

CHAPTER V

LIFE AT THE WELLS.

MY last note of Johnny Gibb's excursion to the Wells left Johnny and his good mare Jess plodding on their way homeward. They reached Gushetneuk in due time, safe and sound; and there we shall leave them meantime, while I describe shortly the habits of the bather and water-drinker.

The daily round was uniform and systematic. You were expected to drink the salt water as an aperient once in two days at least, and to bathe every day. The water was drunk in the morning—the patients helping themselves out of the Moray Firth at such spots as they found most convenient, and then walking along the bare, bluff beach to the valley of Tarlair, where they supplemented the salt water by drinking of the mineral stream that discharged itself at the little well-house, covered with several large Caithness flags, that stood there. There was a little house, too, at the foot of the north bank, where a drop of whisky could be got somehow in cases of emergency, as when the patient got hoven with the liberal libations of salt water previously swallowed, or where the taste lay strongly in that direction; but this was no part of the recognised regimen.

Then about midday was the season for bathing. The women—perhaps I should say ladies—bathed at the part nearest the town, and the men farther eastward; and, on the whole, very excellent and safe bathing ground it is;

with, I rather think, the addition of baths built for public accommodation since the date of which I write. But I speak of the old fashion of things. Bathing served to whet the appetite for dinner, as water-drinking may be supposed to have whetted the appetite for breakfast! and the former important meal over, the bathers spent the latter part of the day in pleasure; daundering about the quays, observing the operations going on there amongst the gallant tars and hardy fishermen, at the risk of having an uncomplimentary designation referring to their present mode of life occasionally applied to them; sauntering out to the hill of Doune to watch the ceaseless breakers on the bar of Banff, and wonder how the waters of the Deveron ever managed to make their way into the sea through the sandy deposits that all but shut up its mouth; or perhaps an excursion would be undertaken to Banff or beyond it: and, in those days everybody made a specialty of visiting Duff House, wandering about the fine grounds at pleasure, and, if ill luck forbade it not, contriving to get some good-natured domestic to guide them over the interior of that noble mansion.

The circumstances being as I have said, Widow Will set herself to find out a prudent and experienced person of the male sex to whose care she might entrust Jock, her son, for, at any rate, the bathing part of the course.

“An’ deed tat ’ll no be ill to get,” quoth Mrs. M’Craw, “for there ’s a vera discreet, weel-livin’ man fae the parish o’ Marnoch bidin at my gweedbreeder’s sister’s, near the Buchan toll yett.”

“Eh, but aw cudna think o’ tribblin a body that kens nae mair aboot me an’ mine nor the man o’ France,” said the widow.

“Och, an’ he ’ll be muckle waur o’ tat! Maister Saun’ers ’ll no be so easy fash’t, I ’se warran. For a won’er he ’ll be in for a crack wi’ Donal’, an’ we ’se see.”

“He ’s an acquaintens o’ your goodman’s, than?”

“Fat ither,” said Mrs. M’Craw. “An’ a weel-leern’t man he is. There ’ll be few as I’ve seen cud haud the can’le to Donal’ at argifyin aboot Kirk maitters; but I

b'lieve ye he'll no loup the stank so easy wi' Maister Saun'ers."

"Na, sirs!" sagely observed Widow Will.

"An' aw b'lieve he's here o' ta vera word," added the good woman, as a ruddy-cheeked, well-conditioned man of middle age, dressed in a comfortable suit of gray, and a cloth cap of large dimensions on his head, passed the window and entered. The stranger, who proved to be in reality Maister Saun'ers from Marnoch, at once agreed to take charge of Jock, both for water-drinking and dookin; and, finding that his friend Donald had crept out to the garden to enjoy the soft air of a fine summer evening, and feel the declining beams of that sun which he had long ceased to see, he went in search of him; no doubt to hold high debate on some of their favourite topics, in preference to wasting his time with mere women's chatter.

And thus Jock was entrusted to the responsible care of the gentleman from Marnoch.

Maister Saun'ers, as the Celtic landlady had called him, had enjoined on the lad the necessity of being out of bed betimes to accompany him. By six o'clock next morning, accordingly, the two were stalking leisurely along the beach on the east side of the town. At a convenient point they picked their steps down, as other people of both sexes were doing, to where the tide was washing fresh and clear into sundry irregular rocky pools. At the margin of one of these Jock's guide, philosopher, and friend, stooped down, filled a tin jug of the salt water, and then, standing bolt upright, solemnly drank off the whole quantity. The jug contained a pint, ample measure; and when Maister Saun'ers had emptied it, he observed to Jock—"Noo, laddie, I'm easy physicket. I'll need no more; but an ordinar' dose for a stoot healthy man's aboot half as muckle again as I've ta'en. Here noo, I'll full the juggie to you." And, suiting the action to the word, he filled the tin jug and presented it to Jock, who lifted the vessel to his head with a dubious and tardy sort of movement.

