alas for Tam's peace of mind the venerable ruin on this wild November night presented itself to Tam's gaze all aglow, shedding a radiance through the leafless trees that astounded and terrified our traveller. Through every window and every rent that time had made poured a flooded light which dispelled in a wide lurid circle the thick shades of darkness. As the horseman approached nearer sounds fell on his ear; it was loud shrill music, and the measured beat of dancing feet.

Taking into account Tam's superstitious nature, one would think that he would put whip and spur to his good grey mare and dash past the haunted ruin at full speed. But the foaming tankards of generous ale had produced effects on Tam's nature far afield

from his ordinary condition. The poet accounts for the conduct of timid Tam on this occasion, in an apostrophe which from frequent quotation has become nearly threadbare :---

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn,
What dangers thou can'st make us scorn !
Wae t'ippeny we fear no evil,
Wae usquebae we'll face the devil !

Driven by curiosity and strengthened by the emboldening spirit within him, Tam determined to see for himself what was passing in the ruin, and with much ado he managed to bring his grey mare into a position whence through the ribs and arches of the Old Gothic oriel he could command a view of the interior. The scene which burst on his gaze was wild and terrible yet strangely mixed with the grotesque and ludicrous. An unearthly crew of witches, warlocks and midnight hags was holding high revelry---'twas a celebration of the witch's sabbath. The scene as depicted by the poet is of a weird and ghastly nature, but every line and tint is drawn by the hand of a master. In the entire description there is nothing weak or faltering---the poet's muse in her flight through the regions of horror which his fancy has conjured up, never once stops, but continues on to the climax where she perches triumphantly. The musician of the party was the arch-fiend Satan himself who, grisly, grim and huge was seated in an elevated niche pouring from the bagpipes, which he handled with the dexterity of a professional piper, such volumes of wild sounds as made the rafters of the old edifice tremble. The wide area of the church was filled with unearthly beings, bouncing and skipping in the mazy dances. Around the walls like presses with their doors thrown open, stood coffins with their inmates in their grave clothes plainly visible and each cold, bloodless hand held a torch to light the dancers. Fitting torch-bearers surely to such dancers! As on occasions of festivity, when we assemble our friends, we are wont to display for the gratification of the guests the ornaments and curiosities on which we set the greater store; so this demoniac

gathering had laid out on what had once served as an altar a collection of horrors the bare enumeration of which makes the blood curdle. The contents of the witch's cauldron in Macbeth had no ingredients more ghastly or horrible than those laid out on the holy table. Here they are as the poet enumerates them :---

A murderer's bones in gibbet airns,
Twa spang-lang wee unchristened bairns ;
A thief new cutted frae a rape
Wi his last gasp has gab did gape---
Five tomahawks wi blood red-rusted,
Five scimitars wi murder crusted,
A garter which a babe had strangled,
A knife a father's throat had mangled---
Whom his ain son o' life bereft---
The grey hairs yet stuck to the heft !

Shakespeare's grandest horror could hardly have struck the heart with more chill than the last couplet. The painted horror becomes almost a reality and an instinctive shudder passes through the reader. Taking the scene all in all---the dreadful character of the musician---the crowd of evil beldames that danced, and the fiendish adjuncts in the midst of which the orgies are conducted, he has displayed a force and fertility of imagination which no poet perhaps has ever surpassed.

In this dancing age the programme of dances which this strange assembly followed merits some share of attention. It was not as you may imagine made up of Polkas, Mazurkas, Waltzes, Militaire or Two-step---but the good old-fashioned Hornpipes, Jigs, Reels and Strathspeys which were the delight of our vigorous great-grandmothers when they were young. These were indeed dances which demanded both agility and endurance on the part of the dancers, and very unlike the languishing circles round which our modern ladies are pleased to be carried or dragged or torn by their partners. Tam is represented as gazing in upon the dancers plunged in a species of bewilderment ; and as he gazes the Piper blows louder and louder, and is responded to by the more rapid motion of the dancers. They reeled and set

and crossed till the arduous exercise forced them to cast their garments to the work.

