



Stories from Hugh Miller's 'Scenes and Legends of the Highlands' which relate directly to Kirkmichael

[Note: titles in brackets are modern and placed there simply to aid the reader in spotting where one story begins and another ends. VJW]

Not long ago I wrought for about a week in the burying-ground of Kirk-Michael, a ruinous chapel in the eastern extremity of the parish of Resolis, distant about six miles from the town of Cromarty. It is a pleasant solitary spot, lying on the sweep of a gentle declivity. The sea flows to within a few yards of the lower wall; but the beach is so level, and so little exposed to the winds, that even in the time of tempest there is heard within its precincts only a faint rippling murmur, scarcely loud enough to awaken the echoes of the ruin. Ocean seems to muffle his waves in approaching this field of the dead. A row of elms springs out of the fence, and half encircles the building in the centre. Standing beside the mouldering walls, the foreground of the scene appears thickly sprinkled over with graves and tablets; and we see the green moss creeping round the rude sculptures of a primitive age, imparting rightness and beauty to that on which the chisel had bestowed a very opposite character. The flake-like leaves and gnarled trunks of the elms fill up what a painter would term the midground of the picture; and seen from between the boughs, the Bay of Cromarty, shut in by the Sutors so as to present the appearance of a huge lake, and the town beyond half enveloped in blue smoke — the windows sparkling through the cloud like spangles on a belt of azure — occupy the distance.

The western gable of the ruin is still entire, though the very foundations of part of the walls can no longer be traced on the sward, and it is topped by a belfry of hewn stone, in which the dead bell is still suspended. From the spires and balls with which the cornice is surmounted, the moss and lichens which bristle over the mouldings, and the stalks of ragweed which shoot out here and there from between the joints, the belfry, though designed in a barbarous style of architecture, is rich in the true picturesque. It furnished me, when the wind blew from the east, with an

Commented [VW1]: Were sea levels higher?

Commented [VW2]: There are still a few surviving elms along the Newhall Point road, perhaps descendants of these.

Commented [VW3]: Spires rather than finials!

agreeable music, not, indeed, either gay or very varied, but of a character which suited well with that of the place. I wrought directly under it, and frequently paused in my labours to hearken the blast moaning amid its spires, and whistling through its apertures; and I have occasionally been startled by the mingling deathlike tones produced by the hammer, when forced by the wind against the sides of the bell. I was one day listening to this music, when, by one of those freaks which fling the light of recollection upon the dark recesses of the past, much in the manner that I have seen a child throwing the gleam of a mirror from the sunshine into the shade, there were brought before me the circumstances of a dream, deemed prophetic of the death of him whose epitaph I was then inscribing. It was one of those auguries of contingency which, according to Bacon, men mark when they hit, and never mark when they miss.

[The Phantom Sundial]

In the latter part of 1822 a young lad, a mason's apprentice, was employed with his master in working within the policies of Pointzfield – a gentleman's seat about a mile from the burying-ground. He wished much to visit the tombs and chapel, but could find no opportunity; for the day had so shortened that his employments engaged him from the first peep of light in the morning until half an hour after sunset. And perhaps the wish was the occasion of the dream. He had no sooner fallen asleep, after the fatigues of the day, than he found himself approaching the chapel in one of the finest of midsummer evenings. The whole western heavens were suffused with the blush of sunset – the hills, the woods, the fields, the sea, all the limbs and members of the great frame of nature, seemed enveloped in a mantle of beauty. He reached the burying round, and deemed it the loveliest spot he had ever seen. The tombs were finished after the most exquisite designs, chastely Grecian, or ornately Gothic; and myriads of flowering shrubs winded around the urns, and shaded the tablets in every disposition of beauty. The building seemed entire, but it was so encrusted with moss and lichens as to present an appearance of extreme antiquity; and on the western gable there was fixed a huge gnomon of bronze, fantastically carved like that of an antique dial, and green with the rust of ages. Suddenly a low breeze began to moan through the shrubs and bushes, the heavens became overcast, and the dreamer, turning towards the building, beheld with a sensation of fear the gnomon revolving slowly as on an axis, until the point rested significantly on the sward. He fled the place in deep horror, the night suddenly fell, and when floundering on in darkness and terror, through a morass that stretches beyond the southern

Commented [VW4]: Meaning he would not have remembered it if it had not come to pass?

Commented [VW5]: Miller himself?, or a young acquaintance?

