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EST QUODAM PRODIRE TENUS, SI NON DATUR ULTRA.

Hor.



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1817.

REMARKS ON THE HUMOUR OF OUR
ANCIENT SONGS.

MR EDITOR,

I WAS pleased to see in your first Number, an old ballad introduced which was always my greatest favourite—"The Wyfe of Auchtermuchtie." It is singular that this song, or rather poem, should have been so often overlooked by our late collectors of ballads, though, in many instances, they have raked them up to the very lees. I wish you could have afforded us some key to the author, either drawn from record or probability, for I have heard some violent disputes about this since it appeared. I cannot now tell how it is, but ever since I remember, I have been impressed with the belief that it was the production of king James V.; that I have heard this asserted a hundred times I know, but yet I can scarcely believe that it was from tradition alone that I at first had this intimation. So thoroughly was I convinced of the truth of it, that I had nearly quarrelled outright with a very intimate friend, for saying that there was no proof nor insinuation in any work extant that warranted such a belief; and after a good deal of research, to my great disappointment, I confess that I can discover none, excepting the resemblance between this ballad and those that are usually supposed to have been written by that prince. This likeness may be chimerical, for fancy is powerful in modelling images that she believes or wishes to exist, but to me it seems fully apparent. The same disposition to depict the manners of low life, and of the country people, with their blunders and perplexities, predominates in them all. As one instance it may be noted, that the insurmountable difficulties of the Gude-man of Auchtermuchtie,—the perplexity of the Gudewife in the ballad of "The Gaberlunzie-man," when she found that her daughter had eloped, —and the utter despair of the lass in "The Jolly Beggar," when she discovered that she had lain beside "the puir aukd bodie," bear all strong evidences of the same mind and the same mode of thinking. Poets have generally but a few situations in which they naturally incline to place their principal characters. The favourite one of James was that of a ludicrous perplexity.

The resemblance between this ballad and "Christ's Kirk on the Green,"

VOL. I.

is still more striking;* in particular, the serio-comic way that prevails in both, of relating the most extravagant incidents, which, above all other things, has the effect of heightening the humour. In short, sir, if either you or any of your correspondents can adduce farther proof that this ballad was indeed written by the redoubted "Gude-man of Ballangeich," I will account myself much beholden to you; and though my evidence may appear frail, still I will hang by the tradition; and unless some of my opponents can advance something more conclusive on the other side, I will retain my integrity, and refuse to pay the dinner and drink that I betted on the issue of the research.

I cannot help remarking here, while I am on this subject, how wonderful it is that no regular collection has been made of our humorous songs by themselves. If these were well selected, arranged, and set to their own old ranting tunes, they could not fail of being highly acceptable to the lovers of innocent frolic and social glee. The best of our old songs are those of humour. That class, at the head of which we may place "The Wyfe of Auchtermuchtie," "Fy let us a' to the Bridal," "Rob's Jock," and "Muirland Willie," are greatly superior to the Damons and Phillises of the same age. Our forefathers had one peculiarity in song-writing, which their children seem to have lost, it was the art of picking up an occurrence, of all possible ones the most unfeasible, whereon to found a song. This adds greatly to the comic effect. The following song, entitled, "Simon Brodie," as it is short, and rarely to be met with, may be given as an instance.

Och! mine honest Simon Brodie,
Stupit, auld, doitit bodie!
I'll awa to the north country
And see mine honest Simon Brodie.

Simon Brodie had ane wyfe,
And wow but she was braw and bonny!
He tauk the dish-clout aff the bink,
And preen'd it till her cockernony.

Och! mine honest Simon Brodie, &c.

Simon Brodie had ane cow,
The cow was tint, he couldna find her!
Quben he had done what man could dow,
The cow cam hame wi' her tail behind her.

Och! mine honest Simon Brodie, &c.

* "Christ's Kirk on the Green" is commonly, and we believe justly, ascribed to King James I.

And here our song ends—we have no more. Perhaps an acute observer might infer from this, that in some northern county, no body knows where, there lived in some age or generation a good-natured extremely stupid fellow, called Simon Brodie, and this is all; still the shrewd idea of pretending to define a character from two such bald and weather-beaten incidents has something in it extremely droll. I may mention another of the same cast—"A mile aboon Dundee."

The suld man's mare's dead;
The poor body's mare's dead;
The suld man's mare's dead,
A mile aboon Dundee.

There was hay to ca', an' lint to lead,
An' hunder hots o' muck to spread,
An' peats an' tur's an' a' to lead;
What mean'd the beast to dee?
The suld man's mare's dead, &c.

She had the cauld, but an' the cruk,
The wheezloch an' the wanton yeuk;
On ilka knee she had a breuk;
An' yet the jade to dee!
The suld man's mare's dead, &c.

She was lang-toothed, an' blench-lippit,
Haem-houghed, an' haggis-fittit,
Lang-neckit, chaunler-chafit,
An' yet the jade to dee!
The suld man's mare's dead, &c.

No poet now alive would ever think of writing a ditty on such an old miserable jade as this that died above Dundee, far less of holding it out as so wonderful that she should have died, while, in the mean time, every line shows that it was impossible the beast could live. Haply these songs may exist in some collection, but as I never saw them in any, and write them down from recollection, as I heard them sung, I cannot assert that they are given in full.

