

The Troubles of Aberdeen

By E. Lynn Linton

Aberdeen was not behind her elder sister. One man and twenty-three women were burned in one year alone for the crime of witchcraft and magic; and the Records of the Dean of Guild faithfully detail the expenses which the town was put to in the process. On the 23rd of February, 1597, Thomas Levis cost them two pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence, for “peattis, tar barrelis, fir, and coallis, to burn the said Thomas, and to Jon Justice for his fie in executing him;” but Jonet Wischart (his mother), and Isobel Cocker, cost eleven pounds ten shillings for their joint cremation; with ten shillings added to the account for “trailing of Monteithe (another witch of the same gang) through the streits of the town in ane cart, quha hangit herself in prison, and eirding (burying) her.” The dittay against these several persons set forth various crimes. Janet Wischart, who was an old woman notorious for her evil eye, was convicted, amongst other things, of having “in the moneth of Aprile or thairby, in anno nvntie ane yeiris, being the first moneth in the raith (the first quarter) at the greiking” (breaking) of the day, cast her cantrips in Alexander Thomson’s way, so that one half of the day his body was “rossin” (burned or roasted) as if in an oven, with an extreme burning drought, and the other half melting away with a cold sweat. Upon Andrew Wobster—who had put a linen towel round her throat, half choking her, and to whom she said angrily, “Quhat wirreys thow me? thow salt lie: I sall give breid to my bairnis this tow mound, and thou sall nocht byd ane moneth with thin, to gif tham breid”—she had laid such sore cantrips, that he died as she predicted: which was a cruel and foul murder in the eyes of the law, forbye the sin of witchcraft. But she had other victims as well. James Low, a stabler, refused to lend her his kiln and barn, so he took a “dwining” illness in consequence, “melting away like ane burning candle till he died.” His wife and only son died too, and his “haill geir, surmounting three thousand pounds, are altogether wrackit and away.” Beside this evidence there was his own testimony availing; for he had often said on his death-bed, that if he had lent Jonet what she had demanded, he would never have suffered loss. She had also once brought down a dozen fowls off a roost, dead at her feet; and had ruined a woman and her husband, by bidding them take nine grains or ears of wheat, and a bit of rowan tree, and put them in the four corners of the house—for all the mischance that followed after was due to this unholy charm; and once she raised a serviceable wind in a dead calm, by putting a piece of live coal at two doors, whereby she was enabled to winnow some wheat for herself, when all the neighbours were standing idle for want of wind; and she bewitched cows, so that they gave poison instead of milk; and oxen, so that they became furious under the touch of any one but herself; and she sent cats to sit on honest folks’ breasts, and give them evil dreams and the horrors; and furthermore, she was said to have gone to the gallows in the Links, and to have dismembered the dead body hanging there, for charms; and twenty-two years ago she was proved to have been found sitting in a field of corn before sunrising, peeling blades, and finding that it would be “ane dear year, for the blade grew widershins, and it was only when it grew sungates (from east to west) that it would be a full harvest and cheap bread for the poor; and once her daughter-in-law had found her, and another hag, sitting stark by her fireside, the one mounted on the shoulders of the

other, working charms for her health and wellbeing. So she cost the town of Aberdeen the half of eleven pounds odd shillings, for the most effectual manner of carrying out her sentence, which was, that she “be brint to the deid.”

Her son Thomas Leyis was not so fortunate as her husband and daughters: “qwik gangand devills” were these; for they escaped the flames this time, and were banished instead. But Thomas was less lucky. He was dilatit of being a common witch and sorcerer, and the partner of all his mother’s evil deeds. One of his worst crimes was having danced round the market-cross of Aberdeen, he and a number of witches and sorcerers—the devil leading; “in the quhilk dans, thow, Thomas, was foremost, and led the ring, and dang the said Katherine Mitchell (another of the accused) because scho spillit your dans, and ran nocht so fast about as the rest.” Thomas had a lover too, faithless Elspet Reid, and she, turning against him, as has been the manner of lovers through all time, gave tremendous evidence in his disfavour. She said that he had once offered to take her to Murrayland, and there marry her; a man at the foot of a certain mountain being sure to rise at his bidding, and supply them with all they wanted; and when he was confined in the church-house, she came and whispered to him through the window, and the man in charge of Thomas swore that she said she had been meeting with the devil according to his orders, and that when she sained herself he had “vaniest away with ane rwmleng (rumbling).” In the morning, too, before the old mother’s conviction, “ane ewll spreit in lyiknes of ane pyit (magpie),” went and struck the youngest sister in her face, and would have picked out her eyes, but that the neighbours to the fore dang the foul thief out of the room; and again, on the day after conviction, and before execution, the devil came again as ane kae (crow), and would have destroyed the youngest sister entirely had he not been prevented: which two visitations were somehow hinged on to Thomas, and included in the list of crimes for which he was adjudged worthy of death.