"Drink hardy, noo!" cried Maister Saun'ers, as Jock

made a gruesome face, and threatened to withdraw the jug from his lips.

He made a fresh attempt, but could get no farther with the process of drinking.

“Hoot, toot, laddie, that ’ll never do. That wud hardly be aneuch for a sookin bairn.”

The jug was hardly half emptied.

“But it’s terrible coorse,” pleaded Jock, with a piteous and imploring look.

“Coorse! awa’ wi’ ye, min! Gweed, clean saut water. Ye sud gae at it hardier, an’ ye wud never think about the taste o’ t. Come noo!”

Jock made another and not much more successful attempt.

“Hoot, min! Dinna spull the gweed, clean, halesome water—skowff’t oot!”

“Weel, but aw canna—it ’ll gar me spue,” said Jock in a tone approaching the greetin.

“An’ altho’, fat maitter?” argued his more experienced friend; “that ’ll help to redd your stamack, at ony rate. Lat me see ye tak’ jist ae ither gweed waucht o’ t, and syne we ’se be deein for a day till we see. But min’ ye it’s nae jeesty to tak’ owre little—speeshally to begin wi’.”

Jock made a portentous and demonstrative gulp, which, I fear, had more show than effect, so far as swallowing the remaining contents of the tin jug was concerned. However, he was reluctantly allowed to spill the remainder.

“Come awa’ noo, an’ pluck a gweed han’fu o’ caller dilse, an’ tak’ a bite o’ them—they’re a prime thing for the constitution,” continued Jock Will’s new guardian.

This order was more grateful than the former had been, and Jock floundered over the slippery tide-washed boulders with alacrity, to gather dulse. “Tak’ the shally anes aye fan ye can get them noo,” said Maister Saun’ers, as Jock came up towards him with a bundle of rather rank-looking material. “They’re a vera halesome thing ta’en wi’ the water. Leuk at that noo!” And he exhibited a bunch of short, crisp dulse, powdered about the root ends with clusters

of tiny shells of the mussel species. "That's the richt thing;" and Maister Saun'ers, after dipping the dulse afresh in a little briny pool, swung them into his mouth. As the shells cracked and crunched away between his excellent grinders, he added, "That shalls has a poo'erfu effeck o' the stamack. We'll awa' roon to Tarlair noo."

When they had walked on to Tarlair, Jock was exhorted to drink as much of the mineral water as he could be persuaded to have thirst for, and to "gyang about plenty," but to "tak' care an' keep awa' fae the edges o' that oncanny banks."

The scene at Tarlair was pretty much what I daresay it often was. About the Well-house were gathered a cluster of visitors, male and female, of various ages, mostly country people, but including a couple of well-dressed sailors, who had evidently been out the night previous on the spree, and had come there to shake off the effects of their debauch, if one might judge from the disjointed exclamations of one of them, who lay stretched at full length on his face on a long stone seat, occasionally complaining of the physical discomfort he was suffering, cursing the day of his return to Macduff, and cursing himself as an unmitigated fool. At a little distance along the valley was a group of sturdy water-drinkers of the male sex, with their coats off, exercising themselves at putting the stone; others, male and female, were to be encountered walking hither and thither, or returning to the Well for another drink; and some lay sluggishly on the brow of the steep grassy banks that shut in Tarlair on the landward side, enjoying the pleasant morning sun, watching any craft that might happen to be in view, or trying to make out as much as they could of the blue hills of Caithness across the Firth. And thus it went on till the several water-drinkers found themselves ready to go home to breakfast.

Of Jock Will's bathing experiences, I daresay, I need say nothing. His guardian was admitted by his compeers to be himself a "hardy dooker," a quality in which, notwithstanding his utmost exhortations, Jock continued to be

rather deficient, I fear. The first gluff of the cold water, when it crept up on his person, was a trial which his nerves could hardly withstand; and the oft-repeated injunction to "plype doon fan the jaw's coming" embodied a lesson which Jock invariably shrank from, unless the iron grasp of his preceptor happened to be on his shoulder. Truth to say, Jock had always the feeling that the reflux of the wave would carry him away into some deep unfathomed cave of the Moray Firth. Nevertheless, there are hundreds of nice convenient baylets about the Macduff bathing ground, where even the most inexperienced may safely take a dip; and at any rate no harm came to Jock Will during the period of his stay at the Wells.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. BIRSE OF CLINKSTYLE.

