CHAPTER IX.

WITCHCRAFT IN SCOTLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

It has been already remarked, that the superstitions connected with sorcery and magic had their foundation in the earlier mythology of the people. If we would perceive this connexion more intimately, we have only to turn our eyes towards Scotland, a country in which this mythology had preserved its sway over the popular imagination much longer than in the more civilized south. We know but little of the Scottish popular superstitions until the sixteenth century, when they are found in nearly the same shape in which they had appeared in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In Scotland, witchcraft had not been magnified and modified by the systematical proceedings of ecclesiastical inquisitors, and it is therefore found in a much less sophisticated form.

In Scotland, as in other parts of Europe, witchcraft first makes its appearance in judiciary pro-
ceedings as an instrument of political or personal animosity, and was used where other grounds of accusation were too weak to effect the objects of the accuser. In the latter half of the fifteenth century, the earl of Mar, brother of James III., was accused of consulting with witches and sorcerers, in order to shorten the king's days, and he was bled to death in his own lodgings, without even being brought to a trial. Twelve witches, and three or four wizards, were subsequently burnt at Edinburgh as his accomplices. In the century following, in 1532, a woman of rank and beauty, Janet Douglas lady Glamis, was charged with having caused the death of her first husband by sorcery, but escaped, to be tried and burnt, amid the general commiseration of her countrymen, for a similar crime which she was said to have attempted against the person of James V., with a view to the restoration of the Douglas family, the object of James's special hatred. In these executions, death was the punishment rather of the treason than of the sorcery; and the first simple case of the latter which we find in the records of the High Court of Justiciary in Scotland, is that of Agnes Mullikine, alias Bessie Boswell, of Dumferming, who, in 1563, was "banished and exiled" for witchcraft, a mild sentence which seldom occurs in subsequent times. The records just alluded to, published a few years ago by Mr. Robert Pitcairn, will be our chief guide in the history of sorcery in Scotland.

In Scotland, the witches received their power, not from the evil one, but from the "fairy folk," with whom, at least until a late period, their con-
nexion was more innocent, and was characterised by none of the disgusting particularities which distinguished the proceedings of their sisters on the continent. According to an old and popular ballad—as ancient perhaps as the fourteenth century—the celebrated Thomas of Ercildowne obtained his supposed skill in prophecy from his connexion with the queen of faery. In 1576, a very extraordinary case was tried before the high court, in which the chief actress was known as Bessie Dunlop, a native of the county of Ayr, and wife of a cottager named Andro Jak. In her confession, this woman stated that she was one day going from her own house to the yard of Monkcastell, driving her cows to the pasture, and weeping "for her cow that was dead," her husband and child that were both lying ill of an epidemic, and herself newly risen from child-bed, when a strange man met her by the way, and saluted her with the words, "Gude day, Bessi!" She returned his salutation, and in answer to his inquiries, told him of her troubles, upon which he informed her, that her child, as well as the sick cow, and two of her sheep, would die, but that her "gude man" should soon recover, all which took place as he foretold. She described her interrogator as "ane honest wele-elderlie man, gray bairdit (bearded), and had ane gray coilt with Lumbart slevis of the auld fassoun ; ane pair of gray brekis (breeches), and quhyte schankis, gartanit abone the kne ; ane black bonet on his heid, cloise behind and plane befoir, with silkin laissis drawin throw the lippis thairof ; and ane quhyte wand in his hand." This personage told her at last that he was
one Thome Reid, "quha deit (died), at Pinkye." (Sept. 10, 1547). And this account was confirmed by the manner in which he disappeared through the yard of Monkcastell—"I thocht he gait in at ane narroware hoill of the dyke, nor ony erdlie man culd haif gane throw; and swa I was sumthing fleit (aghast)." It appears that Thome Reid had been a turned-off servant of the laird of Blair, and Bessie Dunlop was once sent on a message to his son, who inherited his name, and had succeeded to his place in the household of the laird of Blair, and who fully confirmed Thome's story, that he had gone to the battle of Pinkye, and fallen in that disastrous conflict.

