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The poems of Ossian

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poems of Ossian

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Cathlin of Clutha

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CATHLIN OF CLUTHA:

A

P O E M.

2 C 2

ARGUMENT.

AN address to Malvina, the daughter of Toscar. The poet relates the arrival of Cathlin in Selma, to solicit aid against Duth-carmor of Cluba, who had killed Cathmol, for the sake of his daughter Lanül. Fingal declining to make a choice among his heroes, who were all claiming the command of the expedition; they retired *each to his hill of ghosts*; to be determined by dreams. The spirit of Trenmor appears to Ossian and Oscar: they sail from the bay of Carmona, and, on the fourth day, appear off the valley of Rathcol, in Inis-huna, where Duth-carmor had fixed his residence. Ossian dispatches a bard to Duth-carmor to demand battle. Night comes on. The distress of Cathlin of Clutha. Ossian devolves the command on Oscar, who, according to the custom of the kings of Morven, before battle, retired to a neighbouring hill. Upon the coming on of day, the battle joins. Oscar and Duth-carmor meet. The latter falls. Oscar carries the mail and helmet of Duth-carmor to Cathlin, who had retired from the field. Cathlin is discovered to be the daughter of Cathmol, in disguise, who had been carried off by force by, and had made her escape from, Duth-carmor.

CATHLIN OF CLUTHA:

A POEM.

COME,^h thou beam that art lonely, from watching in the night! the squally winds are around thee, from all their echoing hills. Red, over my hundred streams, are the light-covered paths of the dead. They rejoice, on the eddying

^h The traditions which accompany this poem, inform us, that it went, of old, under the name of *Laoi-Oi-Lutha*; i. e. the *hymn of the maid of Lutha*. They pretend also to fix the time of its composition to the third year after the death of Fingal; that is, during the expedition of Fergus the son of Fingal, to the banks of *Visca-duthon*. In support of this opinion, the Highland senachies have prefixed to this poem, an address of Ossian, to Congal the young son of Fergus, which I have rejected, as having no manner of connection with the rest of the piece. It has poetical merit; and, probably, it was the opening of one of Ossian's other poems, though the bards injudiciously transferred it to the piece now before us.

“ Congal, son of Fergus of Durath, thou light between thy locks, ascend to the rock of Selma, to the oak of the breaker of shields. Look over the bosom of night, it is streaked with the red paths of the dead: look on the night of ghosts, and kindle, O Congal! thy soul. Be not, like the moon on a

winds, in the season of night. Dwells there no joy in song, white hand of the harps of Lutha? Awake the voice of the string; roll my soul to me. It is a stream that has failed. Malvina, pour the song.

I hear thee, from thy darkness, in Selma, thou that watchest, lonely, by night! Why didst thou withhold the song, from Ossian's failing soul? As the falling brook to the ear of the hunter, descending from his storm-covered hill; in a sun-beam rolls the echoing stream; he hears, and shakes his dewy locks: such is the voice of Lutha, to the friend of the spirits of heroes. My swelling bosom beats high. I look back on the days that are past. Come, thou beam that art lonely, from watching in the night!

In the echoing bay of Carmona¹ we saw, one day, the bounding ship. On high, hung a

stream, lonely in the midst of clouds: darkness closes around it; and the beam departs. Depart not, son of Fergus! ere thou markest the field with thy sword. Ascend to the rock of Selma; to the oak of the breaker of shields."

¹ Car-mona, *bay of the dark-brown hills*, an arm of the sea, in the neighbourhood of Selma. In this paragraph are mentioned the signals presented to Fingal, by those who came to demand his aid. The suppliants held, in one hand, a shield covered with blood, and, in the other, a broken spear; the first a symbol of the death of their friends, the last an emblem of their own helpless situation. If the king chose to grant

broken shield; it was marked with wandering blood. Forward came a youth, in arms, and stretched his pointless spear. Long, over his tearful eyes, hung loose his disordered locks. Fingal gave the shell of kings. The words of the stranger arose. "In his hall lies Cathmol of Clutha, by the winding of his own dark streams. Duth-carmor saw white-bosomed Lanul,^k and pierced her father's side. In the

succours, which generally was the case, he reached to them *the shell of feasts*, as a token of his hospitality and friendly intentions towards them.

It may not be disagreeable to the reader to lay here before him the ceremony of the *Cran-tara*, which was of a similar nature, and, till very lately, used in the Highlands. When the news of an enemy came to the residence of a chief, he immediately killed a goat with his own sword, dipped the end of an half-burnt piece of wood in the blood, and gave it to one of his servants, to be carried to the next hamlet. From hamlet to hamlet this *tessera* was carried with the utmost expedition, and, in the space of a few hours, the whole clan were in arms, and convened in an appointed place; the name of which was the only word that accompanied the delivery of the *Cran-tara*. This symbol was the manifesto of the chief, by which he threatened fire and sword to those of his clan, that did not immediately appear at his standard.

