CHAPTER XIX.

THE PACKMAN AND THE SWEETIEWIFE.

"Here country Jock, in bonnet blue,
An' eke his Sunday's claes on,
Rins after Meg wi' roklay new,
An' sappy kisses lays on;
She'll tauntin' say, 'Ye silly coof,
Be o' ye're gab mair sparin';'
He'll tak' the hint, and criesh her loof
Wi' what will buy her fairin',
Tae chow that day."

MANY of the old institutions that flourished in the North sixty years ago are now only a semblance of what they were. Begging, at one time a flourishing institution, is prohibited by law. The packman, like the badger and the polecat, that used to be plentiful in our straths and glens, is all but extinct. A nondescript representation of him occasionally knocks at our door and spreads out his wares, but he has about as much similarity to the chapman of sixty years ago as a monkey has to a man. The packmen of those days were, in general, gentlemen. As in all professions, there were degrees of difference; but the real aristocrat of the trade never laid his pack open at your door. No, even "the kitchen end" was seldom good enough to spread out his wares in; he was generally invited "ben the hoose." The following lines were written on a well-known packman. He was the first man ever seen in our parish with a tall white hat. "John the Gentleman's" visit was an event. When he opened his pack and laid out his goods, the women folk gazed at them in speechless admiration. The graceful manner in which he lifted a shawl or gown-piece and hung it over his arm showed his skill in high art.

Spruce an' trig, wi' weel combed wig,
His ruffled sark like snaw;
A velvet vest, wi' rolling breast,
A watch chain lang an' sma';
A big gold seal, that told a tale
Of riches in galore,
Large an' roon', the seal hung doon,
Like a knocker on a door.

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His muckle pack, as big's a sack,
He from his shoulders threw;
From his coat-tail, as big's a sail,
A napkin lang he drew,
Then wiped his face, wi' jaunty grace,
And stroked his shaven beard;
Then cocked his wig, as deft and trig
As ony landed laird.

Then wi' a bang his ellwand lang
He on the table threw,
And said, "Guidwife, if siller's rife,
I'll sell ye something new:
A dress or shawl for kirk or ball
You can ha'e cheap the day;
The like o' them, I tell ye, mem,
Has never come this way.

"With your twa een ye ne'er ha'e seen
Sic ribbons broad and narrow;
Wi' hazel rung I will be dung
If ye can fin' their marrow.
'Tween you an' me, guidwife, ye see,
They're smuggled a' frae France;
Ye'll ha'e them cheap, now tak' the heap,
An' dinna lose the chance.

"Look now at these: the combs will please
That smiling lassie there;
They're tortoiseshell, and thin's a spill,
Fit for a lady's hair.
Here's something Scotch, this siller broach,
A thistle is its form;
With half an e'e ye'll brawly see
The stone's a Cairngorm."

The huxter, or sweetiewife, is a modern institution compared to the pedlar. The formation of towns and villages in the North dealt a deathblow to the packman, but the sweetiewife found in them her best customers. The fairs that were periodically held in them brought a golden harvest to her. Every girl and boy in the parish found their way to the feeing market to spend their bawbees in "fairin's." In a remote rural parish the sight of the sweetiewife's stall yielded to them a pleasure that we, with our cheap railway trips, annual holidays, cattle shows, and public gatherings of various kinds, can form no idea of. Sometimes the scenes witnessed at fairs and feeing markets were of a rather rude and boisterous description, and shocked the sensibilities of the sober and well-conducted; but it is not to be supposed that the ploughmen who upon such occasions got "roarin' fou" were anything but sober, well-conducted men in general. Let us consider

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how monotonous the uneventful life of a ploughman was in those days. Twice a year he was free for the greater part of one day. At the feeing market he met his old fellow-servants, and for old acquaintance sake they had a dram together. Jane and Betty lent their fascinations to the occasion, and went in to "taste wi' them" in a tent filled with lads and lasses, ready to laugh at the most stale jokes. Long before the day was ended many of the ploughmen made fools of themselves in various ways. The lasses never failed to be an element of contention and danger. Were they not in general the cause of the fights that took place at feeing markets? Sandy "cleeked" hold of a lass that was escorted through the fair by Tam, and tried to pull her from the arm of her lover. In the melee her dress was torn and her "fairin's" strewn upon the ground. In a moment Tam and Sandy closed in deadly combat. She that was the cause of the fight tried in vain to separate them. Her screams brought a crowd around, and the combatants were dragged apart, bleeding, and their clothes soiled and torn. They vowed deadly vengeance against each other. The friends of the respective parties began to acquiesce in the justice of their quarrel, and the end of this was that the war was renewed upon an extended basis. A real Donnybrook commenced, and broken heads and bloody noses were plentiful. The lasses, greetin' and wailin', dragged their lovers from the fray.