The next time Thome Reid appeared to Bessie, as she was going between her own house and the thorn of Dawmstarnok, and he then declared more openly his ultimate designs. After remaining some time with her, Thome asked her pointedly if she would believe in him, to which she replied with great naive, "She would believe in anybody who did her good." Thome had hitherto spoken like a good Christian, and at their first interview he had addressed her in the name of the Blessed Virgin, but now, encouraged by her answer, he boldly proposed to her that she should "deny her Cristendom, and the faith she took at the baptismal font," in return for which she should have goods and horses and cows in abundance, besides other advantages. This, however, she refused indignantly, and her tempter went away, "something angry" with her.

Thome's visits generally occurred at mid-day, not at the still hour of night, and he seemed little embarrassed by the presence of other company. Shortly
after the interview just mentioned, he visited her in her own house, where she was in company with her husband and three tailors, and, unseen by these, he took her by the apron and led her to the door, and she followed him up to the "hill-end," and there he told her to remain quiet and speak not, whatever she might hear and see. She then advanced a little, and suddenly saw twelve persons, eight women and four men—"the men were clad in gentlemen's clothing, and the women had all plaids round about them, and were very seemly like to see, and Thome was with them." They bade her sit down, and said, "Welcome, Bessie, wilt thou go with us?" but, as she had been warned, she returned no answer, and, after holding a consultation amongst themselves, which she did not hear, they disappeared in a "hideous" whirlwind. Shortly afterwards Thome returned, and told her the persons she had seen were the "good wights," who dwelt in the court of Elfen, who came there to invite her to go with them, and he repeated the invitation very pressingly, but she answered that "She saw no profit to gang that kind of gates, unless she knew wherefore."

Then he said, "Seest thou not me, worth meat and worth clothes, and good enough like in person?" and he promised to make her far better off than ever she was.

Her answer, however, was still the same—she dwelt with her own husband and "bairns," and could not leave them—and so he "began to be very crabbed with her," and told her that if she continued in that mind she would get little good of him. His anger, however, appears to have soon
subsided, and he continued to come at her call, and give her his advice and assistance, always treating her with respect, for she declared that the greatest liberty he had taken with her was to draw her by the apron when he would persuade her to go with him to fairy-land. She said that she sometimes saw him in public places, as in Edinburgh streets on a market-day, and that on one occasion, when she was “gone a-field” with her husband to Leith, she went to tie her nag to the stake by Restalrig loch, and there came suddenly a company of riders by “that made a din as though heaven and earth had gone together,” and immediately they rode into the loch with a “hideous rumble.” Thome came to her and told her that it was the “good wights,” who were taking their ride in this world. On another occasion Thome told her the reason of his visits to her; he called to her remembrance that one day when she was ill in child-bed, and near her time of delivery, a stout woman came in to her, and sat down on the form beside her, and asked a drink of her, and she immediately gave it; this he said was his mistress, the queen of Elfen, who had commanded him to wait upon her and “do her good.”

The whole extent of Bessie Dunlop’s witchcraft consisted in curing diseases and recovering stolen property, which she did by the agency of her unearthly visitor, who gave her medicines, or showed her how to prepare them. Some of her statements appear to have been confirmed by other witnesses; and however we may judge of the connexion between Thome Reid and Bessie Dunlop, it is ren-
dered certain by the entry in the court records, that the unfortunate woman was "convict and brynt."

From this time cases of witchcraft occur more frequently in the judicial records, and they become exceedingly numerous as we approach the end of the century, still, however, distinguished by their purely Scottish character. A remarkable case is recorded in the memorable year 1588, which has several points of resemblance with the story of Bessie Dunlop. The heroine was Alison Peirsoun, of Byrehill, whose connexion with "faerie" originated with her kinsman, William Sympsoune, a "great scholar and doctor of medicine." He was born at Stirling, his father being the king's smith, but he "was taken away from his father by a man of Egypt, a giant, while but a child, who led him away to Egypt with him, where he remained by the space of twelve years before he came home again." During this time his father, who also appears to have had a hankering after unlawful knowledge, died "for opening a priest's book and looking upon it." On his return home, Alison Peirsoun became intimate with her kinsman, who cured her of certain diseases, until, as it would appear, he died also. One day, as she stated, being in Grange Muir, with the people that passed to the muir (moor), she lay down sick and alone, when she was suddenly accosted by a man clad in green clothes, who told her that if she would be faithful, he would do her good. She was at first terrified, and cried for help, but no one hearing her, she addressed her in God's name, upon which he immediately dis-
ALISON PEIRSON.

