

A HIGHLAND JOKE.

BY C. F. GORDON CUMMING.



HOUGH belief in fairies and fairy lore is fast dying out in the Highlands before the influence of the schoolmasters, it continued to exercise a most practical influence upon our Scotch Highlanders even in the last generation, and nowhere was such superstition more deeply rooted than among the wild glens and on the remote shores of Ross and Cromarty.

In one of Hugh Miller's least-known sketches of some of his contemporaries, he relates a very amusing scene enacted in the fishing town of Cromarty, by a party of young men who had contrived at various times to extract considerable amusement from the superstitious terrors of the fisher-folk, never missing a chance of counting them as they wended their way to the boats, or of asking their destination—both deemed omens of evil luck.

But the form of fairy malice which was most dreaded was that of kidnapping human children, and substituting for them fairy babies, which were called changelings, and invariably proved cross-grained, ill-tempered and voracious. A poor baby who was attacked with any sort of wasting illness, or became unusually fretful and troublesome, was very apt to be looked upon as a changeling, and to receive anything but tenderness from the family who were forced to endure its wailing.

From this popular belief, the young men in question resolved to extract some amusement, by effecting a general exchange of babies throughout the village, and then watching the result. Of course, in a fisher-town, all the women and elder children take their full share of work, in collecting shell-fish and baiting the lines, carrying them and the nets on board the boats, and finally, when the men are starting for their night's fishing, all the women go to the beach to help in launching the boats, and see their husbands, sweet-hearts, and brothers start on what they well know may prove a service of danger. Even the little toddling bairns generally follow their elders to the shore; and many a house is left without one human inmate, save the latest baby, safely ensconced in his wooden cradle.

These babies were the special game which attracted the mirthful and mischievous young men. Having taken care to ascertain exactly which cottages were most certain to furnish unprotected babies, they watched their opportunity when, in the twilight, the fisher-folk trooped down to the shore, without a thought of impending misadventure for their youngest treasures. Then the marauders, dispersing throughout the village, stole gently into each cottage—cautiously,

so as not needlessly to alarm the babies, or attract attention from any bedridden old man or woman who might chance to be lying in some dark corner. Lifting each poor little baby from its warm nest, one of these jokers quickly deposited it in some other cradle, thence removing the rightful occupant to carry it elsewhere. Ere the boats had started, all the babies in Cromarty had been so effectually shuffled that not one remained in its own home.

Then the young men, delighted with their complete success, concealed themselves among the ruins of a deserted hut, and there watched to see what would happen next. Of course, the nursing mothers were the first to hurry back to their offspring, followed more leisurely by those whose bigger babies were securely tied into their cradles, as the only secure means of disposing of them. They were greeted by an unwonted chorus of weeping from the younger babies, and lusty roaring from the frightened elder ones, and, somehow, the wailing voices sounded unfamiliar to the maternal ears, as, hurrying to calm their cries, each mother approached her baby's cradle, and therein, to her indescribable horror, beheld an unknown child! Under other circumstances she might very likely have recognised a neighbour's bairn, but there was no time for such thought—it sufficed that it was not her baby, so there could be no manner of doubt that it was a changeling, a horrid fairy brat, left in exchange for her beloved and precious darling.

Naturally, says Hugh Miller, "the scene that ensued baffles description. The women shrieked and screamed, and wrung their hands, and rushing out to the lanes like so many mad creatures, were only the more unhinged to find the calamity so universal." By this time all the women of the place had assembled to add their questions and counsels to the general chorus. Some urged that they should place all the changelings in creels, and suspend them from the iron hook and chain which hang above the fires, as that was well known to be a sure method of bringing back the fairy mother, who, on hearing the pitiful cries of their half-roasted babies, would certainly come to their deliverance, and restore the stolen human children.

The calmer women counselled that the minister should be summoned, to exorcise the powers of evil; and so one advised one thing, and the next urged something different; while the poor mothers heeded no one, but tore their hair, and tossed their arms aloft, in an infectious frenzy of despair, shrieking and hallooing, while the howls of the terrified elder children, and the wailing of babies, all added to the dire confusion and uproar.

