CHAPTER X.

KING JAMES AND THE WITCHES OF LOTHIAN.

In the year 1589, surrounded by political jealousies abroad, and harassed by the turbulence of his subjects at home, James VI. of Scotland came to the resolution of marrying Anne of Denmark, and the earl marshal left Scotland on the 18th of June on a mission to Copenhagen, to arrange the contract. In July the marriage was celebrated by proxy, and in September the new queen of Scotland left her father's court, and embarked with the earl marshal and his suite for her adopted country; but they had hardly left the port when they were assailed by a tempest, which carried them so far from their course that they with difficulty reached Upsal in Norway, where a continuance of tempestuous weather threatened to detain them till the setting in of winter. King James, impatient of delay, summoned up more courage than he had ever shown before, and on the 22nd of October, set off in search of his wife, whom he found still at Upsal, where they
were again married, and with whom he returned to Copenhagen, and remained there during the winter. On the re-appearance of spring he left Denmark, and after a rough voyage, landed with his queen at Leith, on the 1st of May, 1590.

The obstinate hostility of the weather towards James and his new consort coinciding with political hatred among a portion of his subjects, gave rise to strange reports, and at last a conspiracy of an unearthly character was brought to light, by the agency of which it was universally believed that the royal sea-farer had been persecuted. The earl of Bothwell, the especial organ of the Romish party, was said to have been its instigator, and on this and other charges he was committed to ward, from which he broke towards the end of June, 1591, and took refuge among his friends in the more inaccessible parts of the north. He was himself believed to be a skilful necromancer, and held frequent communication with witches.

The manner in which this extraordinary affair was discovered is involved in some obscurity; but, according to the common story, the first divulger of the secret was a young woman named Geillis Duncan. This woman was servant in the house of David Seytoun, deputy bailiff of the little town of Tranent, on the shores of the Frith of Forth, about nine miles to the east of Edinburgh; and on a sudden she became celebrated for her extraordinary skill in curing diseases, and for doing other things which gave rise to the belief that the agency by which she worked was something more than natural. Her master's suspicions on this subject were strength-
ened by the discovery, that Geillis was in the habit of secretly leaving the house and absenting herself every other night. He thereupon questioned her in private, but obtaining no satisfactory answer, he presumed so far upon his municipal office, as to call in some of his acquaintance, and in their presence put her to most severe tortures. But even this had no effect; and they then examined every part of her body in order to discover the devil's mark. For it was one article of the belief in witchcraft, that, after the compact between the witch and the evil one had been completed, the latter sucked some part of his victim's body, and left his mark, and until this mark was discovered, his influence was unabated, and he hindered confession. The mark was most commonly placed on a part covered with hair, that it might be more easily concealed: and hence one of the first processes in the examination of a witch was one most shocking to her feelings of modesty, that of shaving her body. In the case of Geillis Duncan, the fiend's mark was found in the fore-part of her throat, upon which she confessed that she effected her cures by means of witchcraft. She was now committed to prison, and, after a short confinement, made a more full confession, which implicated a number of persons living in different parts of the district of Lothian, and led to the arrest of not less than thirty presumed sorcerers, whose examinations brought to light the conspiracy above alluded to. The more remarkable of the persons thus placed under arrest were Dr. Fian, otherwise named John Cunningham, Agnes Sampsoun, Euphame Mackalzeane, and Barbara Napier. In the account which
these persons gave of their communications with the tempter, we find many incidents apparently new to the popular mythology of Scotland, but which recur over and over again in the witchcraft stories of later days.

John Fian, one of the chief persons compromised by Geillis Duncan's confession, was a schoolmaster of Tranent, a man above the ordinary stamp of sorcerers at this period, who appears, at the time of these transactions, to have taken up his residence in the neighbouring township of Preston-Pans, the same place which obtained so much celebrity in later Scottish history. Dr. Fian gave the following account of the origin of his acquaintance with the devil. He lodged at Tranent, in the house of one Thomas Trumbill, who had given him great offence by neglecting to "sparge," or whitewash, his chamber, as he had promised; Fian was lying in his bed, "musing and thinking how he might be revenged of the said Thomas," when the devil suddenly made his appearance, clad in white raiment, and said to him, "Will ye be my servant, and adore me and all my servants, and ye shall never want?"