appeared. But he soon afterwards appeared to her again, accompanied with "many men and women," and she was obliged to go with them, and they had with them "piping and merriment, and good cheer;" and she was thus carried to Lothian, where they found puncheons of wine with drinking-cups. From this time she constantly haunted the company of the "good neighbours" (fairies), and the queen of Elfen, at whose court she was a frequent visitor, and she boasted that she had many friends there, among whom was the aforesaid William Sympsoune, who was most familiar with her, and from whom chiefly she derived her skill in curing diseases. She declared that her familiarity with the fairies was so great, that she was allowed to see them "make their salves with pans and fires, and that they gathered their herbs before sun-rising, as she did." The archbishop of St. Andrews, a scholar and profound divine, had condescended to seek the assistance of this woman in a dangerous illness, for which he was made an object of severe satire by his political enemies; she caused him to eat a sodden fowl, and take a quart of claret wine mixed with her drugs, which the worthy prelate drank off at two draughts! Alison, in the course of her examination, gave many curious anecdotes of the fairy people, with whom she was sometimes on better terms than at others; among them she saw several of her acquaintance, who had been carried to Elfland, when their friends imagined they were dead and gone to heaven; and she learnt from her kinsman, Sympsoune, that a tithe of them was yearly given up to hell, and had been warned by
him from time to time not to go with them at certain periods, lest she should be made one of the number. This woman also was convicted and burnt (convicta et combusta).