Commented [VW6]: Compare this section with Dickens' A Christmas Carol and the Phantom at the end of the account of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come – definite echoes, and Dickens was a Miller fan

wall of the chapel, he awoke, and lo! it was a dream. Only five weeks elapsed from this evening, until he followed to the burying-ground the corpse of a relative, and saw that the open grave occupied the identical spot on which the point of the gnomon had rested.

During the course of the week which I spent in the burying-ground, I became acquainted with several interesting traditions connected with its mute inhabitants. There are some of these which show how very unlike the beliefs entertained in the ages which have departed, are to those deemed rational in the present; while there are others which render it evident that though men at different eras think and believe differently, human nature always remains the same. The following partakes in part of the character of both.

[Kirkmichael before Midnight]

There lived, about a century ago, in the upper part of the parish of **Cromarty**, an elderly female of that disposition of mind which Bacon describes as one of the very errors of human nature. Her faculties of enjoyment and suffering seemed connected by some invisible tie to the fortunes of her neighbours; but the tie, unlike that of sympathy, which binds pleasure to pleasure, and sorrow to sorrow, united by a strange perversity the opposite feelings; for she was happy when the people around her were unfortunate, and miserable when they prospered. So decided a misanthropy was met by a kindred feeling in those acquainted with her; nor was she regarded with only that abhorrence which attaches to the evil wish, and the malignant intention, but also with the contempt due to that impotency of malice which can only wish and intend.

Her sphere of mischief, however, though limited by her circumstances, was occupied to its utmost boundary; and she frequently made up for her want of power by an ingenuity, derived from what seemed an almost instinctive knowledge of the weaknesses of human nature. It was difficult to tell how she effected her schemes, but certain it was that in her neighbourhood lovers became estranged, and families divided. Late in the autumn of her last year, she formed one of a band of reapers employed in cutting down the crops of a Cromarty farmer. Her partner on the ridge was a poor widow, who had recently lost her husband, and who, though wasted by grief and sickness, was now toiling for her three fatherless children. Every person on the field pitied her but one; and the malice of even that one, perverted as her dispositions were, would probably have been disarmed by

Commented [VW7]: A precis-ed version of this told outside Kirkmichael itself works very well indeed

the helplessness of its object, had it not chanced, that about five years before, when the poor woman and her deceased husband were on the eve of their marriage, she had attempted to break off the match, by casting some foul aspersions on her character. Those whom the wicked injure, says the adage, they never forgive; and with a demoniac abuse of her knowledge of the dispositions of the people with whom she wrought, she strained beyond her strength to get ahead of them, knowing that a competition would necessarily take place, in which, she trusted, the widow would have either to relinquish her employment as above her strength, or so exhaust herself in the contest as to relapse into sickness. The expected struggle ensued, but, to the surprise of every one, the widow kept up her place in the foremost rank until evening, when she appeared less fatigued than almost any individual of the party. The wretch who had occasioned the contest, and who had fallen behind all the others, seemed dreadfully agitated for the two last hours it continued; and she was heard by the persons who bound up the sheaves, muttering, during the whole time, words apparently of fearful meaning, which were, however, drowned amid the rustling of the corn, and the hurry and confusion of the competition. Next morning she alone of all the reapers was absent; and she was found by the widow, who seemed the only one solicitous to know what had become of her, and who first entered her hovel to inquire after her, tossing in the delirium of fever. The poor woman, though shocked and terrified by her ravings and her agony, tended her till within half an hour of midnight, when she expired.

At that late hour a solitary traveller was passing the road which winds along the southern shore of the bay. The moon, in her last quarter, had just risen over the hill on his right, and, half-veiled by three strips of cloud, rather resembled a heap of ignited charcoal seen through the bars of a grate, than the orb which only a few nights before had enabled the reaper to prosecute his employments until near morning. The blocks of granite scattered over the neighbouring beach, and bleached and polished by the waves, were relieved by the moonshine, and resembled flocks of sheep ruminating on a meadow; but not a single ray rested on the sea beyond, or the path or fields before; — the beam slid ineffectually along the level; it was light looking at darkness. On a sudden, the traveller became conscious of that strange mysterious emotion which, according to the creed of the demonologist, indicates the presence or near approach of an evil spirit. He felt his whole frame as if creeping together, and his hair bristling on his head; and, filled with a strange horror, he heard, through the dead stillness of the night, a faint uncertain noise, like that of a sudden breeze rustling