The doctor assented to the terms, and, at the suggestion of the evil one, he revenged himself on Trumbill by burning his house. The second night the devil again appeared to him in white raiment, and put his mark upon him with a rod. Subsequently, Fian was found in his chamber, as it were, in a trance, during which he said that his spirit was carried "over many mountains," and as it appeared all over the world. From this time he was
present at all the nightly conventions held in the district of Lothian, and rose so high in Satan's favour, that the fiend appointed him his "registrar and secretary." His first visit to these conventions was at the church of North Berwick, about fourteen miles along the coast from Preston-Pans, a favourite meeting-place of the witches. He was transported thither from his bed at Preston-Pans, "as if he had been skimming across the earth;" and he found a number of Satan's "servants," with a candle burning blue in the middle of them. Their master stood in a pulpit "making a sermon of doubtful speeches," the effect of which was that they were not to fear him, "though he were grim" (he seems to have appeared in a different character from that in which he first presented himself to Fian); telling them that "he had many servants, who should never want, and should ail nothing, so long as their hairs were on, and that they should never let any tears fall from their eyes." It was a common article of belief that witches could not shed tears. He further exhorted them that "they should spare not to do evil, and to eat, drink, and be blithe;" and he made them do him homage by kissing his posteriors. Fian appears to have been an ill-disposed person, and well inclined to put in practice Satan's exhortations. The power which he obtained by his connexion with the tempter, was always employed to work mischief, or for the indulgence of his wicked passions. He confessed on his trial that he had seduced a widow named Margaret Spens, under promise of marriage, and then deserted her. He was popularly accused of
having attempted to force to his will a virtuous maiden, the sister of one of his scholars, by charms which cannot well be described here, but which were thwarted by the ingenuity of her mother, and made to throw disgrace on the designing sorcerer. While residing at Tranent, Fian one night supped at the miller's, some distance from the town, and as it was late before he left, was conveyed home on a horse by one of the miller's men; it being dark, he raised up, by his unearthly agency, four candles on the horse's ears, and one on the staff which his companion carried, which were so bright that they made the night appear as light as day; but the man was terrified to such a degree, that on his return home he dropped down dead. This was told by Fian himself on his examination.

Agnes Sampsoun acted an especially prominent part in these transactions. She is described in the indictment as residing in Nether Keith, was commonly known by the title of the wise wife of Keith, and seems to have used her art chiefly in curing diseases, although she was accused of having inflicted serious injuries on those who provoked her. Archbishop Spotswode describes her as a woman, not of the base and ignorant sort of witches, but matron-like, grave, and settled in her answers. Her examination was long, and her confession, by what is preserved, appears to have been the wildest and most extraordinary of them all; but it would take too much of our space to give more than a sample of them.

She said that she had learnt her art of knowing and healing diseases from her father; that the first
time she began to serve the devil was after the death of her husband, when he appeared to her in the likeness of a man, and commanded her to acknowledge him as her master, and to renounce Christ. This she agreed to, being poor, and the tempter promising her riches for herself and her children. He generally appeared to her in the likeness of a dog, of which she asked questions, and received answers. On one occasion, when she was sent for to the old lady Edmestoune, who lay sick, she went into the garden at night and called the devil by the name of Elva, who came in over the dyke, in the likeness of a dog, and came so near to her that she was frightened, upon which she charged him, "on the law he believed on," to come no nearer. She then asked him if the lady would recover, and he told her that "her days were gone." He then asked where the gentlewomen, the lady's daughters, were. She told him they were to meet her there, on which he said that he would have one of them. Agnes said that she would hinder him, on which he went away howling, and concealed himself in the well, where he remained till after supper. The gentlewomen came into the garden when supper was over, whereupon the dog rushed out, terrified them all, and seized one of the daughters, the lady Torsenye, and attempted to drag her into the well to drown her, but Agnes also seized hold of her, and proved stronger than the devil, who thereupon disappeared with a terrible howl. On another occasion, Agnes, with Geillie Duncan and other witches, wishing to be revenged on David Seytoun (Geillie Duncan's master), met
on the bridge at Foulstruthir, and threw a cord into the river, and Agnes Sampson cried, "Hail, holoa!" The end of the cord which was in the water, became immediately heavy, and when they drew it out, the devil came up at the end of it, and asked if they had all been good servants. He then gave them a charm, which was to affect David Seytoun and his goods, but it was accidentally averted, and fell upon another person. The lady of whom we are now speaking seems to have had a little of the evil one in her, for she sometimes quarrelled with the devil himself.