Helen Fraser, of the same “coven,” was a most dangerous witch. She had the power to make men transfer their affections, no matter how good and wholesome the wife deserted:—and she never spared her power. By her charms she caused Andrew Tullideff to leave off loving his lawful wife and take to Margaret Neilson instead: so that “he could never he reconceillit with his wife, or remove his affection frae the said harlot;” and she made Robert Merchant fall away from the duty owing to his wife, Christian White, and transfer himself and his love to a certain widow, Isabel Bruce. for whom he once went to sow corn, and fell so madly in love that he could never quit the house or the widow’s side again; “whilk thing the country supposed to be brought about by the unfawful travelling of the said Helen; “ and was further *testified by Robert himself*,” says Chambers significantly. Helen Fraser was therefore burnt; and it is to be hoped that the men returned to their lawful mates.

Isobel Cockie, who was burnt in company with Thomas Lee’s mother, old Jonet, meddled chiefly with cows and butter. She could forespeak them so that they should give poison instead of milk, and the cream she had once overlooked was never fit for the “yirning.” Her landlord once offended her by mending the roof of her house while she was from home, and Isobel, who did not choose that her things should be pulled about in her absence, and perhaps some of her cantrips discovered, “glowrit up at him, and said, ‘I sall gar thee forthink it that thow hast tirrit my hows, I being frae hame.’” Whereupon Alexander Anderson went home sick and speechless, and gut no relief until Isobel gave him “droggis,” when his speech and health returned as of old. Isabel had been the dancer

immediately after Thomas Lees at the Fish Cross, “and because the dewill playit not so melodiously and well as thow cravit, thow took his instrument out of his mouth, then tuik him on the chafts (chops) therewith, and play it thyself theiron to the hail company.” What further evidence could possibly be required to prove that Isabel Cockie was a witch, and one that “might not be suffered to live”?

Other trials did Aberdeen entertain that year on this same wise and Christian count. There was that of Andrew Man, a poor old fellow specially patronized by the Queen of Fairy who sixty years ago had come to his mother’s house, where she was delivered of a bairn just like an ordinary woman, and no devil or Queen of Elfin at all. Andrew was then but a boy, but he remembered it all well, and how he carried water for her, and was promised by her that he should know all things, and should be able to cure all sorts of sickness except the “stand deid;” and that he should be “well entertainit,” but should seek his meat ere he died, as Thomas Rhymer had done in years long past. Twenty-eight years after this the queen came again, and caused one of his cattle to die on a hillock called the Elf-hillock, but promised to do him good afterwards; and it was then that their guilty albeit poetic and loving intercourse began. Andrew was told in his dittay that he could cure “the falling sickness, the bairn-bed, and all other sorts of sickness that ever fell to man or beast, except the *stand-deid*, by baptizing them, reabling them in the auld corunschbald,¹ and striking of the gudis on the face, with ane foot in thy hand, and by saying their words,’ Gif thou wilt live, live; and gif thaw wilt die, die,’ with sundry other orisons, sic as Sanet John and the three silly brethren, whilk thaw canst say when thaw please, and by giving of black wool and salt as a remeid for all diseases, and for causing a man prosper, so that his blude should never be drawn.” Once, Andrew Man, by putting a patient nine times through a hasp of unwatered yarn, and a cat as many times backwards through the same hasp, cured the patient by killing the cat. This was logical, and quite easy to be understood. Andrew’s devil whom he affirmed to be an angel, and whose name was Christsonday, was raised by saying Benedicite, and laid again by putting a dog under his arm, then casting it into the devil’s mouth with the awful word “Maikpeblis!” “The Queen of Elphen has a grip of all the craft,” says the dittay, “but Christsonday is the gudeman, and has all power under God; and thaw kens sundry deid men in their company, and the king that died at Flodden, and Thomas Rhymer is there.” And as the queen had been seen in Andrew’s company in a rather beautiful and poetic manner, the whole affair was settled, and no man’s mind was left in doubt of the old creature’s guilt. For, Andrew was told, “Upon Rood-day in harvest, in this present year, whilk fell on a Wednesday, thaw saw Christsonday come out of the snaw in the likeness of a staig (young male horse), and the Queen of Elphen was there, and others with her, riding upon white hackneys.” “The elves have shapes and claithes like men, and will have fair covered tables, and they are but shadows, but are starker (stronger) nor men, and they have playing and dancing when they please; the queen is very pleasant, and will be auld and young when she pleases; she makes any king whom she pleases. . . The elves will make thee appear to be in a fair chalmer, and yet thaw wilt find thyself in a moss on the moor. They will appear to have candles, and licht, and swords, whilk will be nothing else but dead grass and straes.” So Andrew’s doom was sealed, for all that he denied his guilt, and he was convicted and burnt like the rest.

¹ Apparently untranslatable.