through a wood at the close of autumn. He blessed himself, and stood still. A tall figure, indistinct in the darkness, came gliding along the road from the east, and inquired of him in a voice hollow and agitated, as it floated past, whether it could not reach Kirk-Michael before midnight? "No living person could," answered the traveller; and the appearance, groaning at the reply, was out of sight in a moment. The sounds still continued, as if a multitude of leaves were falling from the boughs of a forest, and striking with a pattering sound on the heaps congregated beneath, when another figure came up, taller, but even less distinct, than the former. It bore the appearance of a man on horseback. "Shall I reach Kirk-Michael before midnight?" was the query again put to the terrified traveller; but before he could reply, the appearance had vanished in the distance, and a shriek of torment and despair, which seemed re-echoed by the very firmament, roused him into a more intense feeling of horror. The moon shone out with supernatural brightness; the noise, which had ceased for a moment, returned, but the sounds were different—for they now seemed to be those of faint laughter, and low indistinct murmurings in the tone of ridicule; and the gigantic rider of a pale horse, with what appeared to be a female shape bent double before him, and accompanied by two dogs, one of which tugged at the head and the other at the feet of the figure, was seen approaching from the west. As this terrible apparition passed the traveller, the moon shone full on the face of the woman bent across the horse, and he distinctly perceived, though the features seemed convulsed with agony, that they were those of the female who, unknown to him, had expired a few minutes before. None of the other stories are of so terrible a character.

[‘A Friend’s Remembrance and a Sister’s Tear’]

Attached to the eastern gable of the ruin, there is a tomb which encloses several monuments; among the rest a plain slab of marble bearing an epitaph, the composition of which would reflect honour on the pen even of Pope. Like most of the other tablets of the burying-ground, it has its history. Somewhat more than fifty years ago, the proprietor of Newhall, an estate in the neighbourhood, was a young man of very superior powers of mind, and both a gentleman and a scholar. When on a visit at the house of his uncle, the proprietor of Invergordon, he was suddenly taken ill, and died a few hours after, leaving behind him a sister, who entertained for him the warmest affection, and the whole of his tenants, who were much attached to him, to regret his loss. He was buried in the family vault of his uncle, who did not long survive him; and whose estate, including the vault,

was sold soon after by the next of kin – a circumstance which aggravated, in no slight degree, the grief of his sister. There was one gloomy idea that continually occupied her mind – the idea that even the dust of her brother had, like the earth and stones of his cemetery, become the property of a stranger. Sleeping or waking, the interior of the vault was continually before her. I have seen it. It is a damp melancholy apartment of stone, so dimly lighted that the eye cannot ascertain its extent, with the sides hollowed into recesses, partly occupied by the dead, and with a few rusty iron lamps suspended from the ceiling, that resemble in the darkness a family of vampire bats clinging to the roof of a cavern. A green hillock, covered with moss and daisies, would have supplied the imagination of the mourner with a more pleasing image, and have associated better with the character of the dead.

His sister was the wife of a gentleman who was at that time the proprietor of Braelanguil. One evening, about half a year after the sale of her uncle's property, she was prevailed upon by her husband to quit her apartment, to which she had been confined for months before, and to walk with him in a neighbouring wood. She spoke of the virtues and talents of the deceased, the only theme from which she could derive any pleasure; and she found that evening in her companion a more deep and tender sympathy than usual. The walk was insensibly prolonged, and she was only awakened from her reverie of tenderness and sorrow, by finding herself among the graves of Kirk-Michael. The door of her husband's burying-ground lay open. On entering it, she perceived that a fresh grave had been added to the number of those which had previously occupied the space, and that one of the niches in the wall was filled up by a new slab of marble. It was the grave and monument of her brother. The body had been removed from the vault, and re-interred in this place by her consort; and it would perhaps be difficult to decide whether the more delicate satisfaction was derived by the sister or the husband from the walk of the evening. The epitaph is as follows:—

What science crown'd him, or what genius blest,
No flattering pencil bids this stone attest;
Yet may it witness with a purer pride,
How many virtues sunk when Gordon died.
Clear truth and nature, noble rays of mind,
Open as day, that beam's on all mankind;
Warm to oblige, too gentle to offend,
He never made a foe nor lost a friend.
Nor yet from fortune's height, or learning's shade,
It boasts the tribute to his memory paid;
But that around, in grateful sorrow steep's,

The humble tenants of the cottage wept;
Those simple hearts that shrink from grandeur's blaze,
Those artless tongues that know not how to praise,
Feel and record the worth that hallow here
A friend's remembrance, and a sister's tear. [NOTE 2.]

