

## CHAP. XXIII.

## HIGHLAND FARM-HOUSES.

The Farm-house. — Where? — Dirty approach. — Highland Milkmaid. — On the Ground-floor. — An Interior. — Furniture and Tenants. — Bare Legs. — Macbeth's Witch. — Mrs. Mac. — The Mon, pair Body! — The Spence. — A Four-poster. — Pound-cake and Sherry. — Cantire Hospitality. — No Canny. — Extremes. — Oatmeal Bannocks. — What are they like? — Milk, a popular Beverage. — Compulsory Enjoyment. — How happy could I be with neither. — The romantic Tale of the brave Girl of Barr Glen.

ON approaching a farm-house in Cantire, our first thought will probably be — Where *is* the farm-house? Surely, we feel tempted to ask, it cannot be this low range of building of one story high? these must be cattle sheds, bullock hovels, and the like, the outlying buildings of the farm. The farm-house, doubtless, is over the hill side, and down in the glen. But, no; “yon’s the biggin!” we are told; and this long, low hovel, with its midden\* and dirt-heaps, and kennels of

\* *Midden*. Sir Thos. Dick Lauder suggests its derivation from *middle-in*, “the *midden* being always *in the middle* of all rural premises

foul water, is really the farm-house of Mr. Mac-so-and-so.

“Hens on the midden, ducks in dubbs are seen.” \*

You must pick your way carefully; for although liquid manure may be a very useful thing in its proper place, yet it is not precisely that odorous compound in which we should prefer to bathe the boots that will afterwards bear us into the presence of ladies. Our approach, therefore, to the house, is distinguished by a succession of little acts of agility, which are more well meant than successful; and which, indeed, we soon find to be altogether acts of supererogation, for we presently pass to deposits of filth through which we must boldly pass with bated breath, though not averted eye. The approach reminds us forcibly of the farmer's dream of heaven; for, there are “such heaps o' muck!”

Here comes Mr. Mac's milkmaid, setting us the example how we ought to walk, by paddling through all the dirty messes with her still dirtier feet. They are naked of course, and are visible to some distance above the ankle; and very unpleasant is the prospect. They look much better in the sketch than they do in reality, as one cannot depict the encrusted dirt of weeks

in Scotland, so that unlucky visitors not unfrequently walk up to *the middle into the middle* of it.” — *Legendary Tales of the Highlands*, vol. iii. p. 2.

\* Allan Ramsay.

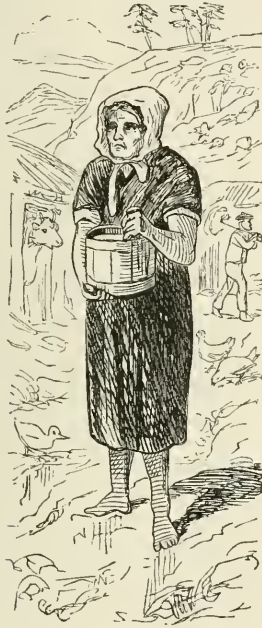
(it may be years!), nor if it were possible, would it be desirable to do so. Mr. Mac's milkmaid is utterly unlike the pictures that one sees of Highland milkmaids on painter's canvas, and in the pages of illus-



HIGHLAND MILKMAID, AS SHE APPEARED BEFORE MY MIND'S EYE.

trated "gift-books." She is a gaunt and scraggy middle-aged woman, "long, and lank, and brown," in a large mutch cap — very much like Mrs. Gamp's night-cap — with a blue gown, that shows her bare arms,

a handkerchief folded over her shoulders, and apparently no other article of attire. She does not elegantly poise her milkpail upon her head, but carries it in front of her, in a very unorthodox manner.



HIGHLAND MILKMAID, AS SHE APPEARED BEFORE MY PENCIL.

Here is more than one door in this long shed of bullock-hovels. Which is the one that will lead us into the immediate presence of Mr. or Mrs. Mac? Their neighbour (who is evidently a man for improve-

ment) has lately marked out his front door by painting it a brilliant scarlet; but here there is no such rubrical guide whereby to direct our steps. We appeal to the dirty milkmaid, and she points to the farthest doorway. The door is open; we knock, and enter. Everything is literally on the ground floor; for there is no quarry, stone, brick, or board to tread upon; nothing but the bare earth, worn into irregularities of surface that afford so many channels and little stagnant pools for wet and filth. Lord Palmerston once defined *dirt* to be "a right thing in a wrong place." There is plenty of it here. Probably this is a passage common to the byre and to the dwelling room. At any rate the cow has been here; and yes! here she is, in the room to the left. We are plunging on in mid gloom down the earthy passage, and, on arriving at the end, turn to the right, and find ourselves in the room that constitutes the working centre of the establishment, and is, *ipso facto*, the farm-house.