The confusion of characters and dishes that are all blent together in "Fy let us a' to the Bridal," is a masterpiece of drollery. It is a pity that there should be one or two expressions in it that are rather too coarse to be sung in every company; for wherever it is sung with any degree of spirit, it never misses the effect of affording high amusement. The first man whom I heard sing this song, accompanied it always with an anecdote of the author (who was a Scotch laird, whose name I have forgot) singing it once in a large private assembly at London. There

were three Scotch noblemen present, who were quite convulsed with laughter, and the rest perceiving that there was something extremely droll in it which they could but very imperfectly comprehend, requested the author to sing it again. This he positively declined. Some persons of very high rank were present, who appearing much disappointed by this refusal, a few noblemen, valuing themselves on their knowledge of Scotsmen's propensities, went up to this northern laird, and offered him a piece of plate of an hundred guineas value, if he would sing the song over again; but he, sensible that his song would not bear the most minute investigation by the company in which he then was, persisted in his refusal, putting them off with an old proverb, which cannot be inserted here. He seems to have been precisely of the same opinion with an author of our own day, between whom and his friend the following dialogue took place in a bookseller's shop in this town, to the no small amusement of the bystanders:—

"Let me entreat you, for God's sake, to make the language of this ballad so as that we can understand it."

"I carena whether ye understand it or no, min; I dinna aye understand it very weel mysel'."

"It is not for what you, or I, or any Scotsmen may understand; but remember thiſ must be a sealed book to the English."

"O it's a' the better for that—these English folk like aye best what they dinna understand."

I know that many old songs of such genuine humour still survive in the country, which have never been collected into any reputable work, merely because they contain some expressions that were inadmissible. A difficult question arises here. Whether is it better to lose these brilliant effusions altogether, or to soften down and modify such expressions so as to suit the taste of an age so notorious for its scrupulous and superficial delicacy? I certainly would give my vote for the latter. It is delicate ground; for it would scarcely be possible to do always just enough and not too much. But though I would not recommend the garbling of original songs as Allan Ramsay did, so as quite to change their character, nor the forging a new volume of old songs off at the ground

as Cronk did*, with the help of his friend Allan Cunningham, having nothing but a few ancient chorusses or couplets, familiar among the peasantry, to bear them through; yet I certainly would like to see a saving hand stretched out to rescue these relics of broad and simple humour; and, rather than they should perish, or give offence to modesty and good breeding, venture to use the pruning knife a little. Are we to lose such productions as "The Wyfe of Auchtermuchtie," because, forsooth, there may be two words in it that one would not choose to read aloud in a mixed company?

Ritson has done a good deal for the preservation of our lyrical lore; Johnson has done more; and as both their works are wearing scarce, it would surely be a good speculation to republish them together, with such omissions or additions as a man of judgment might see meet. I look upon Johnson's Museum as the most valuable collection of that nature that ever was made in our country—not so much on account of the songs, (for many of them are now to be found in other collections) as for the great mine of original music which it contains. Many of these tunes, it is true, have been since modernised, and certainly are improved by the symphonies, graces, and accompaniments, that have been added; still the preservation of them in their simple and original state is a laudable and desirable object; and there is no doubt but an enlarged edition of that work, wherein elegance and utility might be conjoined, is a desideratum in the vocal and musical miscellanies of the day.

Observing that you had set out on your miscellaneous career, with the resuscitation of some valuable old poetic lore, I have thrown these few cursory remarks together, in hopes they may be instrumental in bringing to light some more relics of the pastoral, romantic, and rustic poetry of former ages, which you will do well to preserve, and of which the collectors of songs and music may afterwards avail themselves to their own advantage, and

the cause of song in general. If simplicity be the last refinement, and the highest excellence to which a poet can reach, then these lyrical effusions of our ancestors possess it in a very high degree—true, it is not always elegant simplicity, but it is better than pompous affectation. Every thing in the universe moves in a circle till the two extremes meet; thus the highest refinement returns again to where it set out—the walks of simple nature.

May 27, 1817.

S.

EXPERIMENT, BY MR LAUDER DICK, YOUNGER OF FOUNTAINHALL, RELATIVE TO THE PRESERVATION OF THE VEGETATIVE POWER IN THE SEEDS OF PLANTS.

MR EDITOR,

THE following is an extract of a letter from my friend, Mr Lauder Dick, dated Relugas, near Forres, 6th May 1817. It contains a short notice of an experiment, which, taken in connexion with some others of a similar nature, already familiar to the vegetable physiologist, may perhaps appear of considerable interest to some of your readers. I am, sir, your most obedient servant,

G.

"A friend of mine possesses an estate in this county, a great part of which lying along the Moray Frith, was, at some period not very well ascertained, but certainly not less than sixty years ago, covered with sand, which had been blown from the westward, and overwhelmed the cultivated fields, so that the agriculturist was forced to abandon them altogether. My friend, soon after his purchase of the estate, began the arduous but judicious operation of trenching down the sand, and bringing to the surface the original black mould. These operations of improvement were so productive, as to induce the very intelligent and enterprising proprietor to undertake, lately, a still more laborious task; viz. to trench down the superincumbent sand, on a part of the property where it was no less than eight feet deep.

Conceiving this to be a favourable opportunity, for trying some experiments relative to the length of time which seeds preserve their power of vegetation, even when immersed in

* We have inserted our correspondent's remarks as they came to hand, though we profess ourselves ignorant with regard to the ground of the charge that he makes against Cronk. We trust he can make good his assertion. It would be a curious instance of literary fraud.