

III.

NOTICE OF A HIGHLAND CHARM-STONE. By Rev. ALEXANDER STEWART, LL.D., F.S.A. SCOT., BALLACHULISH MANSE.

When at Kinlochleven one day lately, MacGregor, one of the keepers at Kinlochbeg, handed me an extremely curious talisman, which he assured me had been in the possession of his great-grandmother, having descended to her as a valuable heirloom through several previous generations. It is, in fact, a *Clach-Leighis* or *Clach-Bhuadhach*—a Stone of Healing or Stone of Power—used in the healing of bodily ailments, human and bestial. In ordinary parlance it was simply called *Buadhag*, or *A Bhuadhag*, a feminine diminutive, implying affection, confidence, kindliness—*Amabilis Victrix*—the little, kindly, powerful *She-(Subduer)*. It is in shape and size like a small orange; of a dark chocolate colour, with rough, nodulated surface.

I was at first under the impression that the circles and knobs on the surface of the stone must be artificial—but a minute examination convinced me that its surface is perfectly natural. All MacGregor could further tell me was that it was used in healing of ailments, and that the tradition in the family was that it had originally been found growing on the top of the head of a toad! When questioned as to the *modus operandi* he could only say that sometimes the charm was applied directly to the seat of pain, and at other times it was dipped in water from a running stream, over which an incantation was said, and that the patient was made to drink of the water, and had some of it sprinkled over him.

Of the incantation used he could say nothing, but I am able to supply from Brae Lochaber the following form of words which was repeated over the Keppoch charm-stone as it was being dipped in water.

Bogam thu 'sa bhùrn,
A lèug bhuidhe, bhoidheach, bhuardhar,
Ann am bùrn an fhior-uig ;

Nach d' leig Bride a thruilleadh,
 'An ainm nan Abstol naomh,
 'S Muire Oigh nam beusan,
 'N ainm na Trianaid ard,
 'S nan aingeal dealrach uile ;
 Beannachd air an lèug ;
 'S beannachd air an uisge,
 Leigheas tinneas cléibh do gach creutair cuirte.

Translation.

Let me dip thee in the water,
 Thou yellow, beautiful gem of Power !
 In water of purest wave,
 Which (Saint) Bridget didn't permit to be contaminated.
 In the name of the Apostles twelve,
 In the name of Mary, Virgin of virtues,
 And in the name of the High Trinity,
 And all the shining angels,
 A blessing on the gem,
 A blessing on the water, and
 A healing of bodily ailments to each suffering creature.

The Keppoch charm-stone was an oval of rock crystal, about the size of a small egg, fixed in a bird's claw of silver, and with a silver chain attached, by which it was suspended when about to be dipped. The Keppoch charm-stone was in the possession of the late Angus MacDonell of Insh, a cadet of the old MacDonells of Keppoch and the Braes. I saw it about the year 1854. Angus M'Donell emigrated to Australia shortly afterwards, and it is believed that he carried the charm-stone along with him. To understand the reference to Saint Bridget in the incantation, it is necessary to mention that there is a well near Keppoch, called *Tobar-Bhrìde* (Bridget's Well), from which a small streamlet issues. It was from this stream that the water was taken into which the charm-stone was to be dipped.

As to the supposed origin of the Kinlochleven stone from the head of a toad, we have all heard that "the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet

a precious jewel in his head." A sixteenth-century folk-lorist says:—"There is to be found in the heads of old and great toads a stone they call borax or stelon, which, being used as rings, gives forewarning against venom;" and John Lupton, the herbalist, of somewhat later date, assures us that a "toadstone, called *crepaudia*, touching any part envenomed by the bite of a rat, wasp, spider, or other venomous beast, ceases the pain and swelling thereof." The toadstone also was averred to sweat and change colour when poison was in its proximity. It will be observed, however, that, according to the old popular belief, as thus quoted, it was *in* the toad's head that the precious antidotal jewel was supposed to be hid. In the case of our charm, according to the tradition, it was found not *in*, but as a strange, abnormal growth or excrescence *on*, a toad's head: *Cnap a bha losgan a guilan air a ceann* were the words—a lump, excrescence, or sort of wen that a toad was bearing *on* its head.

The stone has been submitted to Professor Geikie, who pronounces it to be an impure chalcedony coloured with ferric oxide, and to have probably come from an amygdaloidal cavity in some igneous rock.

In some respects a more remarkable charm has just come temporarily into my possession.

For a good many years past I knew in a quiet uncertain way that an old woman in Ardgour had in her possession, and was in the habit of frequently using, a most powerful charm, chiefly in the alleviation and cure of infantile ailments. It was always applied so secretly that, although constantly on the watch for a glimpse of it, I never could manage it; and when I applied to the old woman herself to let me just have a look at it, she very firmly refused, though she and I were otherwise very good friends. The old woman has recently gone to her rest; and I, having watched my opportunity, am at last in *temporary* possession of the famous charm. When it was handed to me it was covered with rust and dust accumulation, and was suspended from a bit of faded scarlet ribbon. On rubbing it up a bit, what was my surprise to find that the charm was a toy universal calendar, intended, I suppose, as a

pendant to a watch chain. When the old woman's son handed it to me, very reluctantly, he made it a condition that I should honestly return it to him, as it really possessed wonderful virtues, and *had been long in their family*. He could assure me that his great-grandmother had it, and by calculation this would throw it back to 1770 or thereby. I asked him if he was aware that there was lettering on it? He said yes, and that the letters were *charmed* letters, which nobody could read.

The calendar, which is of a quite common type, about the size of a sixpence, consists of an inner steel plate upon either side of which revolves a brass disc. The letters and figures are so recent in style that they might be of yesterday, and a number of experts to whom they have been submitted agree in thinking that they cannot be so old as of the last century.

Here then we have an example of a charm, not handed down from remote times surrounded with a halo of mystery, but picked up, and invested with superstitious power, in all probability within the present century.