A suffocating smoke pervades the room, and makes your breath to catch, and your eyes to smart. It proceeds from the peat-turf, heaped on the fire, and moulded into a red-hot cake. The fire is laid upon a low brick hearth; over it hangs a gigantic cauldron which might serve for Macbeth's witches, and in this cauldron some culinary preparation — which, from the noise, would proclaim itself of the bubble and squeak

*genus* — is steaming, and making the great pot-lid to dance a throbbing jig. The smoke, after making a complete tour of the room, finds its way out through a hole in the thatch that does duty for a chimney. Some fowls are strutting about the floor, scratching in the dirt, and scarcely heed our approach; but a collie dog advances, and sniffs at our heels with muttered growls. The side walls of the room are not so high as a grenadier, and the timbers of the pitched roof rest upon them, and are all laid open to view, together with the heather that forms the thatch. A pitched roof it may well be called; for the peat smoke has blackened it, as though it had been really pitched over, and the black timbers shine like japanned work. Two small windows in the low walls face each other, and through their smoked and dirty panes let a scanty light into the room. As a matter of course neither of the windows are made to open. On the third side of the room is the hearth before mentioned; and, on the opposite side, the whole extent of the wall, save a small space for a doorway, is taken up by a rudely-enclosed cupboard, divided into four parts, two above the other two. These four divisions, from the bedding heaped upon them, proclaim themselves to be the sleeping berths of the family; but how Mr. and Mrs. Mac, and their large family, male and female, and their servants are disposed of in these four cribs or box beds, is a delicate

question, which I do not commit the impropriety to ask. A fowl is perched upon the edge of the one upper crib, and looks as though she had been laying an egg upon the pillow; and, for aught I know, there may be a sitting hen in the dark recesses of the other crib. Such furniture as there is, is of the homeliest and



rudest; there is the chest or "kist," and the wooden press, called the ambry; and the only attempt at display is in the garnishing of the old dresser with platters and jugs.

As I enter the room, I find it tenanted (in addition to the fowls and collie) by a bare-legged lassie, stout,

well-favoured, and auburn-haired; and by an old crone, who is squatted on a low stool on the other side of the hearth, and is hard at work at a spinning-wheel. From underneath her dirty white mob-cap her gray hair hangs coarse and dishevelled, and, in appearance, remarkably like the wool on which she is at work. Spinning may be a picturesque occupation, but it is certainly not a cleanly one; and the old lady looks as though she would be mightily improved in appearance by being treated to the old witches' remedy of a float in the horse-pond. As the barelegged damsel does not vouchsafe to introduce the old lady to me, and as I imagine (from her harmony with surrounding things) that she may be the mistress of the establishment, I put that query to the lassie.

“She's just a pair old body!” replies Barelegs; and, vanishing through the opposite doorway, leaves me to the old lady and the cauldron. She looks me full in the face, and waggles her head at me in a very knowing manner. Looking from her to the witches' cauldron, I should not feel at all surprised if she thrust out her skinny arm and forefinger, and addressed me with “Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed!” in which case I should be prepared with my answer; but she only mutters something in Gaelic, which to me might as well be gibberish.

While I am thinking what a remarkably effective



head the old lady has, and am mentally taking her portrait for that scene of Macbeth and the Weird Sisters which I am intending to paint some day — when I have the time (to say nothing of the qualifications)—a woman comes in through the opposite door, wiping her hands, and apologising for being untidy. There is no apology requisite, however, so far as her personal appearance is concerned; for she is a neat, cleanly, ruddy-faced woman, in a blue petticoat, sufficiently short to reveal her white stockings and shoes — her feet thus giving visible tokens that she was the head of the establishment. As I advance to meet her, there is a rolling among the confused heap of bed-clothes on one of the upper cribs, and the apparition of a human bewhiskered face, with a tangled mass of black hair, rises from underneath a patchwork counterpane, and gazes upon me with a pair of dark, lack-lustre eyes.

“It’s the mon, puir body; he’s been sick the lang time, and nae looks sae buirdly,” says the ruddy-faced woman, in answer to my startled look of inquiry. “The mon” of course is *the* man, *par excellence*, in Mrs. Mac’s eyes—Mr. Mac, the head of the household.

