

TAM CRAMB,

WOLFHILL.



MR. T. Cramb

COUNTRY DANCING MASTER.

XLIX.

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WOLFHILL.

Like many other old and interesting institutions, the itinerant dancing master, with all the sociality and merry-making which his coming always occasioned, is fast becoming a thing of the past. It is only now and again one hears of classes being taken up during the winter months in those outlying districts of Stormont and Strathmore with which we are more immediately concerned here—where in former times numerous “danceys,” as they were called, were wont to appear as regularly as the dark nights set in, get the use of a room in some cottage, or the schoolroom, or, best of all, some granary, and have a flourishing academy for initiation into all the mysteries of the poetry of motion in no time. Every little village or hamlet had also its own pet fiddler, and fiddlers in those days were of no account if they were not equally well up in dancing—which, in many cases, did not amount to much after all; for it must be confessed it was a toss up sometimes whether it was the fiddling or the dancing that they knew least about. But young people were not so very particular thirty or forty years ago, and the player who could command

A FEW STRATHSPEYS AND REELS,

with perhaps a country dance or two and a set of quadrilles and lancers thrown in, and could

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

always put plenty of good audible horse-hair and rosin into his playing, was quite equal to all the state balls likely to be held in the district. One does not require to be very old to recall a cluster of these worthies. There was "Dancey M'Donald," who came all the way from the Braes of Balquhiddy and held classes regularly at Forneth, Butterstone, and elsewhere in the Stormont; John Cramb, of Kinclaven; "Dancey Donaldson," from the Murthly district—a quaint character, whose amusing style the late Tom Liston of Hallhole used to mimic so laughably; James Paton, from Murthly, one of the best all-round athletes, as well as one of the finest, most graceful dancers ever seen; and, not to extend the list, "Dancey M'Kenzie," of the Stormont, another character, who was understood to be as good at the poaching as the fiddling, and had the odd habit of carrying a ferret about with him, which was allowed to scamper all over his person. Its favourite position was beneath its owner's long beard, through which it would stick its head, very much to the surprise and alarm of strangers. One night, after some irritation, it took it into its little head to make its teeth meet in the fiddler's throat! There was a sudden cry of pain, and the vicious little animal was dashed to the ground, but not without taking the bit clean away with it. So much in passing. "Dancey Cramb," the subject of the present sketch, was one of the

BEST KNOWN AND APPRECIATED

of his class. He was a native of Wolfhill, about seven miles from Perth, and bred a slater. Early in life, however, he developed considerable ability as a fiddler, and by easy stages ultimately

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graduated as a country dancing master, and was known and welcomed as such over a wide area for the matter of about 50 years. Some 40 years ago, when Donald Dinnie was making the pace for athletics and Nottman was the best step-dancer of the day, Tam used to appear at Highland gatherings and take honourable positions on the prize-list, not only for his dancing, but at throwing the hammer and putting the stone. His looks were greatly in his favour, being tall and well formed and graceful in action, with features that might fairly be called regular and handsome. A notable feature was his long, bushy, and well-groomed beard; and get him with his tall hat and best coat on, ready to start for some ball, and he had "quite a distingue appearance," as the penny novelette would put it. Indeed, he was taken frequently for a scion of a certain blue-blooded Perthshire family, the likeness being remarkable. Fiddling and dancing classes were somewhat scarce in the summer months, however, and although Highland gatherings counted for something, these were of dubious value, and Tam used to fill up spare time at his own trade and otherwise, for he was a handy fellow, who, according to old wives, could either "preach or ploo" when he cared. He was a book-canvasser for a time, and a very good one, too, being always well up as to the merits of the particular work he was pushing. For many years in his prime it was his habit to cross the Sidlaws to get a "hairst" in the Carse o' Gowrie. His long, lithe, and muscular figure bent to the work in fine style, and many a time it was his boast that he could cut, bind, and stook from 20 to 24 threaves in a ten hours day. He never went to "hairst," it may be certain, without his fiddle, and after supper every lawful

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evening out it came, and in a trice the "merry harvesters" were