The next case, or rather two cases, of witchcraft in the Scottish annals, is of a more fearful and more criminal character than either of the preceding. The chief persons implicated were Katherine Munro, lady Fowlis, wife of the chief of the clan of Munro, and Hector Munro, the son of the baron of Fowlis by a former wife. The lady Fowlis was by birth Katharine Ross of Balnagown; and, in consequence of family quarrels and intrigues, she had laid a plot to make away with Robert Munro, her husband's eldest son, in order that his widow might be married to her brother, George Ross, laird of Balnagown, preparatory to which it was also necessary to effect the death of the young lady Balnagown. The open manner in which the proceedings of lady Fowlis were carried on, affords a remarkable picture of the barbarous state of society among the Scottish clans at this period. Among her chief agents were Agnes Roy, Christiane Ross, and Marjory Neyne Mac Alister, the latter better known by the name of Loskie Loncart, and all three described as "notorious witches;" another active individual was named William Mac Gillevordame; and there were a number of other subordinate persons of very equivocal characters. As early as the midsummer of 1576, it appears from the trial that Agnes Roy was sent to bring Loskie Loncart to consult with lady Fowlis, who was advised "to go into the hills to speak with the Elf-folk," and learn from them if Robert Munro
and lady Balnagown would die, and if the laird of Balnagown would marry Robert’s widow; and about the same time, these two women made clay images of the two individuals who were to die, for the purpose of bewitching them. Poison was also adopted as a surer means of securing their victims, and the cook of the laird of Balnagown was bribed to their interests. The deadly ingredients were obtained by William Mac Gillevordame, at Aberdeen, under pretence of buying poison for rats; it was administered by the cook just mentioned, in a dish sent to the lady Balnagown’s table, and another accomplice, who was present, declared “that it was the sairest and maist cruell sicht that evir scho saw, seing the vomit and vexacioun that was on the young lady Balnagown and hir company.” However, although the victim was thrown into a miserable and long-lasting illness, the poison did not produce immediate death, as was expected. From various points in the accusation, it appears that the conspirators were actively employed in devising means of effecting their purpose from the period mentioned above till the Easter of the following year, by which time the deadly designs of the lady Fowlis had become much more comprehensive, and she aimed at no less than the destruction of all the former family of her husband, that their inheritance might fall to her own children. In May, 1577, William Mac Gillevordame was asked to procure a greater quantity of poison, the preceding dose having been insufficient; but he refused, unless her brother, the laird of Balnagown, were made privy to it; a difficulty which was soon got over, and it appears that
the laird was, to a certain degree, acquainted with their proceedings. A potion of a much more deadly character was now prepared, and two individuals, the nurse of the lady Fowlis and a boy, were killed by accidentally tasting of it; but we are not told if any of the intended victims fell a sacrifice. The conspirators had now again recourse to witchcraft, and in the June of 1577, a man obtained for the lady Fowlis an "elf arrow-head," for which she gave him four shillings. The "elf arrow-head" was nothing more than one of those small rude weapons of flint, belonging to a primeval state of society, which are often met with in turning up the soil, and which the superstitious peasantry of various countries have looked upon as the offensive arms of fairies and witches. On the 2nd and 6th of July, lady Fowlis and her accomplices held two secret meetings; at the first they made an image of butter, to represent Robert Munro, and having placed it against the wall of the chamber, Loskie Loncart shot at it eight times with the elf arrow-head, but always missed it; and at the second meeting they made a figure of clay to represent the same person, at which Loskie shot twelve times, but with no better success, in spite of all their incantations. This seems to have been a source of great disappointment, for they had brought fine linen cloth, in which the figures, if struck by the elf arrow-head, were to have been wrapped, and so buried in the earth at a place which seems to have been consecrated by superstitious feeling, and this ceremony was to have insured Robert Munro's death. In August, another elf arrow-head was obtained, and to-
wards Hallowmass another meeting was held, and two figures of clay made, one for Robert Munro and the other for the lady; lady Fowlis shot two shots at lady Balnagown, and Loskie Loncart shot three at Robert Munro, but neither of them were successful, and the two images were accidentally broken, and thus the charm was destroyed. They now prepared to try poison again, but Christiane Ross, who had been present at the last meeting, was arrested towards the end of November, and, being put to the torture, made a full confession, which was followed by the seizure of some of her accomplices, several of whom, as well as Christiane Ross, were "convicted and burnt." The lady Fowlis fled to Caithness, and remained there nine months, after which she was allowed to return to her home. Her husband died in 1588, and was succeeded by Robert Munro, who appears to have revived the old charge of witchcraft against his stepmother; for in 1589 he obtained a commission for the examination of witches, among whose names were those of lady Fowlis and some of her surviving accomplices. She appears to have warded off the danger by her influence and money for some months, until July 22, 1590, when she was brought to her trial, her accuser being Hector Munro. This trial offered one of the first instances of acquittal of the charge of sorcery, and it has been observed that there are reasons for thinking the case was brought before a jury packed for that purpose.