^k Lanul, *full-eyed*, a surname which, according to tradition, was bestowed on the daughter of Cathmol, on account of her beauty; this tradition, however, may have been founded on that partiality which the bards have shewn to *Cathlin of Clutha*; for, according to them, *no falsehood could dwell in the soul of the lovely*.

rushy desert were my steps. He fled in the season of night. Give thine aid to Cathlin, to revenge his father. I sought thee not as a beam, in a land of clouds. Thou, like the sun, art known, king of echoing Selma!"

Selma's king looked around. In his presence, we rose in arms. But who should lift the shield? for all had claimed the war. The night came down; we strode, in silence, each to his hill of ghosts; that spirits might descend, in our dreams, to mark us for the field. We struck the shield of the dead: we raised the hum of songs. We thrice called the ghosts of our fathers. We laid us down in dreams. Tremor came, before mine eyes, the tall form of other years! His blue hosts were behind him, in half-distinguished rows. Scarce seen is their strife in mist, or their stretching forward to deaths. I listened; but no sound was there. The forms were empty wind!

I started from the dream of ghosts. On a sudden blast flew my whistling hair. Low-sounding, in the oak, is the departure of the dead. I took my shield from its bough. Onward came the rattling of steel. It was ¹Oscar

¹ Oscar is here called *Oscar of Lego*, from his mother being the daughter of Branno, a powerful chief on the banks of that lake. It is remarkable that Ossian addresses no poem

of Lego. He had seen his fathers. "As rushes forth the blast, on the bosom of whitening waves; so careless shall my course be, through ocean, to the dwelling of foes. I have seen the dead, my father! My beating soul is high! My fame is bright before me, like the streak of light on a cloud, when the broad sun comes forth, red traveller of the sky!"

"Grandson of Branno," I said, "not Oscar alone shall meet the foe. I rush forward, through ocean, to the woody dwelling of heroes. Let us contend, my son, like eagles, from one rock; when they lift their broad wings, against the stream of winds." We raised our sails in Carmona. From three ships, they marked my shield on the wave, as I looked on nightly Ton-thena,^m red traveller between the clouds. Four days came the breeze abroad.

to Malvina, in which her lover Oscar was not one of the principal actors. His attention to her, after the death of his son, shews that delicacy of sentiment is not confined, as some fondly imagine, to our own polished times.

^m Ton-thena, *fire of the wave*, was the remarkable star mentioned in the seventh book of Temora, which directed the course of Larthon to Ireland. It seems to have been well known to those who sailed on that sea which divides Ireland from South-Britain. As the course of Ossian was along the coast of Inis-huna, he mentions, with propriety, that star which directed the voyage of the colony from that country to Ireland.

Lumon came forward in mist. In winds were its hundred groves. Sun-beams marked, at times, its brown side. White, leapt the foamy streams, from all its echoing rocks.

A green field, in the bosom of hills, winds silent with its own blue stream. Here, midst the waving of oaks, were the dwellings of kings of old. But silence, for many dark-brown years, had settled in grassy Rathcol;ⁿ for the race of heroes had failed, along the pleasant vale. Duth-carmor was here, with his people, dark rider of the wave. Ton-thena had hid her head in the sky. He bound his white-bosomed sails. His course is on the hills of Rath-col, to the seats of roes. We came. I sent the bard, with songs, to call the foe to fight. Duth-carmor heard him, with joy. The king's soul was like a beam of fire; a beam of fire, marked with smoak, rushing, varied, through the bosom of night. The deeds of Duth-carmor were dark, though his arm was strong.

ⁿ Rath-col, *woody field*, does not appear to have been the residence of Duth-carmor: he seems rather to have been forced thither by a storm; at least I should think that to be the meaning of the poet, from his expression, that *Ton-thena had hid her head*, and that *he bound his white-bosomed sails*; which is as much as to say, that the weather was stormy, and that Duth-carmor put in to the bay of Rath-col for shelter.

Night came, with the gathering of clouds.
By the beam of the oak we sat down. At a
distance stood Cathlin of Clutha. I saw the
changeful^o soul of the stranger. As shadows
fly over the field of grass, so various is Cathlin's
cheek. It was fair, within locks, that rose on
Rath-col's wind. I did not rush, amidst his
soul, with my words. I bade the song to rise.

"Oscar of Lego," I said, "be thine the
secret hill,^p to-night. Strike the shield, like
Morven's kings. With day, thou shalt lead in

^o From this circumstance, succeeding bards feigned that Cathlin, who is here in the disguise of a young warrior, had fallen in love with Duth-carmor at a feast, to which he had been invited by her father. Her love was converted into detestation for him, after he had murdered her father. But *as those rainbows of heaven are changeful*, say my authors, speaking of women, she felt the return of her former passion, upon the approach of Duth-carmor's danger. I myself, who think more favourably of the sex, must attribute the agitation of Cathlin's mind to her extreme sensibility to the injuries done her by Duth-carmor: and this opinion is favoured by the sequel of the story.