Among the witches was one younger than the rest---well-formed and agile. Her name the poet has not disclosed, although it is likely that he had in view some individual then living and took this method of satisfying his craving for satire. From the narrative it would appear that this was the night of the young witch's initiation into the malicious sisterhood. A ceremony which was honored by the presence of Satan himself and was now being brought to a termination by a ball. Long after this night she got the credit of perpetrating many aggravated pieces of malice round the shores of Carrick. She killed cattle, swamped vessels, blighted oats and barley---till far and near throughout these parts farmers and fishermen trembled at her name. The dress she wore on this particular evening was the same she had worn as a bare-legged innocent lassie. It had been bought by her grandmother, as the poet puts it, for her Wee Nannie. An apostrophe thrown in by the poet alluding to this incident is conceived in a vein of the most tender pathos. Little did her reverend Grannie know what then she purchased.

Wi twa pund Scots, 'twas a her riches,
Would ever grace a dance of witches.

This young witch becomes the heroine of the dance. Her youth and agility enabled her to frolic and caper in a way that cast all the other dancers into the shade. Tam forgetting where he was and on what he gazed was absorbed in the contemplation of the scene. He watched the motions of the young witch through all the mazes of the dance, his excitement increasing until---just as you may have seen at our Caledonia games hundreds of spectators greet with applause an agile dancer tripping with grace through the intricacies of the sword dance---Tam, carried away by more than ordinary feat of the young witch's agility, shouted out in stentorian voice his approbation---"Weel done Cuttie Sark!" That instant the spell broke---deep darkness descended on the old ruin---and thick as bees

whose hives has been rudely disturbed, through windows, doors and crevices swarm forth the yelling sisterhood to reck revenge on the profane disturber of their orgies.

The chase of the witches after Tam, as drawn by the poet is a lively picture. The fate which awaits the luckless horseman should he be caught is conveyed in the exclamation :---

“Ah Tam, Ah Tam, thou’ll get thy fairin :
In hell they’ll roast thee like a herrin !”

The deserted condition of his wife who awaits his coming is feelingly alluded to, and the mare Meg is encouraged to do her utmost. There is a popular belief that witches and such other malignant creatures dare not cross a running stream. Near at hand the swollen waters of the Doon roar through the arch of the old bridge---all hope of safety rested there. Like hounds on the track of its prey the yelling crowd came on. The young witch who had outstripped all the others in the dance now outstripped them in the chase. She gained near enough to make a furious bound at Tam, but the good grey Mare was equal to the occasion; with one bold spring she crossed the keystone of the bridge and saved her master, but lost in the effort her own grey tail.

The carlin caught her by the rump---
And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.

The merest neophyte in the art of criticism can discover that the denouement of this otherwise grand poem is disappointing. The preparations throughout are magnificent---conceived often-times in the highest vein of poetry and expressed with a terseness and vigor worthy of Homer, but with all this the result is sadly inadequate. It resembles the reduced old gentleman’s dining table, who with a feeling of family pride had zealously preserved through every urgency the family plate. His dinner table was day after day set out to appearance in all the gorgeousness of better days, but the silver dish covers when removed revealed herring and potatoes. Had Tam and Meg in

the ultimate crisis both escaped scot free---he to reflect on the recklessness of his behaviour, repent and purpose amendment, and she to wear her long grey tail as a trophy of her agility and speed---I believe the reader would be better satisfied. But to see a noble animal suffer for the recklessness of its master, though not a case of infrequent occurrence, is not I think one of which a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would approve. To make the weakness of the conclusion still more apparent, Burns appends a moral to his poem in which he warns all who are tempted to overstep the bounds of moderation in an ale-house tap-room to remember the sad fate of Tam O'Shanter's Mare, just as if such a memory would stop a single tankard on its way to the thirsty lips of the toper---No! He would drain it even though the tail of every horse in his stable were to dangle in a witch's hand as a penalty and think after all he earned his indulgence cheap.

Apart however from this blemish there is enough in the poem to excite our admiration. It is beyond all doubt the most classical composition in the Scottish language of the Lowlands that we have, and in it the poet displays fewer of his eccentricities and more of his real poetic talent than in any other poem he ever wrote. Had Burns written Tam O'Shanter and nothing more posterity would still have awarded to him a very high niche in the temple of the Muses, and would have regretted that he did not write more. All the grander attributes of the poet are brought clearly out in this one poem. His pathos, his power of description, his invention, his knowledge of rural life---its errors and its toils, its merry-makings and its superstitions---the local traditions of his country and above all an intimate knowledge of his countrymen's vices, virtues and foibles---are all set forth in colors, true and vigorous. And all this is conveyed in the grand old Scottish tongue, pleasing and expressive as the Doric Greek from the pen of Theocrites. At times it may, to the ears of a stranger, sound rough and rugged; but in this it resembles the scenery amid which it is spoken. The wild hills that rise crest over crest above the grass, the heath and the heather, till they terminate in

pinnacles unrelieved by verdure of any kind aptly resemble the loftier flights of our poet---but far away down from those barren summits lie peaceful valleys, rich in summer verdure through which murmuring streams meander, and there we find our poet reposing with as much grace as he did on the barren mountain tops.