TRIPPING THE "LIGHT FANTASTIC TOE"

in ideal pastoral style, and kings might be blest, but "Tam was glorious." He wielded a light, supple, dexterous bow, and had caught something of Niel Gow's traditional style, particularly at the change from the strathspey to the reel, when he would raise himself from his seat and give an inspiriting "Hooch!" that lifted the dancers fairly off their feet—then a hurricane, till "every carline swat and reekit." Niel was before his day, but he was well acquainted with Duncan M'Kercher, the "Atholl Paganini." Tam, it may be mentioned, was a good judge of fiddles, and possessed several, a "Matthew Hardie"—the finest make Scotland has ever produced—being his favourite instrument. Our friend always showed to advantage in the social circle. His ready wit, caustic criticisms upon men and things, and his inexhaustible wallet of racy anecdotes made him a desirable companion on such occasions, quite apart from his musical ability; and if the glass went round with businesslike regularity Tam was the last man to interfere.

IN HIS PEREGRINATIONS

all over Perthshire he had come into contact with nearly every one worth knowing, but wealth and position were by no means necessary to a place in his favour. Here is a characteristic story of Tam's manner. One day he happened to drop into the Black Bull Inn, Perth, and found several of his Wolhill friends engaged in such a hot dispute with some townspeople that they were on the point of resorting to the argumentum baculinum. Taking in the

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situation at a glance, the polite dancing master thus addressed the company:—"Excuse my interference, gentlemen, but I perceive this is all the result of a misunderstanding." "Hoo that?" exclaimed the strangers. "Oh, you see," explained Tam in his most velvety manner, "these friends of mine took you for gentlemen; and you, sirs, took them for a set of fools; and you're both wrong." The two sets of belligerents sat down to think the matter out, and cooled in the effort. Tam finished his course in his native village on the 22d March 1896, but he has

LEFT HIS MARK BEHIND

in a sort of accepted standard for what is excellent in fiddling and dancing, and in witty and pithy obiter dicta. "As Tam Cramb used to say!" is still heard in the district, and will be for many a year to come. Scores of picturesque and expressive nick-names which he administered on provocation, too—some having already descended from father to son—are likely to survive through many generations. His characteristics were well hit off a number of years ago—as Tam himself admitted—in the following verses by Robert Ford, another native of Wolfhill, and nothing seems better than to conclude this sketch with them.

FIDDLER TAM.

I wadna swap an oor at e'en,
An oor wi' Tam, my pawkie frien',
 For coors wi' some I ken;
For months, indeed, wi' swaggerin' blades,
Wi' jimp as muckle in their heads
 As ony ord'nar' hen.
Na, na! Gie me a man o' mind,
 I carena what his lot;
I prize the mind abune the man,
 The man abune the coat.

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'Tis mind, sirs, ye'll find, sirs,
 That mak's a man o' worth;
'Tis havers, 'tis clavers,
Wi' jimp as ruckle in their heads
That Tam's a genius, nane says nay;
He'll dance or play a blithe Strathspey
 Wi' ony brither Scot,
An' set him down and glibly mix
In history, poetry, politics,
 Or ony crack ye'll vote.
He's slater, doctor, hatter, clerk,
 He'll mak' or men' a shoe;
Auld wives declare, wi' solemn air,
 That Tam can preach or ploo.
I dootna, an' couldna,
 For little comes him wrang,
Though here, sirs, 'tis clear, sirs,
 A crook comes in my sang.

There's naething faultless 'neath the sun,
In sea, or air, or in the grun',
 An' Tam—e'en Tam—has ane.
I'm laith to say't, he lo'es the drink;
But gie the mutchkin stoup a clink,
 Ye'll set his birse on en',
An' quick as thocht he's at your hip,
 De'il tak' the first to tire,
An' I'se be ban', he'll no get Tam—
 He'll never budge his chair.
Frae Monday to Sunday,
 An' e'en a week to that,
But joke still, an' smoke still,
 An' tippie at the maut.

Oh, had I mystic power a fouth
The power to kill that cursed drouth
 Nae sap on earth can sloken,
Ye'd sune see Tam in rank and micht
A gaucy, buirdly, mensefu' wicht
 As e'er set fit in stockin';
For Nature has been kind to Tam—
 She's lent him wit and grace,
A routhy, fine, weel-balanced mind,
 An' eke a weel-faured face.
E'en wi' his faut, his love o' maut,
 We lo'e the carlie weel;
By auld and young, 'tis aye the sang—
 " Feth, Tam's nae ord'nar' chiel!"