

The cat in the Allt Grànd

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE lower course of the River Glass, where it comes rushing out of the hills to flow through Evanton, used to be called the Allt Grànd or 'Ugly Burn'. For a stretch of about two miles above the village the Allt Grànd lies at the bottom of a chasm about 130 feet deep. "So near do the sides approach each other," wrote Hugh Miller in 'Scenes and Legends in the North of Scotland' (1835), "that herd-boys have been known to climb across on the trees, which, jutting out on either edge, interweave their branches over the centre.

"In many places the river is wholly invisible: its voice, however, is ever lifted up in a wild, sepulchral wailing, that seems the lament of an imprisoned spirit. In one part there is a bridge of undressed logs thrown over the chasm."

Miller proceeds to tell a story which is very much about an imprisoned spirit. About two centuries earlier, long before Evanton existed, the laird of Balconie was married to a very reserved woman who was regarded in the district with a mixture of fear and respect. Balconie is below Evanton, close to the shore of the Cromarty Firth, but she spent most of her time out walking on the banks of the Allt Grànd.

After a while she became more social, and began to cultivate the friendship of one of the maids. At the end of a day which they had spent roaming around together, the lady of Balconie suggested one more walk, this time to the Allt Grànd.

They reached the chasm as the last rays of the setting sun were gleaming on the boughs of the birches and hazels that covered it. All beneath was dark as midnight. "Let us approach nearer the edge," says the lady, according to Miller.

"Not nearer, ma'am," says the terrified girl. "Strange sights have been seen in the gully after nightfall."

"How can you believe such stories? Come, I will show you a path which leads to the water. It is one of the finest places in the world; I have seen it a thousand times, and must see it again tonight!"

The lady is dragging the girl towards the black edge of the chasm when a strong masculine voice says from behind: "Suffer *me*, ma'am, to accompany you. Your surety, you may remember, must be a willing one."

It is a dark-looking man clad in green (the supernatural colour). He leads the lady down towards the abyss. As she reaches it she unties a bunch of household keys from her belt and flings them back towards the girl; they strike a granite boulder and sink into it as if it were molten wax, leaving an impression which can still be seen to this day.

The girl runs home and raises the alarm, but nothing is ever found of the lady of Balconie – just a shrub half uprooted, dangling from the brink, and a scrape on the green mould further down where she fell.

About ten years later, says Miller, a man called Donald is fishing in the Allt Grànd just below where it emerges from the chasm. He has an excellent catch. He picks out the best fish for his aged mother and hides them under a bush, then takes the rest home to his employer, a stingy old maid, who says: "Are you quite sure that this is the whole of your fishing? Where have you hid the rest?"

"Not one more, lady, could I find in the burn."

"O Donald!"

"No, lady, devil a one!"

It is one of those moral tales so beloved of the Victorians. When our liar and blasphemer goes back to the bush to fetch his mother's fish, they have all disappeared. "A faintly marked track, spangled with scales," says Miller, "remained to show that they had been dragged apparently by some animal along the grass in the direction of the chasm."

So Donald follows the track. It leads him along the floor of the gorge beside the rushing stream. Above him the light is almost blotted out by the twin precipices and the latticework of trees and bushes. Suddenly however the path terminates in an immense cavern, and he walks into it between two huge guard-dogs which look at him from under sleepy eyelids. Then he comes to an iron table and chair. On the table are his fish, along with a mass of leaven prepared for baking; in the chair is the lady of Balconie. "Donald!" she says. "What brings you here?"

“My fish,” says Donald. “But what keeps you here? Come away with me, and I will bring you home, and you will be lady of Balconie yet.”

“No, no, that day is past. I am fixed to this seat, and all the Highlands could not raise me from it.”

Donald looks at the iron chair. Its legs rise out of the solid rock as if growing from it. Beneath it a thick iron chain, red with rust, is fixed to a ring set in the floor, and its other end is joined to a ring round the lady’s ankle. “Why have you come here?” she says again. “You have denied the fish to your mistress in the name of my jailer, and his they have become. But how are you to escape?”

Donald looks at the dogs, which are now eyeing him keenly. “I maun first durk the twa tykes, I’m thinking.”

“No,” says the lady. “There is but one way. Be on the alert.”

To each of the dogs she flings a piece of leaven, and he passes safely between them to escape from the cave. He scrambles back down the path, and emerges from the chasm just as the evening is darkening into night. Since then no one has ever seen the Lady of Balconie.