^p This passage alludes to the well-known custom among the ancient kings of Scotland, to retire from their army on the night preceding a battle. The story which Ossian introduces in the next paragraph, concerns the fall of the Druids. It is said in many old poems, that the Druids, in the extremity of their affairs, had solicited and obtained aid from Scandinaviā. Among the auxiliaries there came many pretended magicians, which circumstance Ossian alludes to, in his de-

war. From my rock, I shall see thee, Oscar, a dreadful form ascending in fight, like the appearance of ghosts, amidst the storms they raise. Why should mine eyes return to the dim times of old, ere yet the song had bursted forth, like the sudden rising of winds? But the years that are past, are marked with mighty deeds. As the nightly rider of waves looks up to Ton-thena of beams; so let us turn our eyes to Trenmor, the father of kings.

“ Wide, in Caracha’s echoing field, Carmal had poured his tribes. They were a dark ridge of waves. The grey-haired bards were like moving foam on their face. They kindled the strife around, with their red-rolling eyes. Nor alone were the dwellers of rocks; a son of Loda was there; a voice, in his own dark land, to call the ghosts from high. On his hill, he had dwelt, in Lochlin, in the midst of a leafless grove. Five stones lifted, near, their heads. Loud roared his rushing stream. He often raised his voice to the winds, when meteors marked their nightly wings; when the dark-robed moon was rolled behind her hill. Nor unheard of ghosts was he! They came with the

scription of the *son of Loda*. Magic and incantation could not, however, prevail; for Trenmor, assisted by the valour of his son Trathal, entirely broke the power of the Druids.

sound of eagle wings. They turned battle, in fields, before the kings of men.

“ But Trenmor they turned not from battle. He drew forward that troubled war; in its dark skirt was Trathal, like a rising light. It was dark; and Loda's son poured forth his signs, on night. The feeble were not before thee, son of other lands!^a Then rose the strife of kings, about the hill of night; but it was soft as two summer gales, shaking their light wings, on a lake. Trenmor yielded to his son; for the fame of the king had been heard. Trathal came forth before his father, and the foes failed, in echoing Caracha. The years that are past, my son, are marked with mighty deeds.”^r

In clouds rose the eastern light. The foe came forth in arms. The strife is mixed on Rath-col, like the roar of streams. Behold the contending of kings! They meet beside the oak. In gleams of steel the dark forms are lost; such is the meeting of meteors, in a vale by night:

^a Trenmor and Trathal. Ossian introduced this episode, as an example to his son, from ancient times.

^r Those who deliver down this poem in tradition, lament that there is a great part of it lost. In particular they regret the loss of an episode, which was here introduced, with the sequel of the story of Carmal and his Druids. Their attachment to it was founded on the descriptions of magical enchantments which it contained.

red light is scattered round, and men foresee the storm! Duth-carmor is low in blood! The son of Ossian overcame! Not harmless in battle was he, Malvina, hand of harps!

Nor, in the field, were the steps of Cathlin. The stranger stood by a secret stream, where the foam of Rath-col skirted the mossy stones. Above, bends the branchy birch, and strews its leaves on wind. The inverted spear of Cathlin touched, at times, the stream. Oscar brought Duth-carmor's mail: his helmet, with its eagle wing. He placed them before the stranger, and his words were heard. "The foes of thy father have failed. They are laid in the field of ghosts. Renown returns to Morven, like a rising wind. Why art thou dark, chief of Clutha? Is there cause for grief?"

"Son of Ossian of harps, my soul is darkly sad. I behold the arms of Cathmol, which he raised in war. Take the mail of Cathlin, place it high in Selma's hall; that thou mayst remember the hapless in thy distant land." From white breasts descended the mail. It was the race of kings; the soft-handed daughter of Cathmol, at the streams of Clutha! Duth-carmor saw her bright in the hall; he had come, by night, to Clutha. Cathmol met him, in battle, but the hero fell. Three days dwelt the

foe, with the maid. On the fourth she fled in arms. She remembered the race of kings, and felt her bursting soul!

Why, maid of Toscar of Lutha, should I tell how Cathlin failed? Her tomb is at rushy Lumon, in a distant land. Near it were the steps of Sul-malla, in the days of grief. She raised the song, for the daughter of strangers, and touched the mournful harp.

Come, from the watching of night, Malvina, lonely beam!

for with the said - On the fourth she had in
some - she remembered the case of kings and
let her burning soul

Why mind - I wish of latter should I tell
how Cathin - her bond is at night in
and in a distant land - Now it were the steps
of - she raised
the song for the daughter of strangers and
breathed the beautiful name

Come from the waters of night -

THE MARRIAGE OF THE KING

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