

XVI.—*Letter on the Superstitions of the Highlands,*
addressed to the Right Honourable JAMES DRUM-
MOND OF PERTH.

BY THE REV. JAMES ROBERTSON, D. D. MINISTER OF CALLANDER.
 —COMMUNICATED BY THE REV. DR BRUNTON.

[Read to the Society, 27th April 1829.]

MY DEAR SIR, *Bilstanebrae, 11th April 1829.*
 I BEG to transmit herewith a letter on the Superstitions of the Highlands by the late Reverend Dr Robertson of Callander. It was given to me by the late Provost Creech, so that I have no doubt of its authenticity. It was not used for the purpose for which Mr Creech intended it; and, if you think it worth the offering to the Society, will be better placed with them than with me. I fear there is nothing *new* in it. But our concern is not with things *new*. I have the honour to be, &c.

ALEX. BRUNTON.

E. W. A. D. HAY, Esq.

Callander, 7th March 1791.

SIR,—A letter, which I had the honour to receive from Mrs Drummond; dated the 3d curt. conveyed your request, which to me is always a command, that I should write more fully concerning the superstitious customs of the Highlanders upon All Hallow Eve. I do not remember what was in the small note I made at Drummond Castle; therefore this letter has a chance of being only a repetition.

I. Upon the last day of Autumn, the people of a small village or hamlet cut down as many ferns as they thought necessary for the Fire, which they meant to kindle in the evening.

In remote ages, it is probable that more people attended each

Fire than at present, the farm-houses being less scattered than now. They lived in groups of many houses and families, for the purpose of mutual defence against wild beasts or bad people. Besides, that their attendance at this grand anniversary was only possible once a year, and recommended by a high degree of religious veneration, mixed with an eager desire of prying into futurity, we may suppose that these festivals were well attended.

This custom seems also to have been more ancient than the introduction of agriculture, and points at ruder ages for its origin, perhaps even more remote than the pastoral age, because no straw or any fuel was to be used in the Fires, except ferns alone; and the food was principally such fruits as the season and country could afford. The young people collected the ferns; and no ferns were to be taken but such as were cut down that very day.

As soon as it began to be dark, even before day light was gone, the whole people who had an interest in the bonfire assembled at a convenient and contiguous eminence. The fire was kindled with many expressions of joy. Large fires are, among many nations, expressions of national rejoicings; and it is well known that, in very large tracts of Asia, fire was not only employed in religious ceremonies, but was itself held in veneration, and obtained divine honours.

But, that I may not digress from my subject, when the ancient Caledonians had, with many gesticulations and mirth, attended their fire till it was spent, every person in the company got a small stone, such as they could conveniently carry in one hand, and distinguishable by some particular mark, that each stone might be easily known from every other stone. The oldest person laid down the first stone upon the very verge or circumference of the ashes of their fire, saying to the rest that this stone was his. All the rest were prepared to do the same, and took precedency according to their seniority, until the whole stones formed a circle round the spot on which the fire had burnt. And if any person was absent, the rest put in a stone for their

absent friend. This was generally done by the nearest relation of the absentee.

Whether this circle of stones was in imitation of the circles of stones at which they usually assembled for their ordinary and regular worship, or whether it was in imitation of the roundness of their fire, or out of respect to the circular appearance of the sun, the great fountain of fire, I will not pretend to say. It is probable that both the circle of stones in their ordinary places of worship, and the circle of stones upon All-Hallow Eve, and many other circles they made, were with an allusion to the figure of the sun.

To this day, when the Highlanders go round any thing with a degree of religious veneration, they go round in the same direction as the sun goes round the world on this side the equator, *i. e.* from east to west, by the south side. This is the direction in which a bride is placed by her bridegroom, when they stand up to be married; the direction in which the bridegroom turns round the bride to give the first kiss after the nuptial ceremony; the direction in which they go at least half round a grave before the coffin is deposited; the direction in which they go round any consecrated fountain, whose waters are supposed to have some medicinal virtues, which they expect to receive by immersion or drinking. I have heard it said that, in certain places of the Highlands, the people sometimes took off their bonnets to the sun when he appeared first in the morning.

I ask your pardon for leaving my subject for this custom, which they call the lucky or fortunate way of turning round, and the opposite direction, the ominous or unfortunate way.

I at least gave time to the good people to return from the bonfire to their houses, which they did with much anxiety. The person whose stone was turned out of its place, and the tread of whose foot was to be found in the ashes next morning, was supposed to be doomed to die before the end of twelve months. No person went near that haunted place all night;

but by the break of day it was approached with awe, and every circumstance supposed to be of importance relative to the stones and ashes examined with care.

All this I have seen myself; and there is not one particular omitted where the ceremony is understood to be duly performed, or to have any efficacy in divination.