Euphame (Euphemia) Mackalzeane, one of the persons most deeply implicated in these charges, was a lady of rank in society, the only daughter and heiress of Thomas Mackalzeane lord Cliftounhall, one of the senators of the College of Justice, a distinguished scholar, lawyer, and statesman. She appears to have been led into associating with the base people concerned in this conspiracy, by her devotion to the Romish religion and to the party of the earl of Bothwell. She confessed that she had first been made a witch by the means of an Irishwoman "with a fallen nose;" and that to make herself "more perfect and well-skilled in the said art of witchcraft," she had caused another witch, dwelling in St. Ninian's Row (in Edinburgh), to "inaugurate" her in the said craft, with "the girth of ane grit bikar," turning the same "oft round her head and neck, and oft-times round her head," She was charged with having procured the deaths of her husband, her father-in-law, and various other persons, by means of poison and sorcery. She had
become acquainted with Agnes Sampsoun at the time of the birth of her first son, when she applied to her to ease her of her pains in childbirth, which she did by transferring them to a dog, which ran away, and was never heard of afterwards. At the birth of her second son, Agnes Sampsoun in the same way transferred her pains to a cat.

Barbara Napier was also a woman of some rank; but the others were in general persons of very low condition. A man, nicknamed Grey Meill (Gray Meal) whom Spotswode describes as “ane auld sely pure plowman,” was keeper of the door at their conventions.

The extensive scene of the operations of this society embraced the sea as well as the land. I have already stated that the church of North Berwick was their favourite place of meeting. Agnes Sampsoun confessed that, one Allhallow Eve “she was accompanied with a great many other witches, to the number of two hundredth, and that all they together went to sea, each one in a riddle or cive, and went into the same very substantially, with flaggons of wine, making merrie and drinking by the way, in the same riddles or cives, to the kirke of North Barrick, in Lowthian ; and that after they had landed, took handes on the lande, and daunced this reill or short daunce, singing all with one voice,

Commer goe ye before, commer goe ye,
Gif ye wall not goe before, commer let me.

At which time she confessed that this Geillis Dun-cane did goe before them, playing this reill or
daunce, upon a small trumpe, called a Jewes trumpe, until they entered into the kirk of North Barrick."

On one occasion, Fian, Agnes Sampsoun, an active wizard named Robert Griersoun, and others, left Griersoun’s house, at Preston, in a boat, and went out to sea to a “tryst,” with another witch, and entered a ship, and had “good wine and ale” therein, after which, as was their usual custom, they sank the ship and all that was in it, and returned home. On another occasion, as Agnes Sampsoun confessed, they sailed out from North Berwick in a boat like a chimney, the devil passing before them like a rick of hay, and entered a ship called the “Grace of God,” where they had abundance of wine and “other good cheer,” and when they came away the fiend raised “an evil wind,” he being under the ship, and caused the ship to perish; and Agnes said that she gave on this occasion twenty shillings to Grey Meill for his attendance, which would seem to imply that they had taken the ship’s money. On one of their voyages, in the summer of 1589, Dr. Fian stated that the fiend informed them of the leak which subsequently endangered the queen’s ship, when she took refuge in Norway. Subsequent to this, when the queen was on her way from Denmark, a convention was held at the “Brumehoillis,” where the whole party went to sea in riddles, Robert Griersoun, above-mentioned, being their “admiral and master-man,” and they again entered a ship and made merry; and finished by throwing a dog overboard, which not only made the ship turn over and sink, but raised a storm which helped to drive the queen back.
This latter event, however, was effected by more imposing ceremonies. A meeting was held in a webster's house, at Preston-Pans, at which were present Agnes Sampson, John Fian, Geillis Duncan, and two others, who "baptized" a cat in a manner thus described in the confession of Agnes Sampson: "first, two of them held one finger in the one side of the chimney-crook, and another held another finger in the other side, the two nobs of the fingers meeting together; thus they put the cat thrice through the links of the crook, and passed it thrice under the chimney." They subsequently tied to the four feet of the cat four joints of dead men; and it was then carried to Leith, and the witches took it to the pier-head about midnight, and threw it into the sea. Another party of the conspirators, at Preston-Pans, threw another cat into the sea at eleven o'clock at night. The result of all this was a storm so dreadful, that the boat between Leith and Kinghorn perished with all on board, amounting to three-score persons.

