

CHAP. XXIV.

HIGHLAND COTTAGES.

Wretchedness of the Cottages. — Their Exterior. — Their Middens and Kail-yards. — The Interior of a Highland Hut, with Figures. — The Lassies and their Mither. — Bonnie. — Cottages a Century ago. — Dr. Johnson, Garnett, and Pennant's Testimony. — An unwashed Bridegroom. — A Mahometan Paradise. — Dr. Parkins's Theory of wholesome unwholesomeness. — Bother'd. — The Geography of Dirt. — Calvinism and Cleanliness. — Christopher North's poetic gilding. — Lord Palmerston's sound Advice. — Landlords to the Rescue!

If the average farm-house in the neighbourhood of Glencreggan was as I have endeavoured faithfully to depict it, — and for this purpose I have by no means chosen the worst specimen — what were the cottages?

Not to mince matters, they were miserable cabins, so wretched and filthy, that if an English gentleman lodged his labourers in such places, he would be gibbeted in his county newspaper, and held up to deserved reproach. How can morals and decency be expected to exist (much less to thrive) in homes where the inmates are huddled together to sleep in one small hut, reeking with peat smoke and dirty abominations? Hitherto I

had imagined such a state of things to exist only in the uncared-for wilds of Ireland. But, here in Cantire, cleanliness, comfort, and decency were equally as little provided for by the insufficient accommodation as in the Emerald Isle, and equally as much proclaimed the wretched condition of the Celtic labourer. It is for the landlord to take the initiative in these matters; the poor cottars must take things as they find them, and encounter the Sisyphean lot of endeavouring to make the best of what is intrinsically bad.

Here is a row of three cottages. The walls are of a dark brown, weather-stained hue, composed of rough stones and turf cemented with mud. To each cottage is a door and a little window about a foot square, not made to open. A similar window pierces the opposite wall at the back of the cottage; but the door is front door and back door combined. Round the outside of the doors and windows are traces of a band of white-wash — a common form of decoration in Highland cottages, the outside of the house (apparently) being the only portion of it thus favoured. The roof is composed of heather-thatch, laid over turf upon larch poles; and, unless you are of Tom-Thumb dimensions, you may stand without the cottage and touch its eaves with the Adam's apple in your throat. Of course there is no upper chamber; as it is at the farm-house, so it is here; every thing is on the ground-floor. A slight

hump on the pitch of the roof directs our attention to the opening meant for a chimney. In some cases, especially where the thatch is old and the cottage exposed to the full fury of the Atlantic gales (on which account its walls are made of such thickness), the roof is kept from taking a fly through the air by heavy stones slung across it in rows by ropes, like "a row of curl-papers," as Dr. Johnson truly remarked; and certainly, in the slang sense of "thatch" for *hair*, this simile holds good. In front of the door is the *midden*, or family dunghill *; but there is here a marked distinction between the Celtic Highlander's home and dunghill, and those of the Celtic Irishman, in the absence from the former of "the jontleman that pays the rent" — the pig. As we have already seen, there is no pig in Cantire, at any rate so far as the cottagers are concerned. Near to the dunghill is a black heap of peat-turf, their only fuel except a few sticks. Their small *kail-yard* garden is behind the cottages, walled in by large stones rudely piled together. A narrow road

* I have already, in a note to chap. xv., referred to the utter absence of all out-door accommodations. In turning over some of the volumes of the "Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland," I find that (at least in one case) the silver medal was awarded to the proprietor who had erected his "improved cottages" without any out-door accommodations; although the committee were informed they were "yet to be added." Many plans and elevations of improved cottages and farms will be found in the useful volumes of the "Transactions."

leads by the kail-yards to the croft, a patch of ground common to the three cottages, where the little square plots are so variously cultivated that they resemble a tartan pattern, produced for the benefit of Ceres herself.

Let us stoop our heads, and enter this first cottage. As soon as we step over the doorway, we are face to face with some rude boards that form the end of the cupboard where are the sleeping cribs. They form the one side of the room. Sitting on the edge of the crib, I sketch the interior of the hut. Those cribs are surely the "smoky cribs" to which King Henry referred *; for barely six feet in front of me is the fireplace, not upon the hearth in this instance, but bricked up, and containing a small grate, in which a peat fire is smouldering and filling the hut with an eye-smarting smoke. Over it hangs the universal cauldron, or kail-pot, and almost as much light streams from the chimney as through the small dirty windows. A table, two chairs, a low stool, a dresser with mugs and crockery, and a spinning wheel constitute the furniture of the room. Some peat for immediate use is piled in the right-hand corner; and strings of smoked herrings are suspended from the roof. The floor is the natural floor of the earth, in which a motherly hen is vainly scratching to discover something for her brood's dinner. The interior of the pitched roof is smoked as black as

* 2 Hen. IV. Act iii. Sc. 1.

was that of the farm-house. The wattled walls are uneven, cracked, and foul with dirt. The place feels damp and unwholesome, and even the peat smoke cannot conceal the shut-up froustiness and foul smells. But the Highlander seems to care for neither smoke nor dirt. To the latter he "gets manured," as the Malapropian gentleman remarked; and, as to the former, Hugh Miller testifies that "it takes a great deal of smoke to smother a Highlander," and Christopher North contends that it preserves him in health. In England it is different. There, a smoky chimney and a cross wife are put in the same category. Hotspur thought Glendower "worse than a smoky chimney," because he made himself so complete a nuisance.

