

HOGMANAY: ITS ORIGIN AND CUSTOMS.

BY ERIC FORBES.

THE origin of the usages peculiar to Hogmanay, as the last day of the year is styled in Scotland, is to a considerable extent veiled in the mists of antiquity. Even regarding the derivation of the word itself, various explanations of a purely conjectural nature have been offered. It is improbable, as some contend, that it could have been derived by our remote ancestors from the Greek, a language they were unacquainted with at the time when the custom first began. Had this phrase been reduced from any term of Roman Liturgy, then something might have been allowed to its credibility; but no term is to be found in the rubrics of the Roman Church that has the most distant affinity with the word. With much critical acumen, those who seek the origin of the term in the French consider the two words to be a corruption of

“L’homme est né
Trois rois là,”

alluding to the birth of our Lord, and the subsequent adoration paid to Him by the three wise men of the East.

No such song, however, was used by the French during the festival of Christmas, or at least is there any mention of it to be found in the works of such French historians and antiquaries as Megerai, Menage, or Pasquier. History rather points to the fact that all the northern tribes paid a sort of religious veneration to the night rather than the day, and this predilection for the former induced our ancestors, the Saxons, to begin all their computations of time from the night rather than the day; and the beginning of their year from winter rather than summer. In the same way our forefathers were wont to compute time when they said fortnight, se’nnight, or speaking of age, as Chaucer tells us in the tale of the “Wife of Bath,” “Of twenty winters old he seemed to be.” The Saxons probably acquired the custom of celebrating Hogmanay from the Scandinavian or Icelandic tribes, who held

this festival and other religious rites in the month of December, under the name of Hogmonat and Blothmont, signifying in ancient Icelandic the month of immolation or sacrifice. Hogenat, Chambers tells us, was the ancient Scandinavian name for the night preceding the feast of Yule, and was so called in reference to the animals slaughtered on that occasion for sacrificial or festal purposes. When we remember that, devoted by immemorial usage to innocent festivity, it has ever been the custom among northern nations to see the old year out and the new year in with the highest demonstrations of merriment and conviviality, all this points in an unmistakable manner, down through the long vistas of our national history, to where the mists of obscurity hang around the Druid worship of our forefathers. That so interesting an occasion should have been distinguished by some observance or ceremony is but natural, and we accordingly find various customs prevail—some sportive, others serious, with sometimes the mirthful and thoughtful intermingled. The simple ceremony in our own country of the unbarring of the entrance door, as the clock struck twelve, to let the old year out and the new year in, was one which used to be enacted with great formality. In the island of Guernsey we are told the children were wont to parade through the streets carrying the figure of a man emblematic of the dying year, and which, after a quaint ceremony, they buried on a lone part of the sea-shore. In the town of Philadelphia, in North America, one chronicler tells us the old year was "fired out" and the new "fired in" by a discharge of firearms of every imaginable description. In our own country, especially in the northern districts, faint traces of the old Druid custom were not so long ago to be found in some sequestered parts. In the far-off parish of Deerness, in Orkney, for example, the celebration of Hogmanay consisted of the old and young assembling in the village street and ushering in the new year by a series of visits throughout the district. They heralded their approach to each domicile by chanting a song or carol, in which the Queen May mentioned in it may be taken to have reference to the Virgin. At the conclusion of this chant the door was forthwith opened, when the assembled crowd rushed in pell-mell to the interior, where a sumptuous repast awaited them.

The food-receiving capacity of these worthy Orcadians must have been of no mean order, when we learn that he was an angry Deerness man next day whose house had been omitted in the course of this parochial visitation !

In that quaint little fishing town of Burghead, in Morayshire, with its bending shore of raging storm and sunny calm, another singular custom, almost unparalleled in any part of Scotland, prevailed, and which was locally known as "Burning the clavie." Space will not permit here to enter upon its details ; suffice it to say that it consisted mainly of the burning of herring barrels with peats, and the carrying home with great *éclat* of the burning embers as a protection from the "ills of life." This ceremony probably more than any other is largely Scandinavian in origin, and points to the rude times when the brave Norwegian Vikings held for a brief period possession of that outlandish promontory. The custom of the "wassail-bowl" or "first-footing," if no longer observed in our midst in the same effusive and demonstrative manner that it was half a century ago, is still remembered in a quieter way in many parts of the country. On the approach of twelve o'clock a "hot pint" was prepared—that is, a kettle-full of warm spiced or sweetened ale, with a liberal infusion of spirits. When the clock had struck the final knell of the departing year, each member of the family drank of this potation, "A good health and a happy new year, and many of them," to all the rest, with a general hand-shaking, and perhaps a dance round the table. The elders of the family would then most probably sally out with the hot kettle, bearing also a competent provision of huns and shortbread or bread and cheese, with the design of visiting their neighbours, and interchanging with them the same cordial greetings. If they met by the way another party similarly bent whom they knew, they would stop and exchange sips from their respective kettles. Reaching their friend's house, they would enter with vociferous good wishes, and soon send the kettle a-circulating. If they were the first to enter the house since twelve o'clock, then they were deemed as the "first-foot," and as such it was most important for the luck to the family in the coming year that they should make their entry with their hands full of cakes and cheese ; of whom, on the other hand, civility de-