Rapid composition can never be urged as an excuse for errors or shortcomings. If the theme be a worthy one the writer has a right to bring to its development all the treasures of his genius. On the other hand when a poet in a moment of fine inspiration throws out a poem as free from blemish as Burns' Tam O'Shanter, it is due to the authors fame to state, that it was the work of one day. The poet's wife while he was in the ecstasy of composition watched him furtively as he walked backwards and forwards by the river side. His gestures and entire demeanor led her to believe that his wits had fled and a case of hopeless lunacy was left on her hands for life. When however the days work was written out and ushered into the world with the applause of approving critics, the anxious wife changed her opinion and pronounced her husband a genius and not a lunatic. Illustrating thus the truth of the poet's lines :---

Great wits to madness sure are near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

It is on the authority of Alexander Smith, that I make the assertion that Tam O'Shanter was written in one day, and Mr. Smith adds: "Since Bruce fought Bannockburn, it is the best single day's work done in Scotland."

It is a matter worthy of further note that there is not in the entire range of English literature a poem of the same length that has furnished so many subjects for the brush of the painter and the chisel of the sculptor. I regard this as most favorable testimony to the Poet's invention and the grandeur of his conceptions. Artists of merit select their subjects with much care and are rather inclined to be fastidious over them. Still I can mention four or five scenes from

Tam O'Shanter which artists of repute have transferred to the canvass and made immortal, winning for themselves a lasting fame. The opening scene in the inn-kitchen offered a most tempting allurement to the artist, and it has in consequence been seized eagerly and submitted to various treatments as the talents or fancy of the artist lead him. But it is, in fact, a very easy task for an artist to paint a group from Tam O'Shanter. The most difficult portion of his task has been accomplished for him before he begins, and all he has to do is to transfer the word-painting from the poet's book in oil colours to the canvass. When this has been done you can fancy you hear the Souter dilating at the very climax of one of his queerest stories, you can see the laugh grow brighter and brighter on the countenance of the Landlord and approaching nearer and nearer to the exploding point, and you can imagine you hear the captivating nonsense which Tam from time to time drops into the ear of the buxom Landlady.

Another picture is Tam's burly figure bestriding his gallant grey and dashing along the haunted road mid the wild howling of the midnight tempest :

Whiles holding fast his guid blue bonnet,
Whiles crooning o'er some Auld Scotch Sonnet.

Such figures might be cut out at once from Parian marble, so striking and sharp are the outlines. In the scene at the church there is material for the highest effort of the artist. The grand old Gothic oriel, through which Tam peers over the Mare's head to make observations---the frightened attitude of Maggie, the weird flitting figures in the inside, and lurid lights that blaze and flicker over the whole scene, is a study at which few painters would repine. Maggie's last grand spring across the keystone of the Bridge has been painted and engraved so frequently that it must be familiar to all. On the haunches of the bounding Mare stands firmly planted the young witch Nannie with a staunch grasp on the tail. Tam comes forward to avoid the malicious clutch of the infuriated beldame, while behind gibber and yell the wolfish troop of wrinkled hags.

There is yet another scene which might with propriety be painted, it is the figure of Tam's wife, as she sits in her lonely home waiting the arrival of her tarrying mate. Hers is not a mood to be incautiously encountered. She has been nursing her wrath to keep it warm, and I have no doubt she has succeeded to a marvel. I have never seen one such a picture. Artists have probably deemed it too common in real life to excite interest on canvass, save in the breasts of domestic defaulters like Tam, and even with them I fear the interest would be a painful one.

I have adverted to these things, because I thought they would serve to give a good idea of the dramatic power, and I might go on still further and tell you of the gorgeous spectacles which theatre managers have exhibited from Tam O'Shanter. It has however been reserved for our own days to set a crowning gem on this great poem. That round blue bonnet which Tam wore on that eventful evening has been chosen as the shape of the headdress worn by the fairest portion of the creation. Ladies are not in the habit of donning hats or bonnets which would mar their charms, hence the choice of this particular shape I regard as a delicate compliment paid to the Great Scottish Poet, and as shedding fresh tinges of romance round his immortal hero Tam O'Shanter !



Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere ; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.---Burke.