Two little girls are the tenants of the room; and, though bare-legged and poorly clad, they look clean and decent, and of wholesome appearance,—a fact sufficiently accounted for by the circumstance of their being attendants at the Glenbarr school, from which they have just come. Very comely little lassies they are, with the national type strongly marked in their faces and the colour of their hair, — though many of the Cantire Highlanders (like Mr. Mac at the farm) have black hair and a swarthy complexion. The locks of the one are of that peculiar golden red, in which his Grace of Argyle takes a pride, and which seems to be ever accompanied with a clear and lovely skin:—

"'Tis a fair stripling, though a Scot;"



INTERIOR OF A WEST HIGHLAND COTTAGE, CANTIRE.



and a good subject for the pencil. In fact, this "Interior of a Highland Hut, with figures," is precisely one of those subjects that, with a good *chiaro-scuro* effect, is so acceptable to the artist, and looks so well upon paper, while, in sober reality, it is all that is repelling. For, however correctly the forms may be sketched and the lights and shades painted, yet it does not come within the pencil's province to depict the dirtiness of the dirt, or the smokiness of the smoke—and, I might also add, the foulness of the fowls; for very unpleasant evidences of the presence of poultry are liberally strewn (together with other abominations) over the floor, and even the beds. These are the points that make themselves disagreeably apparent to the visitor, and which the artist cannot imitate if he would, and would not if he could—unless he were a stark and staring pre-pre-Raffaelite. It is for these reasons that pen and pencil may not quite agree, and yet do their work faithfully.

Presently the mother of the children comes in, wet up to her waist with sea-water,—for she is a kelp gatherer: and she enters into an account of her labours, which, as I shall shortly describe them in their proper place, I will not here further touch upon. But though she has a hard life of it and is miserably poor, it is with very great difficulty that I can induce her to accept a shilling or two for her children—my little models.

Like the Highland herd-girl, they have “nae been drawit afore;” and they are not a little surprised when



Highland Woman. “Thank the leddy for the siller, Jeanie. Eh! ye’re a varry bonie leddy!”

English Visitor. “Bony lady, indeed! nothing of the kind! Impertinent woman!”

they can look at my sketching-block, and point to each other’s likenesses with, “Ech! there’s Jeanie!” and

“Ech, noo! there’s Girzie, sae trig and cantie! Weel, noo, look ye there! the gentle’s drawit the cootie fool.” Which meant, that the gentleman had introduced the motherly hen into his sketch. For a fowl, as I have before observed, becomes “a fool” in the mouth of the Highlander; and their favourite laudatory adjective of *bonnie* is pronounced as though written *bony*. Thus when this good woman of the house pronounced my sketch to be *varry bony*, I understood her commendation; and when, after I had given her the silver and was leaving her house, she pronounced *me* also to be *varry bony*, I knew perfectly well that she did not refer to any reduced appearance of body that I might present, consequent upon the loss of flesh attendant upon climbing the Highland hills; although I could imagine a case where she might use this personal address in a way that would turn her compliment into an insult.

These Cantire huts seem not to have improved one whit for the last hundred years, but to remain in the same state as those described by the century-ago tourists, who thought as much of an expedition into the heart of the Highlands, as we should into the regions of Lake 'Ngami. Dr. Johnson thus speaks of the huts of his day:—“A hut is constructed with loose stones, ranged for the most part with some tendency to circularity. It must be placed where the wind cannot act upon it with violence, because it has no cement; and

where the water will run easily away, because it has no floor but the naked ground. The wall, which is commonly about six feet high, declines from the perpendicular a little inward. Such rafters as can be procured are then raised for a roof, and covered with heath, which makes a strong and warm thatch, kept from flying off by ropes of twisted heath, of which the ends, reaching from the centre of the thatch to the top of the wall, are held firm by the weight of a large stone. No light is admitted but at the entrance, and through a hole in the thatch which gives vent to the smoke. This hole is not directly over the fire, lest the rain should extinguish it; and the smoke, therefore, naturally fills the place before it escapes.”*