Now if you recall my last article you will know why I have re-told Miller’s story.

*Gu’m b’e sid an sàr-ghaisgeach
A mharbh an cat ’san àllt ghràda . . .*

(“Now that was the true champion / Who killed the cat in the Allt Grànd . . .”) If ever a cat was seen in the chasm, I have little doubt who that cat would have been reputed to be. I don’t know if there was a variant of Hugh Miller’s story in which the lady’s jailer showed up for his dinner and was heroically dispatched by Donald.

Those lines of poetry predate Miller by over a hundred years, having been composed by Murdoch Matheson in 1721 as part of his satire on young Walter Ross, who died of wounds received at the battle of Àth nam Muileach on 2 October of that year. All I can say is: if there was such a variant, Matheson was comparing Walter to Donald; if there wasn’t, Matheson was simply informing us that Walter had once killed a pussy-cat in the Allt Grànd, and leaving our minds to boggle at the profound implications of this for the salvation of mankind. His ceilidh-house audience in Kintail wouldn’t have missed a trick . . .

Anyway, Matheson’s satire continues. As in my last article, I’ve retained John Mackenzie’s spelling in his book ‘An t-Aosdàna’ of 1844, which is intended to make fun of Easter Ross dialect – *glacu* for *glacadh*, and so on.

*Nach be sid an sàr-uasal
A chuir a chluas deth na Phulidh
Cas a dhìru nan àrd-bheinn
Bu a mhath làmh air a’ ghunna.
’S math a mhàrbhadh e ghiorraiseach
A dul timchioll an sgurrach
Eun beag nan cas mògach
S rodan ròmach a’ mhuillean,
Nach glacu cat!*

(“Wasn’t he the fine gentleman / Who took the ear off the turkey — / Foot for climbing the high hills, / Hand for handling a gun well; / He’d kill the hare skilfully / As it ran round the hilltop, / The little bird with splayed feet / And the hairy rat of the mill / That a cat couldn’t catch!”)

Hunting deer is the most noble of all activities, so poor Walter is mocked through his targets – turkeys, hares, little birds, rats. This is a *crossanachd*, in which each verse is followed by a bit of prose; the prose now picks up where the verse leaves off. *Ochan! e chuine! bha mi latha spaidsearachd air bial a’ chùmpaist, agus ciod a chunna mi tighinn a mach ach rodan ròmach a’ mhuillean! Thug mi sanus do’n duine, agus thug an duine tarrainn air an daga bhuidhe bh’air a bhroilleach, ach gonu urachair a dh’éisid e ach na seachd, gus an drobh e marbh air a bhialugh.*

Cha be thoirt dhachaigh gu theaghlach mhòir mhaiseach féin a rinn e ach a thoirt dhomhs’ agus do Sheanaid mo nighean a’s i na laidhe fo na Ghall-teasaich. Dh’ith i fheoil

agus dh'òl i shùgh, is cha deach 's cha théid i car is measa na sin a chuine!

A translation by Captain Alexander Matheson (in Edinburgh University Library) catches the flavour well. We begin with what seems to be a place-name, the Compass, presumably a hill in the Cromarty Firth area; does anyone know where, exactly? “Alas man! I was one day sauntering on the compass face. What have I seen coming out from the Mill but a hairy *rat*. I whispered the man and he drew his yellow pistol from his belt, and with the one shot he was dead at his feet.

“He did not take him home to his own great family but he give it to me and to Janet my daughter and her lying under the tipus fever. She eat his venison and drunk its juice and she did not ail worse since nor will she.”

What Captain Matheson translates as ‘and with the one shot he was dead at his feet’ looks to me more like ‘but not one shot did he hear but seven until he was dead at his feet’! And he misses a word – Walter’s ‘great family’ is actually his ‘great handsome family’. More importantly, though, this is a reversal of another important set of traditional motifs, what I once called on this page ‘the Highland welfare state’. It was incumbent on the Highland chief to look after the poor and the sick. How does Walter Ross, son of the Laird of Easter Fearn, look after the poor and the sick? By handing over a dead rat that he had filled seven times over with lead.

But ultimately the satire is against Easter Ross folk in general, considering that for the gift of a dead rat the father of this girl suffering from ‘Lowland fever’ sounds by no means ungrateful.

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