After an event of this kind, the recruiting-sergeant put in his appearance. Sandy, who had lost his lass and got his licks to the bargain, rather than face the chaff of his fellow-ploughmen, took "the shillin'," and marched off next morning "wi' a ribbon at his lug," a soberer if not a wiser man. I have heard my mother tell of poor fellows who enlisted under such circumstances. When a resident in Aberdeen, she had daily to pass the gate of the barracks at a time when the poor north country recruits were being drilled. She noticed one poor fellow amongst them from her native parish. He seemed broken-hearted. The drill-sergeant called out in an angry voice, "Do you not know your right hand from your left? Look to the right." The poor fellow replied, "If I had looked to the right, I wadna been here."

There were other features of the fair more pleasing. The sweetiewives were there with all their tempting wares spread out

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to feast the eyes of the girls and boys who clustered round their stalls, eager to invest their bawbees in the various commodities displayed thereon. When we see a man or woman rise to the top of their profession, it is often a proof that they possess qualities that have lifted them above their fellows. If this is true in general, it was especially true in regard to Meg Elgin. She was beyond all question the most eminent sweetiewife of her time. Like John Gilpin, she was a citizen of credit and renown within a radius of fifty miles around the ancient capital of the North. Meg was known to almost every household. Her juvenile customers gazed with wonder and admiration upon the contents of her basket. There lay within its ample dimensions more wonderful things than they had ever dreamt of. Her dolls bore a striking resemblance in dress and shape to Meg herself. She was short in stature but ample in face, which was of a shining scarlet hue, heightened, no doubt, by exposure to the bracing mountain air and the morning drams that she said she was obliged to take for "the win' on her stamack." When she sojourned in Aberlour, she quartered herself in the house of James Grant. Being a quiet, pious man, he was greatly shocked at Meg's unruly tongue. His cousin Nelly was a spinster of repute, and lived next door. She made several attempts to throw the sweetiewife out of her kinsman's house, but had always to retire without effecting her purpose. When obliged to retreat, she would fire off her big guns at "the nasty, ill-tongued, drunken limmer! fitter tae sleep in a barn than anaith the roof o' a God-fearin' man!" The pious widower remained passive during the fiery conflicts between the belligerents, and Meg continued in possession. Her market pro perties lay undisturbed from one fair day to another in the shoemaker's barn. In the village square, where the market was held Meg claimed the best stance, and had her claim allowed. On one occasion an Aberdeen huxter, known as "Treacle Tam," set up his stall upon Meg's freehold. He had arrived with his spouse and properties on a cart in the early morning. When Meg came upon the scene and saw her stance occupied, without saying a word, she caught hold of one of the poles that supported the stall, and with a wrench pulled it from the ground. In a moment the stall was a wreck. Treacle sticks, gingerbread, and sweeties lay heaped together on the ground. Tam's wife flew at the irate Meg, who

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defended herself with the tent pole. When Tam appeared, he too made an onset upon her, but she called out, "Haud awa', ye lang-luggit sclipe! fat brocht ye here wi' that drunken limmer tae disgrace the pairish o' Aberlour? May the deevil droon ye baith in yer ain traicle cask that ye mak' that stinking stuff oot o' tae pooshin puir fowks' bairns."

Some may be disposed to smile at this record of "a sweetie-wife," but let such remember that she carried a savour about her of the city whose name had been affixed to her own as an honourable distinction. On her stall there were displayed works of art, dolls, jumping-jacks, horses in wood and in gingerbread, and pigs of the same material, their skins covered with sweeties. Everything was there to tempt the taste and fascinate the eyes of the children, who had but few opportunities of seeing such displays.

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