It is somewhat remarkable, that while the lady Fowlis was thus attempting the destruction of her step-children, they were trying to effect, by the
same means, the death of her own son. Immediately after her acquittal, on the same day, the 22nd of July, 1590, Hector Munro (her accuser) was put on his trial before a jury composed of nearly the same persons, for practising the same crime of sorcery. It is stated in the charge that, when his brother Robert Munro had been grievously ill in the summer of 1588, Hector Munro had assembled "three notorious and common witches," to devise means to cure him, and had given harbour to them several days, until he was compelled to dismiss them by his father, who threatened to apprehend them. Subsequent to this, in January, 1588, (i.e. 1589 according to the modern reckoning,) Hector became himself suddenly ill, upon which he sent one of his men to seek a woman named Marion Mac Ingaruch, "ane of the maist notorious and rank witches in all this realme," and she was brought to the house in which he was lying sick. After long consultation, and having given him "three drinks of water out of three stones which she had," she declared that there was no remedy for him, unless the principal man of his blood should suffer death for him. They then held further counsel, and came at last to the conclusion that the person who must thus be his substitute was George Munro, the eldest son of the lady Fowlis, whose trial has just been described. The ceremonies which followed are some of the most extraordinary in the whole range of the history of these dark superstitions. Messengers were sent out to seek George Munro, the intended victim, in every direction, and he, "as a loving brother," suspecting no evil, came to where Hector lay, on the
fifth day. By the express direction of the witch, the latter was to allow none to enter the house until after his brother's arrival; he was to receive his brother in silence, give him his left hand and take him by the right hand, and not speak till he had first spoken to him. Hector Munro followed these instructions to the letter; George Munro was astonished at the coldness of his reception, compared with the pressing manner in which he had been invited, and he remained in the room an hour before he uttered a word. George at last asked him how he did, to which Hector replied, "the better that you have come to visit me," and then relapsed into his former silence. This, it appears, was a part of the spell. At one o'clock the same night, Marion Mac Ingaruch, the presiding sorceress, with certain of her accomplices, provided themselves with spades, and went to a piece of earth at the seaside, lying between the boundaries of the lands of two proprietors, and dug a grave proportionate to the size of the sick man, and took off the sod. She then returned to the house, and carefully instructed each of the persons concerned in the part they were to perform in the ceremonies which were to transfer the fate of Hector Munro to his brother George. The friends of Hector, who were in the secret, represented that if George should die suddenly, suspicion would fall upon them all, and their lives would be in danger, and wished her to delay his death "a space;" and she took on hand to "warrant him unto the 17th day of April next thereafter." They then took the sick man from his bed, and carried him in a pair of blankets to the grave, the
assistants being forbidden to utter a word until the witch and his foster-mother, named Christiana Neill Dayzill, had first spoken with “their master, the devil.” Hector was then placed in the grave, and the green sod laid over him, and held down upon him with staves, and the chief witch took her stand beside him. The foster-mother, leading a young lad by the hand, then ran the breadth of nine ridges, and on her return inquired of the hag “which was her choice?” to which she replied that “Hector was her choice to live, and his brother George to die for him.” This strange form of incantation was repeated thrice, and then the patient was taken from the grave, and carried home to his bed in the same silence which had distinguished the first part of the ceremony. The effects of an exposure to the cold of a January night in the north on a sick man must have been very serious; but Hector recovered soon afterwards, and in the month of April, as foretold, George Munro was seized with a mortal disease, under which he lingered till the month of June, when he died. Hector Munro took the witch into great favour, carried her to the house of his uncle at “Kildrummadyis,” where she was “entertained as if she had been his spouse, and gave her such pre-eminence in the country that there was none that durst offend her, and gave her the keeping of his sheep, to colour the matter.” After the death of George, the affair was whispered abroad, and an order was issued for the arrest of the witch, but she was concealed by Hector Munro, until information was given by lady Fowlis that she was in the house at Fowlis. When subjected to an examination, and
no doubt to the torture, she made a confession, and was probably burnt. Her confession was the ground of the charge against Hector Munro, who, like his step-mother, was acquitted.

The trials of lady Fowlis and Hector Munro appear to have caused much excitement, and other cases of witchcraft followed with fearful rapidity in different parts of the country, to such a degree that they moved the learned superstition of the king, who from this period began to take an extraordinary interest in prosecutions for crimes of this description. King James's example was not lost upon his subjects, and not only did they show redoubled diligence in seeking out offenders, but probably cases were made up to gratify his curiosity, until a fearful conspiracy between the hags and the evil one was discovered, of which the king himself was to have been the chief victim, and which will be related at full in our next chapter. The interference of king James not only marks an epoch in the history of sorcery in Scotland, but it had also an influence in modifying the belief by the introduction of the scientific demonology of France and Germany. In the conspiracy to which I have just alluded, we shall see many foreign notions mixed with the native superstitions.

For two or three subsequent years, the records of the high court are unfortunately missing, but in 1596 we find several prosecutions for the practice of witchcraft, of which persons of high rank believed themselves, or were believed to be, the victims. On the 24th of June, John Stewart, the master of Orkney, was accused, on the confession of certain
witches who had previously been condemned and burnt, of having employed them to compass the death of Patrick earl of Orkney; but he alleged in his defence that the confessions had been extorted by extreme torture, and had afterwards been contradicted by the sufferers as they were carried to the stake, and he was acquitted by the jury. On the 30th of October, a woman named Alison Jollie was tried for the same crime of employing a witch to cause the death of a woman with whom she had quarrelled, grounded on the confession of the witch, and was also acquitted. Another woman, named Christian Stewart, tried on the 27th of November for compassing the death of one of the powerful family of the Ruthvens by witchcraft, was less fortunate, for she was judged "to be tane to the Castle-hill and thair to be burnt."

