

The Devil's Secretary

By E. Lynn Linton

On the 26th of December, 1590, John Fian, *alias* Cuningham (spelt Johanne Feane, *alias* Cwninghame), master of the school at Saltpans, Lothian, and contextnptuously recorded as "Secretar and Register to the Devil," was arraigned for witchcraft and high treason. There were twenty counts against him, the least of which would have been enough to have lighted up a witch-fire on that fatal Castle Hill, for the bravest and best in the land. First, he was accused of entering into a covenant with Satan, who appeared to him in white, as he lay in bed, musing and thinking ("mwsand and pansand," says the dittay in its quaint language) how he should be revenged on Thomas Trumbill, for not having whitewashed his room, according to agreement. After promising his Satanic majesty allegiance and homage, he received his mark, which later was found under his tongue, with two pins therein thrust up to their heads. Again, he was found guilty—"fylit" is the old legal term—of "feigning himself to be sick in the said Thomas Trumbill's chamber, where he was stricken in great ecstacies and trances, lying by the space of two or three hours dead, his spirit taken, and suffered himself to be carried and transported to many mountains, as he thought through all the world, according to his depositions." Note, that these depositions were made in the midst of fearful torture, and recanted the instant after. Also, he was found guilty of suffering himself to be carried to North Berwick church, where, together with many others, he did homage to Satan, as he stood in the pulpit, making doubtful speeches, saying, "Many come to the fair, and all buy not wares;" and desired him "not to fear, though he was grim, for he had many servants who should never want, or au nothing, so long as their hair was on, and should never let one tear fall from their eyes so long as they served him;" and he gave them lessons, and said, "Spare not to do evil, and to eat and drink and be blithe, taking rest and ease, for he should raise them up at the latter day gloriously." But the pith of the indictment was that he, Fian, and sundry others to be spoken of hereafter, entered into a league with Satan to wreck the king on his way to Denmark, whither, in a fit of clumsy gallantry, he had set out to visit his future queen. While he was sailing to Denmark, Fian and a whole crew of witches and wizards met Satan at sea, and the master, giving an enchanted cat into Robert Grierson's hand, bade him "cast the same into the sea, holà," which was accordingly done; and a pretty capful of wind the consequence. Then, when the king was returning from Denmark, the devil promised to raise a mist which should wreck him on English ground. To perform which feat he took something like a football—it seemed to Dr. Fian like a wisp—and cast it into the sea, whereupon arose the great mist which nearly drove the cumbrous old pedant on to English ground, where our strong-fisted queen would have made him pay for his footing in a manner not quite congenial to his tastes. But, being a Man of God, none of these charms and devilries prevailed against him. A further count was, that once again he consorted with Satan and his crew, still in North Berwick church, where they paced round the church wider shins (wider scheins?), that is, contrary to the way of the sun. Fian blew into the lock—a favourite trick of his—to open the door, and blew in the lights which burned blue, and were like big black candles held in an old man's hand round about the pulpit. Here Satan as a "mekill blak man, with ane blak baird

stikand out lyke ane gettis (goat's) baird; and ane he ribbit neise, falland doun scharp lyke the beik of ane halk; with ane lang rumpill (tail); clad in ane blak tatie goun, and ane ewill favorit scull bonnett on his heid; haifand ane blak buik in his hand," preached to them, commanding them to be good servants to him, and he would be a good master to them, and never let them want. But he made them all very angry by calling Robert Grierson by his Christian name. He ought to have been called "Ro' the Comptroller, or Rob the Rower." This slip of the master's displeased them sorely, and they ran "hirdie girdie" in great excitement, for it was against all etiquette to be named by their earthly names; indeed, they always received new names when the devil gave them their infernal christening, and they made themselves over to him and denied their holy baptism. It was at this meeting that John Finn was specially accused of rifling the graves of the dead, and dismembering their bodies for charms. And many other things did this Secretar and Register to the devil. Once, at the house of David Seaton's mother, he breathed into the hand of a woman sitting by the fire, and opened a lock at the other end of the kitchen. Once he raised up four candles on his horse's two ears, and a fifth on the staff which a man riding with him carried iii his hand. These magic candles gave as much light as the sun at noonday, and the man was so terrified that he fell dead on his own threshold. He sent an evil spirit, who tormented a man for twenty weeks; and he was seen to chase a cat, and in the chase to be carried so high over a hedge that he could not touch her head. The dittay says he flew through the air—a not infrequent mode of progression with such people. When asked why he hunted the cat, he said that Satan had need of her, and that he wanted all the cats he could lay hands on, to cast into the sea, and cause storms and shipwrecks. He was further accused of endeavouring to bewitch a young maiden by his devilish cantrips and horrid charms; but, by a wile of the girl's mother, up to men's arts, he practised on a heifer's hairs instead of the girl's, and the result was that a luckless young cow went lowing after him everywhere—even into his school-room—rubbing herself against him, and exhibiting all the languish and desire of a love-sick young lady. A curious old plate represents John Fian and the heifer in grotesque attitudes; the heifer with large, drooping, amorous eyes, intensely ridiculous—the schoolmaster with his magic wand drawing circles in the sand. These, with divers smaller charges, such as casting horoscopes, and wearing mode-wart's (mole's) feet upon him, amounting in all to twenty counts, formed the sum of the indictment against him. He was put to the torture. First, his head was "thrawed with a rope" for about an hour, but still he would not confess; then they tried fair words and coaxed him, but with no better success; and then they put him to the "most severe and cinch pains in the worlde," namely, the boots, till his legs were completely crushed, and the blood and marrow spouted out. After the third stroke he became speechless; and they, supposing it to be the devil's mark which kept him silent, searched for that mark, that by its discovery the spell might be broken. So they found it, as stated before, under his tongue, with two charmed pins stuck up to their heads therein. When they were drawn out—that is, after some further torture—he confessed anything which it pleased his tormentors to demand of him, saying how, just now, the devil had been to him all in black, but with a white wand in his hand; and how, on his, Fian's, renouncing him, he had brake his wand, and disappeared. The next day he recanted this confession. He was then somewhat restored to himself, and had mastered the weakness of his agony. Whereupon it was assumed that the devil had visited him through the night, and bad marked him afresh. They searched him—pulling off every nail

with a turkas, or smith's pincers, and then thrusting in needles up to their heads; but finding nothing more satanic than blood and nerves, they put him to worse tortures, as a revenge, he made no other relapse, but remained constant now to the end; bearing his grievous pains with patience and fortitude, and dying as a brave man always knows how to die, whatever the occasion. Finding that nothing more could be made of him, they mercifully came to an end. He was strangled and burnt "in the Castle Hill of Edinbrough, on a Saterdaie, in the ende of Januarie last past 1591;" ending a may be loose and not over-heroic life in a manner worthy of the most glorious martyr of history. John Fian, schoolmaster of Saltpans, with no great idea to support him, and no admiring friends to cheer him on, bore himself as nobly as any hero of them all, and vindicated the honour of manhood and natural strength in a way that exalts our common human nature into something godlike and divine.