manded that each individual in the house should partake. To such an extent did this custom prevail in Edinburgh, that its principal streets were, even till the beginning of the century, more thronged between twelve and one in the morning than they usually were at mid-day. An unlucky circumstance which took place, however, in 1812, provided the means of nearly extinguishing the old-fashioned custom. A small party of reckless boys formed a design of turning the innocent festivities of "first-footing" to account for purposes of plunder. On that bright moonlight morning, the tuneful strains of "Auld Lang Syne" from the garrison band stationed on the Castle ramparts had scarce died away, and the peaceable townsfolk gone abroad on the principal streets of the romantic Old Town "first-footing," when these youths sallied forth in small bands in search of plunder. By a previous agreement they kept on the outlook for those who chanced to wear white neckties, such being the best mark by which they could distinguish in the sombre shadows of the moonlit streets those likely to carry any property worthy of being taken. Needless to say, a great many were thus spoiled of their watches and other valuables. The least resistance was resented by the most brutal treatment. In the *melee* which ensued, two persons—a policeman, Dugald Campbell, and a clerk, James Campbell—received injuries from which they died. An affair so unusual, so uncharacteristic of the people among whom it happened, provided a widespread feeling of surprise and indignation. The *Scots Magazine* of January, 1812, gives the following graphic description of this Hogmanay riot:—"During almost the whole of the night after eleven o'clock a gang of ferocious banditti, armed with bludgeons and other weapons, infested some of the leading streets of the metropolis, and knocked down and robbed and otherwise most wantonly abused almost every person who had the misfortune to fall in their way. After they had fairly succeeded in knocking down those of whom they were in pursuit, they proceeded to immediately rifle them of their money and watches; and the least symptom on their part of anxiety to save their property was a provocation to new outrages, which were persevered in until their lives were in danger. One person we have heard of who, after being knocked

down, made several attempts to preserve his watch, when he was so abused and kicked on the head and in the breast and stomach that he was glad to escape with his life. We have heard of many other instances of outrage, but it is unnecessary to enter further into particulars here." The deaths of the policeman "Royal Arch," as he was familiarly called, and the young Leith clerk, three days after the riot, caused the magistrates to offer a reward of two hundred guineas for the discovery of the murderers. Upon the 22nd April following, amid a great array of civil and military power, three young men, named Hugh M'Intosh, Neil Sutherland, and Hugh M'Donald, who had been found guilty by the High Court of Justiciary of the murders, were executed upon a gibbet erected upon the scene of the tragedies in the High Street, exactly opposite the Old Stamp Office Close. The same journal informs us that upon the afternoon of the execution, with a view to preserve the majesty of the law and the peace of the city, 400 of the Perthshire Militia, 200 volunteers, a regiment of the Edinburgh Militia, and a troop of the 6th Dragoon Guards, lined the approaches from the Tolbooth to the scaffold when the prisoners were led forth, escorted by the magistrates and high constables. M'Intosh and Sutherland (who were cousins) attired in blue jackets, pantaloons, and white vests, and M'Donald in a blue jacket and white trousers, bareheaded, and wearing white gloves, concluded upon the scaffold the last act in this memorable Hogmanay tragedy. "Such a concourse of people," says a newspaper of that date, "never before came together on the streets of Edinburgh, every place which could command a view of the procession or the place of execution, even the tops of the houses, and balconies of the Tron Kirk and St. Giles Cathedral, being filled with spectators." From that time, then, and probably as a result of this sad affair, the old custom of going about, in large towns at anyrate, with the "hot pint" and ancient "wassail-bowl" fell off. But there existed in Scotland, and does so yet to some extent, a "first-footing" independent of the "hot pint." It is within the recollection of many that it was the custom of some youthful member of a family to steal silently to the door in the hope of meeting there the maiden of his fancy, and obtaining the privilege of a kiss as his "first-foot." It

not unfrequently happened that great was the disappointment of the amorous Jock, and doubtless great the joking around the family ingle, if perchance by accident or plan some half-withered aunt or aged beldame came to receive his osculatory salutation instead of the blooming Jenny. Remote country districts even now evince a strong tendency towards the retention of those auld warl' customs and observances, and although the "mummers" with whom Sir Walter Scott delighted to amuse his household on Hogmanay, when Abbotsford was in all its glory, are now but a memory of the past, we find the children of the industrial and agricultural classes, although unattired in fantastic garb as of old, still clinging to the custom taught them by their elders of traversing the village main streets or the country lanes, calling at the doors of the wealthier folks for their "Hogmanay," which in most cases is in itself a sufficient announcement of their demands. Across the Border, too, a similar custom prevails among the young, which is known as far as Yorkshire and the surrounding Midlands as "Hagmena." Indeed, it is seldom now that an English family fails to sit up on the last night of the year to listen to its dying requiem, when the ushering in of another of Father Time's already numerous progeny affords them an opportunity to exchange mutual congratulations.

THE FUN OF THE FAIR:
A SKETCH OF A WOMAN'S TRAGEDY.

BY MARGARET MOYES BLACK.

ACT I.

IN THE FIR WOODS.

IN the broad belt of fir woods that stretched for miles between the hills and the sea there resounded the axe of the woodman and the ceaseless whirr of the steam-sawmill. The