At last one woman, wiser than her neighbours, came to ask the meaning of such an astounding Babel of feminine voices, and on learning the state of matters, and recollecting various tricks that had from time to time been played by some of the big lads, a happy thought struck her, that these had probably had some

hand in the matter; so having succeeded in making her voice heard, she suggested this view of the case, and recommended that all the babies should be assembled in one place, so that each mother might see whether her own was to be found.

So admirable a solution of the difficulty was at once carried into effect. Each woman rushed back to her cradle, and snatching up the poor baby (now well-nigh exhausted with prolonged crying) she brought it to this improvised baby-show. Needless to say, few

minutes elapsed ere each happy mother recognised her own darling, and joyfully clasped it to her bosom, soothing its alarm, and hushing its pitiful cries.

In the general confusion the perpetrators of the joke, having thoroughly enjoyed its success, escaped from their hiding-place, and made good their retreat. The subject was made a matter for much good-natured banter, and thenceforward the good folk of Cromarty seem to have in a great measure got over their dread of fairy interference in their domestic affairs.

SKETCHED IN COURT.



CONTEMPT OF COURT.

IN the old legends the administration of justice always wears a more or less paternal character, and it is this feature, in large survival, which chiefly impressed the writer in a visit casually paid of late to an English County Court. The Judge is not so much the stern personification of authority—a vitalised statute-book—as guide, adviser, mutual friend of each contending party. He has onerous and peculiar duties, and to fulfil them with even approximate satisfaction he

encloses a purely agricultural area, and not a single manufacturing town of any size or importance. Bullbridge, where his Honour is sitting on this particular Tuesday, is a straggling, old-world town, with its nearest railway station miles away, and its great annual carnival, the unabridged Michaelmas “hiring-fair.”

The wheezy market-house clock has announced the hour of noon, and the Court is arranged for business. A long table in front of the mimic throne is hemmed about by lawyers, clerks, local reporters. Long benches are placed at right angles thereto for the accommodation of suitors and witnesses. To the eye of imagination, a good many thorns are sprinkled about those hard seats. A wide space intervenes, apparently to allow the portly usher—the model of a conventional alderman—sufficient air to ward off apoplexy, and a sufficient frame for his dignity and graces. Then begin the rows of unsightly wooden forms for spectators and for friends of the antagonists in the coming duels. These seats rapidly fill up, and finally the door is chronically blocked up by a group compelled to stand.

The Judge is a trifle late, by reason of the delays and inconveniences of a long coach journey. But at last he is comfortably ensconced in his chair of state, and in a hurry for a start. He is a rotund, well-preserved little man, plainly nearing the Scriptural limit of threescore years and ten. He has a large, fleshy face, which shows to marked advantage beneath that relic of a past frivolity, the wig, and which is as the sun in the firmament to those whose hopes and anxieties hang breathless upon his verdicts. The beams of a contemplative smile are joy, suffusing the entire landscape on that side with warmth and brilliancy; the puckering of a frown convey terror and discontent, and wrap the prospect in grey shadow.

A long string of unopposed cases are taken first, judgment in repeated instances being given in default. Where the defendant appears, the process is exceedingly simple, and it brings prominently out that paternal aspect of “His Honour’s” proceedings on which we first remarked. The defaulters are chiefly labourers of the very poorest and most improvident class; they are often represented by their wives, who, as a rule, are adepts in casuistry, and could give the

needs tact, patience, a rare gift of sympathy, and intimate knowledge of the manners and habits of thought of his appointed district. That the County Court is so useful and respected, and, in a sense, popular an institution as dwellers in country places especially know it to be, is in a great degree owing to the conscientious and painstaking devotion of the men who give its decisions. The observations of a stray hour or two in this atmosphere of homely law may have their interest as differentiating some noteworthy social types, and as reflecting some genuine humours of the British rustic.

“County Court Circuit, No. 999” (for the purposes of our narrative), is less than fifty miles from London, measured from any twist in its irregular curve. But in character and modes of existence it is as truly provincial—nay, as primitive—as any district between the proverbial Land’s End and John o’ Groat’s. Its sweep