IN the quiet region about Gushetneuk, comparatively unimportant events attracted no inconsiderable amount of public attention; and furnished topics of news that would circulate for a wonderful length of time. And thus the annual visit of Johnny Gibb's family to the Wells was naturally known to the neighbourhood, and formed the topic of conversation for the time being. It was also a means of getting a certain amount of useful news direct from "the Shore."

And so it came about that, on the evening after his return from Macduff alone, Johnny had a visit from his neighbour, Peter Birse, the farmer of Clinkstyle. Peter's errand was partly one of friendship, and partly one of business. But here it will be proper shortly to define, somewhat more exactly, who Mr. Peter Birse was.

Clinkstyle, next to Mains of Yawal, which lay on the west as it did on the east side of the road, and a little nearer to the Kirktown of Pyketillim, was the largest farm in the vicinity. The tenant of Clinkstyle kept two pairs of horses and a stout shalt, or orra beast, which "ran in the gig," the latter being a recently-added voucher for the respectability of Peter Birse, or rather, I should say, the respectability of his wife. She was a managing woman, Mrs. Birse, a very managing woman; extremely desirous of being accounted "genteel;" moreover, for thrift none in the parish could beat her. Perhaps it would be wrong to

say that she boasted of her thrift; but at any rate the unapproachable sums she realised off her cows every summer in the shape of butter and cheese, in addition to fostering the calves, were no secret. Yet it was understood that Mr. Andrew Langchafts, the new merchant at the Kirktown, who, with the intention of distancing all his rivals in the district, and securing the lion's share of the custom going, had prominently avowed his intention of giving the highest prices for butter and eggs, did not altogether admire her mode of transacting business. When the sturdy sunburnt servant damsel from Clinkstyle, in check apron and calico wrapper, came to his shop deeply freighted with a basket of butter weighing thirty-six pounds, for which he paid at the rate of eightpence a pound—(a halfpenny in excess of the other shops)—and when Mrs. Birse, by her messenger, bought in return “an unce o' spice, a pennyworth o' whitet broons, half a peck o' saut, an' a stane o' whitenin,” one can easily imagine that the merchant did not deem it encouraging. And it would be difficult to believe that he could feel greatly flattered when the girl, having got her errands and her goodly nugget of shillings in her hand, added, “The mistress bad's seek some preens fae ye. Ye gyauna's neen last—she says she never saw a merchant't cudna afford to gie's customers preens.”

“Well,” quoth Andrew Langchafts, gravely, “I have really no margin—I'm afraid I'll have loss, for the butter's declining.”

“That's fat she said at ony rate,” answered the damsel; “an' she said she expeckit there wud be some ootgang o' the butter, forbye't ye sud say't it's scrimp wecht.”

“I tell you, young woman, if I press the buttermilk out of each of these lumps, I would lack well nigh a pound avoirdupois.”

“Weel, weel, ye better come awa' wi' oor preens at ony rate, an' lat's be gyaun, or I'll get up my fit for bidin sae lang.”

The merchant, a stiff gousty-lookin' stock, who had but recently begun business in the shop at Pyketillim, whose

experience heretofore had, it was understood, been mainly in a tolerably populous back street in Aberdeen, and who was thus not quite conversant with the peculiarities of thrifty country life, had no help for it but comply with the request.

Mrs. Birse had a family of three sons and one daughter, whose ages ran from ten to seventeen, and she had already begun to lay plans for their future establishment in life. The eldest son, Peter junior, was destined to succeed his father as farmer of Clinkstyle; the second, Rob, must be provided with a farm as soon as he was ready for it; the youngest, Benjamin, was to get leernin: and the daughter would, of course, be married off in due season to the best advantage.

Well, as I have said, Peter Birse called at Gushetneuk on the gloamin after Johnny Gibb's return. Along with him came his collie dog, and his eldest son; and Peter's conversation took somewhat of this turn—

“Weel, Gushets, ye've wun redd o' the goodwife noo, hae ye?”

“I' the meantime, Clinkies—mithna ye try something o' the kin' to get on the breeks yersel' for a fyou days, jist for a cheenge?”

Clinkies did not altogether relish the retort seemingly, so he gave up the jocular vein and continued—

“Weel, foo's the crap leukin doon the wye o' Turra?”

“Ou brawly; bits o' the corn wud be neen waur o' a gweed shoer, but the feck o' 't's settin' for a gey fair crappie.”

“D'ye think that, though, Gushets?—it's blate, blate, a hantle o' 't, hereabout.”

“Ou ay, ye've a gey puckle i' the laft, an' twa 'r three aul' rucks to thrash oot, Peter; but I wudna advise you to keep up, expeckin an ondeemas price for't—the corn's comin' doon,” said Johnny.

“Eh, man, is't?” exclaimed Peter Birse. “An' fat are they gi'ein at the Shore?”

