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Tam O'Shanter

By Dr. John Caven.

IT WOULD on my part be a bold undertaking, at the very outstart of my theme rigidly to define the class of poetry to which the poem of Tam O'Shanter belongs. In some editions of the works of the Great Scottish Poet it is classed among the humorous pieces, in others it finds a place among the Tales. That it is a tale in the wide acceptation of the term I allow. The Illiad is a tale in this sense---so also is the Aneid; so is the Jerusalemne Liberata of Tasso, the Divine Commedia of Dante, and the Paradise Lost of Milton. That Tam O'Shanter is simply a humorous production, designed only to raise a smile or encourage a laugh, is I think an untenable assertion and when I have finished my analysis of the poem I think you will agree with me that it deserves a higher niche in the Temple of Poetry than that usually accorded to productions designed merely to provoke mirth. The poetic force and power of Burns are impressed on none of his works so strongly as on the poem of Tam O'Shanter. His invention, his pathos, his descriptive tact and the richness of his imagination are there imaged and glassed in the sharpest outline. There may not be always that polish about his sentiments and diction which a fastidious taste would insist on; but did the lines of Burns possess the soft cadence of a Pope or the classic polish of a Tennyson he would no longer be the Ploughman Bard, and we doubt if in that case the shrine which he occupies in the hearts of his country-men would be so deeply

reverenced as it is now. He used the language of the people, and he used it as a vehicle on which to transmit to his country men the pictures of a rich fancy and an inexhaustible poetic invention. The stern old Scottish Doric, talked by the farm laborer and his farmer master, became in the hands of Burns as soft clay, capable of being moulded into what forms he pleased. An inexperienced eye would probably think little of the silken scarf, which an Indian Rajah plaits into folds for his turban. when compared with the production of European looms, but in the former there is pure material and its worth is real while the trickeries of manufacturers have imparted to the latter a false gloss merely meant to aid its sale. So with Burns, he deals in the real material; educated contrivances might perhaps have made the material look better but it is just possible that the material then would not be genuine. Burns gives Tam O'Shanter to us, in his native homespun; had, he dressed himself in West of England broadcloth he would not have accomplished his task half so gracefully.

The limits within which the action of the Poem is confined are clearly defined. Some might consider them too narrow for any superstructure of magnitude to be erected on them for, the journey of a farmer from the market town of Ayr to his own residence embraces all the incidents of this remarkable composition. Twelve miles of a ride on horseback afford indeed at first sight a narrow basis on which to construct an epic. Homer and Virgil had at their command the incidents of years to narrate. Airsto, Milton and Tasso took what time they needed, and wove into their narratives the most gaudy colors. But in nothing is the fertile invention of our poet more prominently illustrated than in this. He selects for his theme one of the most trifling and ordinary occurrences of

Agricultural life and he surrounds it with a witchery and a magic, which raise it to within a very little of Epic dignity. "Tam the simple, wassail-loving farmer becomes a hero, his boon companions grow into familiar personages and the Good Mare Meg is invested with that species of fame enjoyed by the war-horse of Alexander.

The method which the poet takes to portray to us the character of his hero, is exceedingly happy. He does not enter into a minute analysis of his mind, or his motives of action---he simply tells us what his wife said to him, and what she has repeated to him over and over again. Such a criterion of character is apt to be considered by some as fallacious, and we may go so far as to say that had the poet presented himself in person to Tam's wife inquiring after her husband's character, the answers to his inquiries would have been couched in far different terms from what we find in the poem. But how the poet came by his information we know not---he gives us Tam's character as his wife drew it and set it before Tam's own private gaze for private reflection. She would no sooner have thought of painting her husband in such color to a stranger than she would have planned the firing of his farm-steadings---and there were no insurance offices in these days. Here then is the portrait which Mrs. Kate O'Shanter draws of her husband hero. She was no doubt provoked when she did it, and the outlines are in consequence rough and severe :---

She tauld thee weel thou wast a skellum,
A bletherin, blustering, drunken blellum,
That frae November tae October
A market nicht thou wast nae sober.
That ilka melder wie the miller,
Thou sat as lang as thou had siller,

That every nagwas ca'd a shoe on
The smith and thee gat roarin fou on;
That at the Lord's House e'en on Sunday
Ye drank wae Kirkton Jean till Monday.
She prophesied that late or soon
Thou would be found deep drowned in Doon
Or caught wi' Warlocks in the Mirk
By Alloway's auld haunted Kirk.