This particular quality of the cats for raising storms is not easily accounted for. Dr. Fian was accused of the hunting of a cat at Tranent; in which hunt he was carried high above the ground, with great swiftness, and as lightly as the cat herself, over "a higher dyke than he was able to lay his hand to the head of." and when asked why he pursued the cat, he replied, that at a convention held at the "Brume-hoillis," Satan had commanded all that were present to catch cats, to be cast into the sea for the purpose of raising winds for the destruction of ships. A cat was subsequently cast
Meeting at the Fairy-Hills.

into the sea to raise winds on the king's passage to Denmark; and when the king was returning, another convention was held, at which Satan promised to raise a mist, and cast the king into England, for which purpose he threw into the sea a thing like a foot-ball, in the presence of Dr. Fian, who saw a vapour and smoke rise from the spot where it touched the water.

The king and his consort, as we have seen, escaped all the perils of the sea, and landed safely in Scotland. Satan confessed that James was "un homme de Dieu," and that he had little power over him; but after his return, new plans were formed for the king's destruction, at the moment when Bothwell was plotting rebellion against his sovereign. On Lammas Eve (July 31st), 1590, nine of the principal sorcerers, including Dr. Fian, Agnes Sampsoun, Euphame Mackalzeane, and Barbara Napier, with others to the number of thirty, met at the New Haven, between Mussilburgh and Preston-Pans, at a spot called the "Fayrie-hoillis," when the devil made his appearance in the form of a black man, which was "thought most meet to do the turn for the which they were convened." When they had all taken the places assigned to them, Agnes Sampsoun proposed that they should consult for the destruction of the king. The devil, after stating that their designs were likely to be thwarted, promised them a picture of wax, and directed them to hang up and roast a toad, and lay the drippings of the toad, mixed with "strang wash," an adder's skin, and "the thing in the forehead of a new-foaled foal," in the way where the
king was to pass, or hang it in a position where it might drop on his body. Agnes Sampsoun was appointed to make the figure, which she did, and gave it to the evil one, who promised to prepare it and deliver it to them for use within a short time. The process of the toad was carried into effect, and the dripping was to have fallen on the king “during his majesty’s being at the Brig of Die, the day before the common bell rang, for fear the earl Bothwell should have entered Edinburgh.” It happened, however, that the king did not pass by the way he was expected.

The image of wax appears to have been considered a matter of much greater moment—a last and terrible resource, and there was evidently more than one meeting on the subject between the time above-mentioned and the eve of Hallowmass, 1590, An unusually solemn meeting had been called for that night, to be held at North Berwick church, where the witches assembled to the number of above a hundred, among which number there were only six men. Agnes Sampsoun confessed that she went thither on horseback, and arrived at the churchyard about eleven o’clock at night, across which they danced, Dr. Fian leading the way, and Geillis Duncan, as usual, playing to them on a trump. At the church the women first made their homage, being turned six times “widderschinnes,” (i.e. in the contrary direction to the course of the sun), and then the men were turned in the same manner nine times. Fian next blew open the church door, and blew in the lights, which were like great black candles held in an old man’s hand,
round the pulpit. The devil suddenly rose up in
the pulpit in the form of a black man, with a black
beard sticking out like that of a goat, and a high
ribbed nose, falling down like the beak of a hawk,
"with a long rumple." He was clad in a black
gown, with an "evil favoured" skull-cap, also
black, on his head. John Fian stood beside the
pulpit, as clerk, and next to him was Robert Greirs-
soun, above-mentioned. Some of the company stood
and others sat. The fiend first read from a black
book their names, and each when called answered,
"Here, master." On this occasion Satan appears
to have been in some confusion, for, whereas it was
the custom for every one to have a nickname, by
which only they were to be named in that com-
pany, that of Robert Greirsoun being "Rob the
Rowar," the devil called him by his own proper
name, which caused great scandal and clamour, and
they all "ran hirdie-girdie," and were angry. The
excitement was increased by his making the same
mistake with regard to Euphame Mackalzeane and
Barbara Napier. When this outbreak was ap-
peased, Satan made a short sermon, exhorting them
all to be good servants and to continue doing as
much evil as they could. This was followed by an-
other outburst of dissatisfaction, on account of the
image of wax that was not yet forthcoming. Robert
Greirsoun, urged on by the women, said, "Where
is the thing ye promised?" To appease the tumult,
which was becoming greater and greater, the fiend
replied that "It should be gotten the next meeting,
and he would hold the next assembly for that
cause the sooner; it was not ready at that time."
Robert Greirsoun, who was perhaps offended at the mistake about his name, called out, "Ye promised twice and deceived us!" and four "honest-like women," as Barbara Napier termed them in her confession, were very importunate, and obtained a promise that the image should be delivered very shortly to Barbara Napier and Euphame Mackalzeane, without waiting for another meeting. In the midst of this tumult, poor Grey Meill, the door-keeper, was imprudent enough to say that "Nothing ailed the king yet, God be thanked!" for which "the devil gave him a great blow." We are told that the devil gave as a reason for his tardiness, the king's extreme piety and wisdom, which had preserved him from all dangers; and the king was not a little flattered by this confession. After this business was ended, the company appear to have had a sort of a revel, and they opened two graves within and one without the church, and took the joints of the dead to make charms of, which were shared amongst them, and then they departed, having given the evil one the accustomed compliment of a kiss behind. It appears that the judicial prosecution arose before any further progress could be made with the image of wax.

