

TRIAL OF GEILLIS DUNCAN

1590

Within the town of Tranent, in the Kingdom of Scotland, there dwells one David Seaton, who, being Deputy-Bailiff in the said town, had a maid called Geillis Duncan, who used secretly to absent and lie forth of her master's house every other night. This Geillis Duncan took in hand to help all such as were troubled or grieved with any kind of sickness or infirmity, and in short space did perform many matters most miraculous; which things, for as much as she began to do them upon a sudden, having never done the like before, made her master and others to be in great admiration, and wondered thereat. By means whereof, the said David Seaton had his maid in great suspicion that she did not those things by natural and lawful ways, but rather supposed it to be done by some extraordinary and unlawful means.

Whereupon, her master began to grow very inquisitive, and examined her which way and by what means she was able to perform matters of so great importance; whereat she gave him no answer. Nevertheless, her master, to the intent that he might the better try and find out the truth of the same, did, with the help of others, torment her with the torture of the pilliwinkles upon her fingers, which is a grievous torture; and binding or wrenching her head with a cord or rope, which is a most cruel torment also; yet would she not confess anything.

Whereupon, they suspecting that she had been marked by the Devil (as commonly witches are), made diligent search about her, and found the Enemy's mark to be in her fore crag, or fore part of her throat; which being found, she confessed that all her doings was done by the wicked allurements and enticements of the Devil, and that she did them by witchcraft.

After this, her confession, she was committed to prison, where she continued a season, where immediately she accused these persons following to be notorious witches, and caused them forthwith to be apprehended, one after another, viz.—Agnes Sampson, the eldest witch of them all, dwelling in Haddington; Agnes Tompson of Edinburgh; Doctor Fian, alias John Cuninghame, master of the school at Salt pans in Lothian, of whose life and strange acts you shall hear more largely in the end of this discourse. These were by the said Geillis Duncan accused, as also George Mott's wife, dwelling in Lothian; Robert Grierson, skipper; and Janet Blandilands; with the potter's wife of Seton; the smith at the Boggs Holdings, with innumerable others in those parts, and dwelling in those bounds aforesaid; of whom some are already executed, the rest remain in prison to receive the doom of judgment at the King's Majesty's will and pleasure.

The said Geillis Duncan also caused Elphame McClaran to be apprehended, who conspired and performed the death of her god-father, and who used her art upon a gentleman, being one of the Lords and Justices of the Session, for bearing good will to her daughter. She also caused to be apprehended one Barbara Naper, for bewitching to death Archibald, late Earl of Angus,¹ who languished to death by witchcraft, and yet the same was not suspected; but that he died of so strange a disease as the physicians knew not how to cure or remedy the same. But of all other the said witches, these two last before recited were reputed for as civil, honest women as any that dwelled within the city of Edinburgh before they were apprehended. Many other besides were taken dwelling in Leith who are detained in prison until His Majesty's further will and pleasure be known....

As touching the aforesaid Doctor Fian, alias John Cunningham, the examination of his acts since his apprehension declares the great subtlety of the Devil, and therefore makes things to appear the more miraculous; for being apprehended by the accusation of the said Geillis Duncan aforesaid, who confessed he was their Register and that there was not one man suffered to come to the Devil's readings but only he: the said Doctor was taken and imprisoned, and used with the accustomed pain provided for those offences, inflicted upon the rest, as is aforesaid. First, By thraving of his head with a rope, whereat he would confess nothing.

¹ Archibald Douglas (1555–1588), Earl of Angus (1558–1588)

Secondly, he was persuaded by fair means to confess his follies, but that would prevail as little. Lastly, he was put to the most severe and cruel pain in the world, called the boots; who, after he had received three strokes, being inquired if he would confess his damnable acts and wicked life, his tongue would not serve him to speak; in respect whereof the rest of the witches will to search his tongue, under which was found two pennies, thrust up into the head; whereupon the witches did say, "Now is the charm stinted," and shrewed that those charmed pennies were the cause he could not confess anything. Then was he immediately released of the boots, brought before the King, his confession was taken, and his own hand willingly set thereunto....

Thus, all the day this Doctor Fian continued very solitary, and seemed to have a care of his own soul, and would call upon God, showing himself penitent for his wicked life; nevertheless, the same night, he found such means that he stole the key of the prison door and chamber in which he was, which in the night he opened and fled away to the Salt pans, where he was always resident, and first apprehended. Of whose sudden departure, when the King's Majesty had intelligence, he presently commanded diligent inquiry to be made for his apprehension; and for the better effecting thereof, he sent public proclamations into all parts of his land to the same effect. By means of whose hot and hard pursuit he was again taken, and brought to prison; and then, being called before the King's Highness, he was re-examined, as well touching his departure as also touching all that had before happened. But this Doctor, notwithstanding that his own confession appears, remaining in record under his own hand writing, and the same thereunto fixed in the presence of the King's Majesty and sundry of his Council, yet did he utterly deny the same.

Whereupon the King's Majesty, perceiving his stubborn willfulness, conceived and imagined that in the time of his absence he had entered into new conference and league with the Devil, his master; and that he had been again newly marked; for the which he was narrowly searched, but it could not in any way be found. Yet for more trial of him, to make him confess, he was commanded to have a most strange torment, which was done in this manner following. His nails upon all his fingers were riven and pulled off with an instrument called in Scottish a Turkas, which in England we call a pair of pincers, and under every nail there was thrust in two needles over even up to the heads. At all which torments notwithstanding, the Doctor never shrunk any whit; neither would he then confess it the sooner for all the tortures inflicted upon him. Then was he, with all convenient speed, by commandment conveyed again to the torment of the boots, wherein he continued a long time and did abide so many blows in them that his legs were crushed and beaten together as small as might be; and the bones and flesh so bruised that the blood and marrow spouted forth in great abundance; whereby they were made unserviceable forever. And notwithstanding all these grievous pains and cruel torments, he would not confess anything; so deeply had the Devil entered into his heart that he utterly denied all that which he before avouched; and would say nothing thereunto but this, that what he had done and said before was only done and said for fear of pains which he had endured.

Upon great consideration, therefore, taken by the King's Majesty and his Council, as well for the due execution of justice upon such detestable malefactors, as also for example sake, to remain a terror to all others hereafter that shall attempt to deal in the like wicked and ungodly actions as witchcraft, sorcery, conjuration, and such like, the said Doctor Fian was soon after arraigned, condemned, and adjudged by the law to die, and then to be burned according to the law of that land provided in that behalf. Whereupon he was put into a cart, and being first strangled, he was immediately put into a great fire, being ready provided for that purpose, and there burned in the Castle Hill of Edinburgh, on a Saturday, in the end of January last past, 1591.