From this it would appear that Tam's convivial habits were apt, when an opportunity occurred, to expand themselves into bacchanalian shapes, very indecorous and very much to be deplored. What between the weekly market and his visits to the mill and smithy, Tam's orgies may not have been quite so frequent as the orgies of some in our enlightened times, but I have no doubt when they did occur they were every whit as deep. The fearful forecast of the fate which awaited Tam---either to be drowned in Doon, or carried away by the malignant imps that made the old ruined Kirk of Alloway their nightly rendezvous---gives a sufficiently precise outline of the condition in which Tam was wont to present himself to his anxious spouse on market nights or after an evening's relaxation in the company of the smith or the miller. Tam I should suppose was a man who loved gossip society, and certainly he could not have chosen boon companions of a complexion better calculated to satisfy his tastes in this respect than a village smith and a country miller. Around the smithy forge and the kiln-fire of the mill could be heard news, the scandal and the gossip of the neighborhood. These establishments in country districts performed in years gone by the functions of our modern journals, without running the terrible risk of being arraigned for criminal libel---just as the well-to-do Roman in the

days when Rome was great, would saunter into the Forum to learn what news the morning carriers had brought as to how it fared with the state in the distant provinces of Gaul, Britain and Africa---or as that same Roman would later on in the day walk into the stately and voluptuous baths to hear rehearsed in minute detail the nights news of the great city, its factions, its suppers, its riots and its scandals, just so would a Scottish farmer of Tam's position step into the village smithy or the country mill and learn all worth learning whether substantial in news or trifling in gossip.

With a correct dramatic taste, the poet lifts the curtain on a convivial scene which a student of the Rembrandt school of art would love to transfer to canvas. The kitchen of an Inn in a Country Capital is as a rule a scene of lively bustle, more especially on the evening of a market day. But at the time the poet chooses to introduce his readers to the kitchen, the bustle has died away---for the hour is late and the threatening aspect of the sky on this particular evening has probably driven the more considerate portion of country people, to enter somewhat earlier than usual on their journey homeward. Only the daring are left. Cheerfully burns the fire in the big fire-place and with much noise roars up the capacious chimney throwing as it goes strong floods of light around the walls, on the carefully ordered rows of delf and tinware, which in turn reflect and scatter the light until the apartment is filled with dazzling brightness. Surrounded by this comfortable splendor sits a group of persons not numerous but wonderously happy withal. Foaming tankards of ale pass frequently and merrily around the group and at every turn the frothing beverage is pronounced to be immensely superior to its predecessor. Songs are sung, stories told, laughter rings, and the whole company is evidently fast drif-

ting into that abnormal condition which our poet describes as "getting fou and unco happy."

A prominent personage in this group is our hero Tam who is planted unco right fast by the blazing ingle. At his elbow sits "Souter Johnny" whose character is delineated with rare felicity by the poet in a single line. He was Tam's long-tried and never-failing friend but he had a weakness---he was much afflicted with a thirst which cost him and his friends much to appease. The bonds which bound together "Tam O'Shanter" and "Souter Johnny" were strongly woven---strong indeed as those which are supposed to knit brothers.

The best minds of pagan antiquity have expatiated in learned treatises on Friendship. They have investigated the origin of the passion, if I may so term it, and have laid bare, so far as they could discover them, its sources. Rome's greatest orator and statesman, Cicero, wrote an essay upon Friendship which is to this day the delight of scholars. But to none of the cunning investigators of ancient times did a foundation for friendship between man and man present itself at all like that on which stood the stately fabric of affection which subsisted between Tam O'Shanter and Souter Johnny. The ancient writers perhaps could not imagine a source of love so sequestered as that discovered by the Scottish Poet. Tam, says Burns, loved Souter Johnny like a very brother and the reason for this wonderful love is explained in the following line: "They had been fou for weeks together." That two men should be drunk in each others company for weeks, and not only not quarrel, but should so elevate themselves mutually in each others estimation that their affection for each other took the form and intensity of that love which is supposed to subsist between brothers, is undoubtedly

something which might escape the sharpest minds of antiquity without casting any reproach on their keenness.

Here again we see revealed Tam's passion for gossip. Souter Johnny is delighting the group with his queerest stories, with uncommon avidity. Of course the Souter's stories are all well known to the landlord who has heard them over and over again, and from long experience knows exactly when to laugh and when to applaud the songs. In the midst of all this the landlady, a buxom, ready-worded, woman is carrying on a very violent flirtation with our hero Tam of which in the interests of domestic peace we hope that his spouse Kate knew nothing, as such knowledge would certainly have raised to the boiling point the wrath she nursed so studiously to keep warm.