The strange circumstances described above, with much more, were confessed to, more or less, by nearly thirty individuals, so that we can hardly do otherwise than suppose that the persons implicated, under some mental illusion, had plotted together to effect a criminal object by superstitious practices. Much, however, of the more extravagant part of the story was probably suggested by the questions put
by their examiners, and extorted under the terror and the feeling of helplessness produced by the cruelty and tyranny of their tormentors. We have already seen the manner in which Geilles Duncan's confession was wrenched from her. The firmness with which many of them suffered was looked upon as diabolical obstinacy, and only provoked to the application of severer tortures. Those to which Dr. Fian was subjected were too horrible to be described. Agnes Sampsoun was examined before the king at Holyrood House; she bore the torture, which is described in the old narrative as "a payne most grevous," firmly and without confession; upon which she was stripped, the hair shaved from her body, and "the devil's mark" found in a part where it was a cruel insult to her womanhood to search. She confessed anything rather than submit to further indignities.

The king, we are told, "took great delight" in these examinations; and the confessions put him "in a wonderful admiration." His vanity was flattered, at the same time that his curiosity was excited and gratified. He made Geilles Duncan play before him on her trump (or Jew's harp) the same tune to which the witches had danced in their meetings. The trials continued to occupy him throughout the winter of 1590, and the end was more tragical even than the beginning, for the Scottish Solomon was inexorable in his judgments. Dr. Fian was condemned on the 26th of December, 1590, and "byrnt" at the beginning of January. On the 27th of January, 1591, Agnes Sampsoun was sentenced to be taken to the castle-hill of
Edinburgh, and there be bound to a stake and "wir-
reit" (worried) till she was dead, and thereafter her
body burnt to ashes; all which was duly executed.
The sentence of Euphame Mackalzeane was still
more cruel; she appears to have been kept long
and to have undergone many examinations, prob-
able in the hope that she might give up the names
of some of Bothwell’s accomplices, and on the 7th
of June, 1591, she was condemned to be burnt
alive, the others being all strangled before they
were committed to the flames. During the inter-
vening period many of her accomplices of less note
suffered at the stake. In the case of Barbara
Napier, the majority of the jury having acquitted
her of the chief articles of the charge against her,
were themselves threatened—the king sitting in
judgment in his own person—with a trial for wilful
error upon an assize, and were compelled to avoid
the consequences by acknowledging themselves
guilty and throwing themselves on the king’s mercy,
who “pardonèd” them.

King James now became proud of his skill and
knowledge in the matter of sorcery, and of the
wisdom of his judgments. He made it a subject of
his special study, and his royal leisure was occu-
pied with the compilation, in form of a dialogue, of
a treatise which was printed under the title of
“Dæmonologic,” with the king’s name, at Edin-
burgh in 1597. In the preface the royal author
speaks of “the fearfull aboundinge” of witches in
Scotland at that time; and complains bitterly
against the Englishman Reginald Scott, who had
attempted to disprove the existence of witches, and
against Wierus, the German, who had written a sort of apology for the persons thus accused, "whereby," says the king, "he plainly bewrayes himselfe to have bene one of that profession." His majesty's book is much inferior to the other treatises on the subject published about the same period; it is compiled from foreign works, and begins with discussing very learnedly the nature and existence of witchcraft, and with describing the contract with Satan, but it furnishes little or no information on the real character of the Scottish superstitions of the day.