Commented [VW8]: This monument is one of many restored at Kirkmichael and is located on the west wall of the Chancel

[Lady Ardoch's brave brother]

Half-way between the chapel and the northern wall of the burying-ground, there is a square altar-like monument of hewn ashlar, enclosing in one of its sides a tablet of grey freestone. It was erected about sixty years ago by a baronet of Fowlis to the memory of his aunt, Mrs. Gordon of Ardoch, a woman whose singular excellence of character is recorded by the pen of Doddridge. She was the only sister of three brothers – men who ranked among the best and bravest of their age, and all of whom died in the service of their country – two in the field of battle, the third when pursuing a flying enemy.

Commented [VW9]: The story of Lady Ardoch's marriage and the change in character after his suicide attempt is not given here.

The eldest son of the family was Sir Robert Munro, twenty-seventh baronet of Fowlis, a man whose achievements, as recorded by the sober pen of Doddridge, seem fitted to associate rather with ideas derived from the high conceptions of poetry and romance, than with those which we usually acquire from our experience of real life. He was a person of calm wisdom, determined courage, and unassuming piety. On quitting the university, which he did when very young, he passed into Flanders, where he served for several years under Marlborough, and became intimate with the celebrated James Gardiner, then a cornet of dragoons. And the intimacy ripened into a friendship which did not terminate until death; perhaps not even then. On the peace of 1712 he returned to Scotland; and the Rebellion broke out three years after. At the head of his clan, the Munros, in union with the good Earl of Sutherland, he so harassed a body of three thousand Highlanders, who, under the Earl of Seaforth, were on the march to join the insurgents at Perth, that the junction was retarded for nearly two months – a delay which is said to have decided the fate of the Stuarts in Scotland. In the following year he was appointed one of the commissioners of inquiry into the forfeited estates of the attainted; and he exerted himself in this office in erecting parishes in the remote Highlands, which derived their stipends from the confiscated lands. In this manner, says his biographer, new presbyteries were formed in counties where the discipline and worship of Protestant Churches had before no footing. It is added, that by his influence with Government he did eminent service to the wives and

children of the proscribed. He was for thirty years a member of Parliament, and distinguished himself as a liberal consistent Whig – the friend both of the people and of the king. In the year 1740, when the country was on the eve of what he deemed a just war, though he had arrived at an age at which the soldier commonly begins to think of retiring from the fatigues of the military life, he quitted the business of the senate for the dangers of the field, and passed a second time into Flanders. He now held the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and such was his influence over the soldiers under him, and such their admiration of his character, that his spirit and high sense of honour seemed to pervade the whole regiment. When a guard was granted to the people of Flanders for the protection of their property, they prayed that it should be composed of Sir Robert's Highlanders; and the Elector-Palatine, through his envoy at the English court, tendered to George I. his thanks for this excellent regiment; for the sake of whose lieutenant-colonel, it was added, he would for the future always esteem a Scotchman.

The life of Sir Robert resembled a well-wrought drama, whose scenes become doubly interesting as it hastens to a close. In the battle of Fontenoy he was among the first in the field, and having obtained leave that his Highlanders should fight after the manner of their country, he surprised the whole army by a display of extraordinary yet admirable tactics, directed against the enemy with the most invincible courage. He dislodged from a battery, which he was ordered to attack, a force superior to his own, and found a strong body of the enemy, who were stationed beyond it, preparing to open on him a sweeping fire. Commanding his regiment to prostrate itself to avoid the shot, he raised it when the French were in the act of reloading, and, sword in hand, rushed at its head upon them with so irresistible a charge as forced them precipitately through their lines. Then retreating, according to the tactics of his country, he again brought his men to the charge as before, and with similar effect. And this manoeuvre of alternate flight and attack was frequently repeated during the day. When after the battle had become general, the English began to give ground before the superior force of the enemy, Sir Robert's regiment formed the rearguard in the retreat. A strong body of French horse came galloping up behind; but, when within a few yards of the Highlanders, the latter turned suddenly round, and received them with a fire so well directed and effectual, that nearly one-half of them were dismounted. The rest, wheeling about, rode off, and did not again return to the attack. It was observed, that during the course of this day, when the Highlanders had thrown themselves on the ground immediately as the enemy had levelled

their pieces for firing, there was one person of the regiment who, instead of prostrating himself with the others, stood erect, exposed to the volley. That one was Sir Robert Munro. The circumstances of his death, which took place about eight months after, at the battle of Falkirk, were adapted to display still more his indomitable heroism of character. He had recently been promoted to the command of a regiment, which, unlike his brave Highlanders at Fontenoy deserted him in the moment of attack, and left him enclosed by the enemy. Defending himself with his half-pike against six of their number, two of whom he killed, he was not overpowered, though alone, until a seventh coming up shot him dead with a musket. His younger brother, who accompanied the regiment, and who had been borne along by the current of the retreat, returned in time only to witness his fate and to share it.