What with the agreeable company the songs, the stories, Tam's flirtations, the fast circling tankards of foaming ale, and the big roaring fire spreading radiance round the apartment, the scene is one of comfort and conviviality. In strong contrast with the glow and warmth filling the interior, and the mirth and gaiety prevailing there, is the dark and dismal November tempest that howls outside. There is no doubt an additional zest added to the comfort of a group seated round the blazing fire-place, while the wind raves madly outside, shrieking at the doors, roaring down the wide chimney, and driving the big rain-drops in rattling fury against the windows. A Roman poet experienced the feeling and recorded it in smoothest verse:---

How sweet is sleep to pass the vacant hours:
Lulled by the rushing winds and drifting showers.

The feeling to its fullest seems to have been enjoyed by Tam. As far as he was concerned the storm outside might rave and rustle: he did not mind the storm a whistle.

Our hero is in a condition far above all earthly cares, with no thought whatever of the lang Scotch miles that lay between him and his home, or the wild storm that would pelt on him with pitiless fury, till he gained its shelter:

Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious:
O'er a the ills o' life victorious.

Just at this point when our hero seems to be wrapt to the very summit of felicity, when the minutes like bees laden with honied treasure flit around him, every one of them stingless for the present at least, the poet introduces another striking contrast. 'Tis deep midnight---the hour of nights dark arch the key-stone---and Tam must bid farewell to his jovial company, quaff his last tankard, quit the snug, warm kitchen and through a wild commotion of the elements fight his way homeward as best he may. The poet seizes the occasion to hang round that well known exclamation of the preacher, "vanity of vanities and all is vaniety," one of the most beautiful garlands that the hand of bard ever wove. Never was the evanescent and changeful nature of human things portrayed by a rosary of more beautiful and correct similies. How charmingly the text is illustrated learn for yourselves while I cite the poet's lines:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed,
Or like the snow-flakes in the river,
A moment white then melt forever---
Or like the Borealis race,

That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.

The storm into which Tam is plunged from the comforts of the Inn kitchen is graphically described by the poet :---

"The wind blew as twad blow its last,
The rattling shower rose on the blast,
The speedy gleams the darkness swallowed,
Loud, deep, and lang the thunder bellowed;
That night a child might understand,
The De'il had business on his hand."

In explanation of the last couplet I may state that evil spirits have from days long previous to the time of Shakespeare been credited with raising ferocious storms and causing the direst confusion in the elements. The great Dramatist puts into the mouth of Lenox a well-known description of the night on which Macbeth murdered the gracious Duncan :---

"The night has been unruly where we lay.
Our chimneys were blown down and as they say
Lamentings heard in the air, strange screams of
death
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events,
New hatched to the woe-ful time. The obscene
bird
Clamored the livelong night---some say the
Earth was feverous and did shake.

In a like spirit the Scottish Poet judges from the turmoil in the elements that the powers of darkness are at work and have some enterprise to accomplish. Foreshadowing thus gently the terrible scene to be revealed in the Alloway Kirk. "Weel mounted on his

grey mare, Meg, a better never lifted leg,' Tam shoots out into the darkness heeding little lightning, wind or rain but otherwise sorely tormented and ill at ease. Tam's mind was in fact overgrown with superstitions as we have seen a stone with moss. He was a firm believer in witches and warlocks, fairies and spirits of every degree and color. The places which popular belief pointed out as the chosen haunts of these mysterious beings, the lonely graveyard, the ivy-clad castle of Baronial times, and the ruined church were all sources of a freezing terror, more especially if the night was dark and a tempest raged. Hence we find our hero as he urges forward his willing steed through mud and mire, casting his eye behind him at intervals to see that none of the terrible shapes he dreads start unexpected from an ambush and seize him as their prey.

To a mind constituted like Tam's the road along which he was now riding fast and furious to regain his home actually bristled with horrors. Places round which unearthly shapes are supposed to delight to linger during the very witching hours of night, lay thick along his route. There first of all was the ford near which in the snows of a December's storm an unfortunate peddler had perished. Farther on was the stone among the hazel trees, carefully noted, over which a poor drunkard had staggered and broken his neck; next rose among the furze a cairn to mark the place where hunters had found the body of a murdered infant; and then came a thorn tree spreading out over a wayside fountain on which an old dottard woman had hanged herself. All these were places of solemn dread, and all these Tam had to pass. Little wonder that he quailed and looked cautiously around. The descent of Virgil's hero to the shades was not beset with terrors more startling.

(To be continued.)