I have heard it supported by very respectable and repeated tradition, that this bonfire was the extinguishing of the old or unhallowed fire, upon All Saints Eve, in the times of the Druids; and that upon the next morning the people applied to their priests for holy or consecrated fire, the virtues of which new fire were to last for one year and no longer.

II. After the ceremony of the bonfire was over, and all the stones laid in the order mentioned, the young people's next care was to use certain charms, and to indulge their curiosity in trying to know the persons or names of their future spouses. The whole of their divinations seem to refer to their deaths or marriages, which are certainly two very important grounds of concern to people, in all ages, and in every stage of society.

From such a variety of charms as were in use with regard to the latter of these, I shall only mention two or three; for every person made choice of one or of another according to their courage or inclination.

One mode of knowing the appearance and figure of their future spouse was this. The person went to a barn, which must have two opposite doors. Both doors were opened. A riddle was taken into which a piece of money was thrown; no matter whether a coin, or brooch, or piece of plate. The person began immediately to riddle the silver, in the name of the Evil Spirit, or of the Worst Man, as he is commonly called in Gaelic. During this transaction the figure of a person came in, and took the riddle from the person who was employed; and this vision was understood to have the exact figure, and stature, and appearance of the future spouse.

I am not very superstitious, nor much inclined to give credit to tales about hob-goblins; yet I cannot forbear to mention what a man of veracity told me not long ago, about this very charm, that had happened to people with whom he was intimate in his youth.

My author lived then in his grand-uncle's house. His grand-uncle's servant went to the barn, to riddle the silver, upon All Hallow Even. There came in the figure of a woman, who took a faint hold of the riddle, but not so as to take it out of his hand. He continued still to riddle, and there came another female apparition, and passed in the same manner. Immediately thereafter there came in four people, carrying a coffin on a bier, in the ordinary way used at funerals, and passed through the barn. He was so terrified that he started back till this procession passed away. But before he could make his escape, the figure of a third woman came in and took the riddle from him. He left the barn instantly, and came to the dwelling-house in great terror and agitation. The person who told me was at that moment in the house. The master of the family examined his servant strictly, in the presence of all, where he had been—what he had been about—and if he had seen any thing. The servant told every circumstance as above narrated. The old man replied, You shall be three times married, and you have already seen the funeral of your two first wives.

The man was actually married three times—buried two of his wives—and died himself before the last wife.

However incredible this story may appear, I see no way to overturn it, unless we suppose that the whole family had conspired to tell a lie; and, even then, it is still surprising that they could devise a lie which should correspond exactly to all the circumstances of the man's three marriages, and the two funerals, long before any of them took place.

I have heard of other adventures of this nature, where a woman went to riddle in the barn, and the apparitions of men came in,

with the clothes wet or bloody; and these women's husbands are said to have been drowned or killed. But I never could trace information, which appeared to be so suspicious, till it rested on any thing like proper evidence of the fact. I have only heard from those who had it heard from others.

III. Another practice is, that a person goes to the fold upon that night, and takes some wool from a black sheep. The wool is spun immediately by the person, without speaking a word to any other. The person then goes to a common kiln for drying victual. The clew is thrown down, in the same name as before, into the pot of the kiln; and the person begins to wind up the yarn, till the end below be held fast. Then the person asks, Who holds my clew? The answer, from below, announces the name and surname of the future spouse.

I have seen or heard of many other modes of trying to know future events upon All Hallow Evening, especially with regard to marriage; such as a stone, taken from a rivulet making a boundary between two estates, and from a ford where living and dead do pass—gall cut with the teeth by a person blind-fold and dumb—the first egg of a young hen, baked into a cake, with one shellful of soot, another of meal, and a third of salt, all properly mixed together. This extraordinary cake must be dressed by a fire made of straw taken from the cradle of a woman's first son. Besides, I have heard of some other charms, which I forbear even to mention, as not worthy of your notice. I suspect that I have tired you sufficiently already, and must crave your forgiveness. Yet, however ridiculous these may appear to us, they certainly were instituted with very serious intentions at first, and were invented from the keen desire that mankind have of prying into futurity. And I do think that they are just as good, and were certainly as useful, as Virgil's Charm of knots and colours: '*Necte tribus nodis ternos, Amarylli, colores.*'

In the Highlands of Perthshire, and no doubt in many other inland parts of the country, these practices prevailed much even

since the middle of this century; but they are now wearing out of use.

I forget how much or how little of this corresponds with the hasty note I left at Drummond Castle, or whether any or all of it be the same. All I recollect about it is, that it related to Ball-teen, which is the Fire of Ball, and to Hallow-Evening; and that I took notice of some of the allusions practised in the Highlands to the sacrifices of the one, and to the divinations of the other, of these two great Druidical festivals.—I have the honour to be, &c.

JAMES ROBERTSON.