It has been told me by a friend, who, about forty years ago, resided for some time in the vicinity of Fowlis, that he could have collected, at that period, anecdotes of Sir Robert from among his tenantry sufficient to have formed a volume. They were all of one character: – tints of varied but unequivocal beauty, which animated into the colour and semblance of life the faint outline of heroism traced by Doddridge. There was an old man who used to sit by my friend for hours together narrating the exploits of his chief. He was a tall, upright, greyhaired Highlander, of a warm heart and keen unbending spirit, who had fought at Dettingen, Fontenoy, Culloden, and Quebec. One day, when describing the closing scene in the life of his almost idolized leader, after pouring out his curse on the dastards who had deserted him, he started from his seat, and grasping his staff as he burst into tears, exclaimed in a voice almost smothered by emotion, "Ochon, ochon, had his ain folk been there! "

[The Letters Gone Astray]

The following anecdote of Sir Robert, which I owe to tradition, sets his character in a very amiable light. On his return from Flanders in 1712, he was introduced to a Miss Jean Seymour, a beautiful English lady. The young soldier was smitten by her appearance, and had the happiness of perceiving that he had succeeded in at least attracting her notice. So happy an introduction was followed up into an intimacy, and at length, what had been only a casual impression on either side, ripened into a mutual passion of no ordinary warmth and delicacy. On Sir Robert's quitting England for the north, he arranged with his mistress the plan of a regular correspondence, and wrote to her immediately on his arrival at

Fowlis. After waiting for a reply with all the impatience of the lover, he sent off a second letter complaining of her neglect, which had no better success than the first, and shortly after a third, which shared the fate of the two others. The inference seemed too obvious to be missed; and he strove to forget Miss Seymour. He hunted, fished, visited his several friends, involved himself in a multiplicity of concerns, but all to no purpose; she still continued the engrossing object of his affections, and, after a few months' stay in the Highlands, he again returned to England, a very unhappy man. When waiting on a friend in London, he was ushered precipitately into the midst of a fashionable party, and found himself in the presence of his mistress. She seemed much startled by the rencounter; the blood mounted to her cheeks; but, suppressing her emotion, she turned to the lady who sat next her, and began to converse on some common topic of the day. Sir Robert retired, and beckoning on his friend, entreated him to procure for him an interview with Miss Seymour, which was effected, and an explanation ensued. The lady had not received a single letter; and forming at length, from the seeming neglect of her lover, an opinion of him similar to that from which she herself was suffering in his esteem, she attempted to banish him from her affections; — an attempt, however, in which she was scarcely more successful than Sir Robert. They were gratified to find that they had not been mistaken in their first impressions of each other, and parted more attached, and more convinced that the attachment was mutual, than ever. And in less than two months after Miss Seymour had become Lady Munro.

Sir Robert succeeded in tracing all his letters to one point, a kind of post-office on the confines of Inverness-shire. There was a proprietor in the neighbourhood, who was deeply engaged in the interests of the Stuarts, and decidedly hostile to Sir Robert, the scion of a family which had distinguished itself from the first dawn of the Reformation in the cause of civil and religious liberty. There was, therefore, little difficulty in assigning an author to the contrivance; but Sir Robert was satisfied in barely tracing it to a discovery for, squaring his principles of honour rather by the morals of the New Testament than by the dogmas of that code which regards death as the only expiation of insult or injury, he was no duellist. An opportunity, however, soon occurred of his avenging himself in a manner agreeable to his character and principles. On the breaking out of the Rebellion of 1715, the person who had so wantonly sported with his happiness joined the Earl of Mar, and, after the failure of the enterprise, was among the number of the proscribed. Sir Robert's influence with the Government, and the peculiar office to which he was appointed, gave him

considerable power over the confiscated properties, and this power he exerted to its utmost in behalf of the wife and children of the man by whom he had been injured. "Tell your husband," said he to the lady, "that I have now repaid him for the interest he took in my correspondence with Miss Seymour."

Hugh Miller, Chapter 9, *Scenes and Legends of the Highlands*, written in 1834