“Four-an'-twenty for gweed, weel-colour't stuff; an'



gettin' slack at that," said Johnny Gibb. "There's sic cairns o' 't pourin' in sin' the neep seed was finish't."

Peter Birse senior could scarcely conceal his chagrin at this announcement, the truth being that he had been sent over by Mrs. Birse to find out from Johnny what was being paid for the quarter of oats at Macduff; and also what was being charged for the boll of lime and coals, the object of these inquiries being to obtain the necessary data for deciding whether it would be prudent and advantageous to send off a couple of cart-loads of grain from Clinkstyle, for sale at that port, and to bring the carts home laden with either of the articles just named.

"An' divnin ye think four-an'-twenty a terrible little simmer price, Gushets?" pleaded Peter.

"'Deed, Peter, it's aboot daar aneuch for them that has't to buy. Dinna ye be keepin' up, lippenin till a muckle price afore hairst,—ye may get a less, an nae blessin' wi' 't."

"Aweel, a' the toosht about our toon 'll mak' little odds. We wusna jist seer gin we wud thrash oot the bit huickie or twa 't we hae, or no. Is there mony fowk at the Walls this sizzon?"

"Muckle aboot the ordinar'."

"There 'll be mair neist month, I daursay,—the water winna be at its strength till near aboot Lammas, ye ken. Fan div ye gae doon again to fesh hame the goodwife?"

"This day ouk."

"An' ye 'll tak' a day or twa o' the water yersel', like?"

"Fae Wednesday till Saturday lickly,—we 'll come hame on Saturday."

"Jist that. They 'll be begun to the herrin' gin than?"

"I kenna."

"Sawna ye nae appearance o' the fishers gettin the muckle boats hurl't doon to the water aff o' the chingle, or the nets rankit oot?"

"Weel, I really tyeuk little notice, Peter; but I 'se keep my een apen fan I gae back."

“Jist that,” added Peter. “It’s a sturrin place Macduff: speeshally about the time o’ the herrin’.”

Peter had an object in all the questions he had put. He had got a commission of inquiry from his spouse, and his business when he had fulfilled it was to go home and report to her. When he had done so faithfully, Mrs. Birse pronounced, almost with indignation, against the idea of selling corn at twenty-four shillings a quarter; and more than hinted that if Johnny Gibb’s granary and stackyard had not been pretty well emptied, he would not have been so communicative of the sort of advice he had tendered to the goodman of Clinkstyle. “Man, ye’re a saft breet; cudna ye’a speer’t fat he wad tak’ for a dizzen o’ quarters oot o’ the bing on *his* barn laft?” added Mrs. Birse, in the way of personal compliment to Peter; and having delivered herself of her sentiments on the grain question, she next heard Mr. Birse’s statement about the general run of things at Macduff, and the fishing in particular.

The truth was, Mrs. Birse contemplated troubling Johnny Gibb with a small order when he returned to the seaport just named to fetch home his own. And on the evening before Johnny set forth on that journey, the lad Rob Birse was entrusted with the delivery of this order to the person who was to be honoured with its execution. Rob came across to Gushetneuk accordingly, and, having found Johnny, discharged his trust in these words—

“My mither bad’s tell ye—gin ye wad be good aneuch—fan ye gang to Macduff, to fesh hame till her fan yer comin back twa dizzen o’ fresh herrin’. An’ gin there binna herrin’, gin ye cud get a gweed chape skate till her, an’ twa-three bawbee partans.”

“An’ is that a’, laddie—has she nae ither bits o’ erran’s?” asked Johnny, with a slight tinge of sarcasm, which the youthful Birse hardly appreciated.

“No, aw dinna think it,” answered the lad. “She was gyaun to bid ye fesh half-a-gallon o’ dog-oil till her, but she hedna a pig teem that wud haud it.”

During these eight days of temporary celibacy, while

his wife was absent at the Wells, Johnny Gibb persisted in taking most of his meals with his three servants. He partook along with Tam Meerison and the loon of whatever Jinse Deans saw fit to make ready; and when Jinse ventured to ask his advice about some part of her household work, Johnny got something very like crusty, and said he "kent nedder aucht nor ocht about it;" and that if she "didna ken better aboot hoosewifeskip" than he did, she "wad mak' a peer bargain" to the man that got her; at which Jinse giggled, tossed her head slightly, and professed that there "was fyoun seekin' 'er."

But Jinse was a competent servant as well as a gate-farrin damsel; and, though she had consulted Johnny once out of deference to him, she was quite capable of discharging her household duties satisfactorily without special guidance; and, in point of fact, she did so discharge them at this time, in so far as both Johnny and the other members of the household were concerned.