“Their cottages,” says Garnett, “are, in general, miserable habitations. They are built of round stones without any cement, thatched with sods, and sometimes heath; they are generally, though not always, divided by a wicker partition into two apartments, in the larger of which the family reside. It serves likewise as a sleeping-room for them all. In the middle of this floor is the fire, made of peat placed on the floor, and over it, by means of a hook, hangs the pot for dressing the victuals. There is frequently a hole in the roof to allow the exit of the smoke; but this is not directly over the fire, on account of the rain; and very little of

* Works, vol. viii. p. 240.

the smoke finds its way out of it, the greatest part, after having filled every corner of the room, coming out of the door; so that it is almost impossible for any one, unaccustomed to it, to breathe in the hut. The other apartment, to which you enter by the same door, is reserved for cattle and poultry, when these do not choose to mess and lodge with the family.”*

“The houses of the common people,” says Pennant, “are shocking to humanity; formed with loose stones, and covered with clods which they call *devots*; or with heath, broom, or branches of fir;—they look, at a distance, like so many black mole-hills.”† Captain Burt describes these *devots* or *divets*, as slices of turf that served for tiling, and “if there happens to be any continuance of dry weather, which is pretty rare, the worms drop out of the *divet* for want of moisture; insomuch that I have shuddered at the apprehension of their falling into the dish when I have been eating.” These accounts coincide with Sir Walter Scott’s description of the huts at the clachan of Tully-Veolan: and they may be applied without any variation to the cottages near to Glencreggan.‡

* Tour, vol. i. p. 121.

† Scotland, vol. i. p. 131. See also an account of Highland huts in Knox’s “View of the British Empire,” and in Dalrymple’s “Memoirs of Great Britain.”

‡ The writer of a work (published January, 1861) who is well qualified to speak on this subject, favourably contrasts the cleanliness of the

Now how is it possible for much attention to be given to cleanliness or common decency in squalid huts like these, where the inmates are packed as close as figs in a drum, and where all healthy, physical and moral laws are set at defiance? Looking at their be-fouled interiors, one is inclined to believe in that Scotch traveller's tale of the expectant bridegroom, who presented himself in all his dirt before a spruce Edinboro' clergyman. "The marriage to take place directly!" exclaimed the horrified parson; "surely you mean, after you have washed yourself!" "I'm well eneuch!" was the reply. "But surely," urged the decent clergyman, as his thoughts flew to the bride; "surely you would not wish to be married in such a dirty state!" "*Me*, dirty!" cried the indignant bridegroom; "*me*, dirty! what if ye saw *her*!"

One of the promised joys of the Mahometan paradise was, that it would be filled with perfumes, like to the

"Odours of Eden, and Araby the blest."

West Indian negroes and their dwellings with that of the Scotch labourer. (See "Reminiscences of a Scottish Gentleman," by Philo-Scotus, p. 198.) In another work published at the same time, viz. "Lady Elinor Mordaunt," by Margaret Maria Gordon (*née* Brewster), will also be found a faithful picture of many West Highland cottages, with the "children growing up in the habits of savage life, because they have habitations of no greater pretensions to decency than the Esquimaux hut or the Indian wigwam" (p. 341). The many evils resulting from the bothy system and the immoderate use of whiskey, are also forcibly detailed.

If there were any faithful followers of the prophet, who dwelt amid such unwholesome stench as those in which a Highland hut is steeped, how keenly must they have enjoyed the change to their sweetly-scented paradise! And yet, according to Dr. Parkins' new theory, poverty, filth, and density of population are *not* unwholesome, or predisposing causes to endemic diseases. Contrary to all the theories of the Board of Health, accumulations of filth and of everything that can give out horrible stinks appear (from Dr. Parkins' statistics) to be anything but predisposing causes to disease; and those who advocate the bothy system, and condemn the Highland labourer to his present dwelling and consequent condition, will be glad to fortify themselves with Dr. Parkins' crowning fact that, when the natives of Kamschatka and Russia, and the Greenlanders and Esquimaux crowd together in over-heated rooms during their long winter months, excluding every breath of external air and breathing a polluted atmosphere, they are almost entirely exempt from fevers and epidemic diseases; and it is not until they emerge into the pure air that that class of diseases is known. Such is the new theory of wholesome unwholesomeness!

But new theories are very hard to be digested. And when a Greenlander's hut in the middle of winter or a Parisian *abattoir* in the height of the dog-days, is re-

presented to us as one of those health-giving places to which invalids should resort, we are reduced to much the same state of blank surprise as the old cottager found himself in the other day, when the curate had been laboriously and somewhat too learnedly, explaining to him the nature and conditions of faith — “Well,” said the old man, when the curate had come to an end of his essay, “what wi’ the railroads, and the telegraphs, *and faith*, I’m fairly bother’d!”

