

Ewen of the Little Head

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scotland

Scottish

Advanced
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About three hundred years ago, Ewen Maclaine of Lochbuy, in the island of Mull, having been engaged in a quarrel with a neighbouring chief, a day was fixed for determining the affair by the sword. Lochbuy, before the day arrived, consulted a celebrated witch as to the result of the feud. The witch declared that if Lochbuy's wife should on the morning of that day give him and his men food unasked, he would be victorious, but if not, the result would be the reverse. This was a disheartening response for the unhappy votary, his wife being a noted shrew.

The fatal morning arrived, and the hour for meeting the enemy approached, but there appeared no symptoms of refreshment for Lochbuy and his men. At length the unfortunate man was compelled to ask his wife to supply them with food. She set down before them curds, but without spoons. When the husband inquired how they were to eat them, she replied they should assume the bills of hens. The men ate the curds, as well as they could, with their hands; but Lochbuy himself ate none. After behaving with the greatest bravery in the bloody conflict which ensued, he fell covered with wounds, leaving his wife to the execration of the people. She is still known in that district under the appellation of Corr-dhu, or the Black Crane.

But the miseries brought on the luckless Lochbuy by his wife did not end with his life, for he died fasting, and his ghost is frequently seen to this day riding the very horse on which he was mounted when he was killed. It was a small, but very neat and active pony, dun or mouse-coloured, to which the Laird was much attached, and on which he had ridden for many years before his death. Its appearance is as accurately described in the island

of Mull as any steed is at Newmarket. The prints of its shoes are discerned by connoisseurs, and the rattling of its curb is recognised in the darkest night. It is not particular with regard to roads, for it goes up hill and down dale with equal velocity. Its hard-fated rider still wears the same green cloak which covered him in his last battle; and he is particularly distinguished by the small size of his head, a peculiarity which, we suspect, the learned disciples of Spurzheim have never yet had the sagacity to discover as indicative of an extraordinary talent and incomparable perseverance in horsemanship.

It is now above three hundred years since Ewen-a-chin-vig (Anglice, Hugh of the Little Head) fell in the field of honour; but neither the vigour of the horse nor of the rider is yet diminished. His mournful duty has always been to attend the dying moments of every member of his own tribe, and to escort the departed spirit on its long and arduous journey. He has been seen in the remotest of the Hebrides; and he has found his way to Ireland on these occasions long before steam navigation was invented. About a century ago he took a fancy for a young man of his own race, and frequently did him the honour of placing him behind himself on horseback. He entered into conversation with him, and foretold many circumstances connected with the fate of his successors, which have undoubtedly since come to pass.

Many a long winter night have I listened to the feats of Ewen-a-chin-vig, the faithful and indefatigable guardian of his ancient family, in the hour of their last and greatest trial, affording an example worthy the imitation of every chief,—perhaps not beneath the notice of Glengarry himself.

About a dozen years since some symptoms of Ewen's decay gave very general alarm to his friends. He accosted one of his own people (indeed he never has been known to notice any other), and, shaking him cordially by the hand, he attempted to place him on the saddle behind him, but the uncourteous dog declined the honour. Ewen struggled hard, but the clown was a great, strong, clumsy fellow, and stuck to the earth with all his might. He candidly acknowledged, however, that his chief would have prevailed, had it not been for a birch-tree which stood by, and which he got within the fold of his left arm. The contest became very warm indeed, and the tree was certainly twisted like an osier, as thousands can testify who saw it as well as myself. At length, however, Ewen lost his seat for the first time, and the instant the pony found he was his own master, he set off with the fleetness of lightning. Ewen immediately pursued his steed, and the wearied rustic sped his way homeward. It was the general opinion that Ewen found considerable difficulty in catching the horse; but I am happy to learn that he has been lately seen riding the old mouse-coloured pony without the least change in

either the horse or the rider. Long may he continue to do so!

Those who from motives of piety or curiosity have visited the sacred island of Iona, must remember to have seen the guide point out the tomb of Ewen, with his figure on horseback, very elegantly sculptured in alto-relievo, and many of the above facts are on such occasions related.

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