But she soon leads me away to an inner room, of which she is visibly proud,—a room reserved for visitors, and high days and holidays, the *spence* or parlour. (I should inform the reader that Mr. and Mrs. Mac are “bettermost people,” and that some of the neighbour-

ing farmers had no such room.) The spence is a step higher than the other room; it has a boarded floor, a plastered ceiling, a good sized window (made to open) and a fireplace after the new and improved fashion, with a mantelpiece, on which are china ornaments of Uncle Tom and Eva, Prince Albert (a very startling bust), and a dog of doubtful species, — together with a shepherdess in a dress of sea shells, and a small basket made of card and ribbon. Over the mantelpiece is a looking-glass. There is a shining mahogany table, *ditto* chairs, *ditto* chest of drawers, on the top of which is a writing-desk, a large Bible, “Calvin’s Institutes,” “The Whole Duty of Man,” “Boston’s Fourfold State,” “Alleine’s Alarm to Sinners, and Saint’s Pocket Book,” “Baxter’s Saint’s Rest,” “Pike’s Early Piety,” “Jenks’ Family Prayers,” and “Moore’s Almanack.” But by far the chief object in the room is an enormous four-post bed, reaching to the ceiling (not that it required to be very lofty to do that), and occupying the lion’s share of the apartment. It is covered with snowy linen, and a smart patchwork counterpane, and looks as though it had never been slept in, and was not intended to be occupied—as, indeed, I found that it was not, except by extraordinary visitors on extraordinary occasions. As I look at the four-poster it becomes a matter of curious speculation to me whether this rival of the great bed of Ware is ever made use of at a family festival, by the

guests sleeping in it gipsy fashion, top and bottom, stacked like bottles of wine, or game in a grouse-box. There is ample room for this; and a bolster at the foot of the bed lends force to the supposition. In the daytime, doubtless, when they are keeping high jinks, they use the bed as a great ottoman.

No one can be prouder of her *spence*, or more hospitable in it than Mrs. Mac. She flits about like a busy bee,—she brushes imaginary dust from a chair, so highly polished that I might shave myself before it,—she rushes out of the room with a shrill “Jeannie, lassie! be handy, noo!” sounded like a note of interrogation, as are all Highland comments and commands,—she comes back again, closely followed up by Barelegs carrying a tray covered with a snowy cloth—(wherever can all these clean things come from out of this dirty house?)—and then, from a side cupboard in the *spence*, she produces one of the richest of Scotch cakes (the plainest of which are a trifle richer than wedding cake) and a decanter of sherry.—Sherry? well, she called it by that name; though its *bouquet* was curious, and its vintage doubtful. On these viands I am immediately set to work, in spite of all protestations to the contrary; and my request for some of her beautiful bread and butter is altogether disregarded. Mrs. Mac will not be gainsaid, and will take it as a personal affront, and a slight upon Cantire hospitality, if I do not immediately fall-to at

the sherry and the pound-cake—in every square inch of which I see a bilious headache. Being of a weak mind, and in the presence of a woman who has evidently a will of her own and will not be trifled with, I resign myself to my fate, and munch this headachy stuff as though I liked it; while Mrs. Mac watches every mouthful in such a way that I am unable to accomplish any feat of jugglery, by pocketing a piece, while her attention is directed to another part of the room. No sooner have I done than she insists on my beginning all over again, and having another piece of cake and another glass of wine, informing me that if I refuse she shall consider me “no canny,”—and, as I am rapidly sinking into a state of idiocy from the combined influences of the oppressive heat of the shut-up room, the perspiring difficulties attendant upon holding a conversation in an unknown tongue, and the unwonted nature of my luncheon, I give way before the undefined horrors of her threat; and taking the wine and cake as rapidly as though they were themselves medicine, and not the causes for medicine, I heartily bid Mrs. Mac farewell, and, rushing through the other smoky room, with a collective adieu to Barelegs, Macbeth’s witch, and the gude mon in his crib, plunge through the filthy byre, and out into the fresh air and pools of liquid manure.

Now while I sat in that neat and spotless room, in

the company of the clean and tidy Mrs. Mac, drinking her curious sherry, and eating her rich cake (which had been purchased at Campbelton at ever so much a pound), I might have fancied myself anywhere else than in the *spence* of a Highland farm-house, where almost all besides, even if it did not suggest dire poverty, certainly manifested the extremity of dirt, untidiness, and squalor. It was a contest of "fierce extremes." And yet Mr. and Mrs. Mac were, as I have said, bettermost people, and could afford to entertain their visitors with such costly fare in this rich apartment. When I called upon their near neighbours, they had no such *spence* in which to receive me, nor could they offer me sherry and pound-cake; though their hospitality and friendly feeling were just as great and as warmly evinced. In these cases, the refreshment offered was a glass of milk, and a plate of oatmeal bannocks.