In 1597, we have another case bearing some resemblance to those of Bessie Dunlop and Alison Peirsoun. The healing art had been during the middle ages practised by all sorts of quacks and unskilful pretenders, who made use of certain preparations of herbs and some other ingredients, but depended more for their success on the superstitious observances with which they were gathered, prepared, or applied. In order to gain more credit for their remedies, they pretended to receive their knowledge from an intercourse with the spiritual world. It was a part of the education of every good housewife in former days to understand the use of medicines, and most women were, more or less, acquainted with the mode of preparing them. Most jo the remedies which are mentioned in the trials as
used by Bessie Dunlop, Alison Peirsoun, and others, are found in the old medieval receipt-books. On the 12th of November, in the year last mentioned, four miserable women, Jonet Stewart, Christian Lewingstoun, Bessie Aiken, and Christian Saidler, were brought to their trial for various alleged acts of witchcraft. Christian Lewingstoun was accused of having bewitched a baker of Haddington by burying a small bag full of worsted thread, hairs and nails of men, and other articles, under his stairs, then pretending that the witchcraft was the work of another, and undertaking to relieve him from it. In this we can see little more than a dishonest trick to extort money; but she pretended to further knowledge, and the baker’s wife being with child at the time, she told her that she would give birth to a boy, which happened accordingly. When asked whence she derived her knowledge, she said that she had a daughter who was carried away by the “fairy folk,” and from her she had her knowledge. She was accused after this, with the other women as accomplices, of the superstitious treatment of various sick persons, besides some other transactions not more honest than her treatment of the baker of Haddington. Jonet Stewart was, on one occasion, called to a woman who was “deadly sick;” she took off the sick woman’s shirt and her “mutche,” (cap,) and carried them to a stream which ran towards the south, and washed them in it, and made the patient put them on dripping wet, and said thrice over her, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” and then put a red-hot iron in the water and burnt straw at each “newke” of the bed. This
was a primitive sort of "cold-water cure." She healed several women of another disease, by passing them thrice through a garland of green wood-bind, which she afterwards cut in nine pieces, and cast in the fire. Wood-bind appears to have been a favourite remedy in a variety of cases. Bessie Aiken cured most of her patients by passing them nine times through a "girth" of wood-bind, in the name of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. For a woman labouring under a pain in the loins, she took a decoction of red-nettles and herb Alexander, and bathed the part with it, and then boiled herb Alexander with fresh butter, and rubbed her with it, and then passed her nine times through the girth of wood-bind, at three several times, a space of twenty-four hours being allowed to elapse between each. Other similar practices are recounted; and the four women were finally condemned "to be taken to the Castle-hill at Edinburgh, and there to be strangled at a stake till they died, and their bodies to be burnt to ashes;" a sentence which was duly executed on three of them. But Bessie Aiken pleaded that she was with child, and she was allowed to languish in prison until the 15th of August, 1598, when the king, moved with, for him, an unusual degree of clemency, in consideration that she was "delyverit of ane infant, and hes sustenit lang puneischment be famine and impreisment," commuted her original sentence for perpetual banishment.

We have thus traced the history of witchcraft in Scotland to the close of the sixteenth century, down to which time it had preserved its national charac-
ter, altogether differing from the superstitions which prevailed on the continent in the same age. In Scotland, witchcraft was an object of more universal and unhesitating belief than in almost any other country, and it obtained greater authority from the circumstance that so many people of rank at different periods had recourse to it as a means of gratifying revenge or ambition. There were sorcerers among the minor agents in the mysterious conspiracies of the earl of Gowry, which have given such celebrity in Scottish history to the last year of the century. The narrative which will occupy our next chapter, will exhibit in a remarkable manner the sentiments of king James, who appears to have carried his hatred of witches with him into England, and with his reign in the latter country began the darkest period of the history of witchcraft in the southern parts of our island. In a future chapter we shall have to return to the superstitions of Scotland, which took a still wider and more fearful form in the seventeenth century, when they were beginning to subside in other countries.