Marjory Mutch came to her end because, having a deadly hatred against William Smith, she bewitched his oxen, as they were ploughing, so that they all ran “wood” or mad that instant, broke the plough, and two of them plunged up over the hills to Deer, and two ran up Ithan side, and could never be taken or apprehended again. She was notorious for bewitching cattle; and that she was a witch, and good for nothing but burning, a gentleman proved to the satisfaction of all present, for he found a soft spot on her which he pricked without causing any pain; a test that ought to have been eminently satisfactory and conclusive—but was not; for she was “clenged”—cleansed, or acquitted.

Ellen Gray, convicted of many of the ordinary crimes of witchcraft, did away with all chance of mercy for herself when, on being taken, she looked over her shoulder, saying, “Is there no mon following me?” and Agnes Wobster was a witch because in a great snow she took fire out of a “cauld frosty dyke,” and carried the same to her house. They were both burnt, as they merited. Janet Leisk cast sickness and disease on all she knew, and made whole flocks run “wode” and furious; geese too; but she was “clenged,” or cleared; so was Gilbert Fidlar; but Isabel Richie, Margaret Og. Helen Rogie, and others, were burnt, for the satisfaction of offended justice.

Margaret Clark, too, came to no good end, because being sent far by the wife of Nicol Ross, when in child-bed, she gave her ease by casting her pains upon Andrew Harper, who fell into such a fury and madness during her time of travail, that he could not be holden, and only recovered when the gentlewoman was delivered. And what did Violet Leys do, but bewitch William Finlay’s ship so that she never made one goad voyage again, all because her husband had been discharged therefrom, and Violet the witch was most mightily angered? And Isobell Straquhan, too, had she not powers banned even in the blessing? She went one day to “Elspet Murray in Woodheid, she being a widow, and asked of her if she had a penny to lend her, and the said Elspet gave her the penny; and the said Isobell took the penny and bowit (bent) it, and took a clout and a piece of red wax, and sewed the clout with a thread, the wax and the penny being within the clout, and gave it to the said Elspet Murray, commanding her to use the said clout to hang about her craig (neck), and when she saw the man she loved best, take the clout, with the penny and wax, and stroke her face with it, and she so doing, would attain into the marriage of that man wham she loved.” She also made Walter Ronaldson leave off beating his wife, by sewing certain pieces of paper thick with threads of divers colours, and putting them in the barn among the corn, since which time Walter left off dinging his poor spouse, and was “subdued entirely to her love.” So Isabel Straquhan made one of the tale of twenty-two unfortunate wretches who were executed in Aberdeen that year, for the various crimes of witchcraft and sorcery.

No evidence was too meagre for the witch-hunters; no accusation too absurd; no subterfuge or enormity sufficiently transparent to show the truth behind. When Margaret Aiken, “the great witch of Balwery,” went about the country dilating honest women for witches, “by the mark between their eyes,” it was evident to all but the heated and credulous, such as John Cowper, the minister of Glasgow, and others, that she used this as a mere means to save time, she herself having been tortured into confession, and now seeing no way of safety but by complicity and witch-finding. She told of one convention held on a hill in Atholl, where there were twenty-three hundred witches, and the devil among them. “She said she knew them all well enough, and what mark the devil had given severally to every one of them. There was many of them tried by swimming in the

water, by binding of their two thumbs and their great toes together, for being thus casten in the water, they floated ay aboon.” It was not only the malevolent witch that suffered in this wild raid made against reason and humanity. The doom dealt out to the witch who slew was equally allotted to the witch who saved. Yet the witchologists made a difference between the two.

“Of witches there be two sorts,” says Thomas Pickering, in his ‘Discovrse of the damned Art of Witchcraft,’ printed 1610, “*the bad witch* and *the good witch*; for so they are commonly called. The *bad witch* is he or she that hath consulted in league with the Deuill; to vse his helpe for the doing of hurte onely, so as to strike and annoy the bodies of men, women, children, and cattell, with diseases and with death itselfe; so likewise to raise tempests by sea and by land, &c. This is commonly called *the binding* witch.

“The *good witch* is he or she that by consent in a league with the Deuill doth vse his helpe for the doing of goad onely. This cannot hurt, torment, curse, or kill, but onely heale and cure the hurt inflicted vpon men or cattell by badde witches. For as they can doe no good but onely hurt; so this can doe no hurt but good onely. And this is that order which the Deuill hath set in his kingdome, appointing to several persons their several offices and charges. And the Good Witch is commonly called the Vnbinding Witch.”

But the good witch, as Pickering calls her, was no better off than the bad. Indeed she was held in even greater dread, for the black witch hurt only the body and estate, while the white witch hurt the soul when she healed the body; the healed part never being able to say “God healed me.” Wherefore it was severed from the salvation of the rest, and the wholeness of the redemption destroyed. In consequence of this belief we find as severe punishments accorded to the blessing as to the banning witches; and no movement of gratitude was dreamt of towards those who had healed the most oppressive diseases, or shown the most humane feeling and kindness, if there was a suspicion that the power had been got uncannily, or that the drugs had more virtue than common.