As for the bannocks, they are deal boards made easy, and taste like a compressed mixture of bran and chaff. They hurt the teeth, and cause a sensation in the throat similar to what must be felt by any one who stands open-mouthed before a winnowing machine when it is in full work. As for the milk, it is not every southron past the age of infancy, who is possessed of sufficient bodily and stomachic power to drink a glass of it before dinner without materially interfering with his digestion for the remainder of the day. So that not

only in Mrs. Mac's, but also in the other cases, the hospitality degenerated into a bore—as, indeed, enforced hospitality always does. Compulsory enjoyment is apt to produce unsought-for effects. When, for example, the fond papa took his son for a day's jaunt into the country, and, catching him by the collar and shaking a big stick over his head, said, “Now, my boy! I've brought you out here to enjoy yourself; and, if you don't begin to do so at once, I'll give you the soundest thrashing you ever had in your life!” doubtless, the fear of the possible performance of this threat would somewhat damp the young gentleman's pleasure.

And so with these hospitable and friendly Highland farmeresses. You must either persistently refuse their pressing invitation to eat and drink what they have set before you, and so avoid that mysterious alternative of being thought “no canny,” or else you must swallow the curious sherry and rich cake—an act of egregious folly that you would never dream of committing at home, not even with your own wedding-cake—or hurt your teeth with chaffy oat bannocks, and destroy your inward serenity for the remainder of the day by tossing off a glassful of new milk. How happy would you be with neither! and yet you do all this for the sake of not rejecting the well-meant hospitality of people you never saw before, and shall probably never see again, and for whom you certainly do not

care one brass button. But what easy fools some people are !

One cannot be surprised at being offered milk in a Highland farm-house, for it is a popular beverage with adults in Scotland. You not only see it thus drunk in private houses, but you meet with glasses of milk set out on the refreshment stalls of the railway stations, and in the best confectioners' shops in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and other large towns. Thus your way in Scotland is made into a milky way.

I will close this chapter with a legendary tale told concerning a Cantire farm-house and its inmates in the near neighbourhood of Glencreggan, which, in its dramatic character, surpasses the story of Mary the Maid of the Inn. It is this :— Once upon a time, in Barr Glen, on a wild winter's night, a farmer and his family and servants were comfortably seated around a peat-fire, when the wind was howling terribly around the house and the drifting snow was clogging up the doorways. The farmer knew that his son and the servant-girl were much attached to each other, but he would not consent to their marriage. While they were all sitting round the fire on that winter's night, he thought of a plan by which the servant-girl could be got rid of ; so he said that if, before the next day, she would bring him a skull that was in Saddell Church, she should have his son for a husband. The girl's love was so

strong for the young man, that she joyfully agreed to the proposal, although it was quite seven miles to Saddell, and the road thereto lay over Beinn-an-Tuirc. She knew the road well and all its dangers and difficulties even by daylight, which would now be immensely increased by the darkness of the night, the fierce wind and driving snow, and the slippery rocks and swollen torrents. But she did not shrink from the danger, and at once made ready and went on her way. The farmer took good care that she went alone, and that his son did not follow her.

The brave girl went over hill and glen, battling with the snow storm, and tracking her path with the greatest difficulty. She passed safely over the southern side of Beinn-an-Tuirc, and by midnight reached Saddell Church. Its door was open, burst open perhaps by the violence of the wind. She knew the place where the skull was kept, and she groped towards it in the dark. As she did so she heard a great and peculiar noise, made up, as it seemed, of loud moans. There was a trampling of light feet over the pavement, and she heard forms rush past her; then a moment's silence, succeeded by more mysterious moans and sounds. Terrified, but not disheartened, the brave girl kept her purpose steadily in view; and, groping towards the skull, seized it with both hands, and made for the church door. The trampling of feet and the moans continued,



and the forms pursued her. Grasping the skull she gained the door, and pulled it to after her. As she did so she heard a rush against it; but she turned and fled. By daylight she had regained her lover's home, and, half dead with fatigue and excitement, placed the skull in the farmer's hands, and claimed the fulfilment of his promise.

The farmer was taken aback by seeing the girl, having hoped that she would have perished amid the snow and wilds. He would not believe that she had really been to Saddell, and taken the skull from the church on such a night; so he at once set out to Saddell with some of his men, expecting to be able to disprove the girl's tale, by finding the skull still in its place in the church. When they got there, and had opened the church door, they found within the building — not the skull, but a number of wild deer, who, having found the door open, had sought shelter from the violence of the storm. The girl had told him of the sounds she had heard within the church. Here was their cause; and much as he wished it otherwise, yet it was impossible for him to disbelieve her tale.

There was nothing for him to do but to yield with the best grace he might. He gave his consent to the match; and, to make assurance doubly sure, the lover took his brave girl to Saddell Church the very next day, where she replaced the skull in its old position,

and they were married off hand. And as some of the deer that had frightened her had been killed and cooked, they had a hearty wedding and plenty of good venison at the feast that followed.