The “Saturday Review” said, that “To the investigator of calm mind and stoical nostrils, who enters upon his subject without any undue predisposition to nausea, the geography of dirt is a curious scientific problem;” and suggested that the distribution of dirt being as important a matter of investigation as the distribution of quadrupeds, Mr. Keith Johnstone should construct a map that should contain *isorypal* as well as isothermal lines. Primæval filth is being rapidly dispersed by the widening track of tourists; the “Review” therefore advised the compilers of guide-books boldly to mark out the odorous and inodorous hotels, so as to shame the hotel-keepers into cleanliness. Romanism and dirt are known to go together*; and it would seem that Calvinism and cleanliness are opposed to each other.

* “It is a strange but undoubted fact, that wherever a population is peculiarly Catholic it is almost always peculiarly dirty. Wherever the practice prevails of adorning the roadsides and street corners with little

Christopher North strives to hide the dirt of the Highland cottage by the glamour of a poetic halo, and to conceal its inodorous smells by the sweeter scent of "the honeysuckle stealing up the wall, and blinding, unchecked, a corner of the window, its fragrance unconsciously cheering the labourer's heart, as in the midday hour of rest he sits dandling his child on his knee, and conversing with the passing pedlar. And let the moss-rose tree flourish, that its bright blush balls may dazzle in the kirk the eyes of the lover of fair Helen Irwin, as they rise and fall with every movement of a bosom yet happy in its virgin innocence." This is a very dexterous method of leading us away from the matter in question and directing our thoughts to sweeter subjects. Not less ingenious and lapwing-like are his flights from the dirty cottage to "honest poverty, — strength of muscle and mind, — plain, coarse, not scanty, but unsuperfluous fare, — the future brightening before the steadfast eyes of trust, — the nook which hope consecrates to the future," &c. &c. All this is very fine, not to say highly imaginative, though in the

shrines and images, there your nose will not fail to discover adjuncts which sensibly modify the poetry of the scene. Wherever a Roman Catholic church is peculiarly alive with worshippers, it is generally also peculiarly alive with something else; and the Protestant visitor will carry off with him some entomological companions who certainly did not enter the building for the purposes of worship." — *Saturday Review*, Sept. 17, 1859.

“unsuperfluous fare,” truth has crept in, and “the steadfast eyes of trust” may denote that the inhabitant of the cottage is (what is vulgarly called) “going upon tick” at the village-shop or public-house. When, however, Christopher North makes out that the Highland cottage is such a beatific abode that “the very babe in the cradle, when all the family are in the fields, *mother and all*, hears the cheerful twitter” (of the sparrows making holes in the thatch) “and is reconciled to solitude,”* we feel that he is very much in the position of the Old Bailey barrister who has to defend Mr. Jack Sheppard from a charge of burglary with violence, and astonishes the prisoner by describing to the jury the home of his client’s innocent childhood as an *à fortiori* argument that it was impossible for him to have been guilty of the crime with which he was charged.

In fine, no poetical gilding or artistic chiaro-scuro can avail to conceal the abject squalor and indecency of the average West Highland cottage; and, until landlords take up the subject in the way they ought to do, as stewards of a trust committed to their hands, so long must all other efforts to ameliorate the Highland labourer’s condition be fruitless, and the benefits derived from education and religious teaching be nul-

* This very improbable statement really occurs in Christopher North’s panegyric on Highland “Cottages.”—*Recreations*, vol. i. p. 217.

lified. Mr. Stirling of Keir, and Mr. Scott Burns, in a paper read to the London Farmer's Club, in December last, adduced a great mass of evidence relative to the evils resulting from the bothy system in the Western Highlands; and a remarkable speech was made by Lord Palmerston at Romsey during the Christmas of 1859, and, in substance, was repeated in December 1860, in which were uttered many valuable truths concerning lodgings for the labouring classes, which Scotch no less than English landlords would do well to take to heart and act upon. The noble Viscount's argument was to this effect: — That a landlord ought not to look to the rent of the cottages on a farm reimbursing him for the expense incurred in building those cottages, any more than he would expect to receive rent for a farmhouse separate from the farm. That the cottages for the labourers are farm appurtenances, equally as much as the barns and buildings essential to the cultivation and stocking of the land. That land cannot be well cultivated unless the labourers are *well housed*; and, if the labourers have to trudge three or four miles to their work, they get physically exhausted, and the farmer does not receive his money's worth for the wages that he pays. That the weekly rent paid by the labourer is rather to impress upon his mind that he is earning the accommodation given to him, than from any idea that it is to repay the expense of erection.

That the carrying out of these propositions would be to the advantage of the farm; and that a farm that can be cultivated to advantage is worth more to a tenant.

This is good advice; and advice that a landlord may turn to his own benefit, as well as to that of his labourers. Except in certain cases, where a two-roomed cottage is adequately sufficient for the comfort and decency of the inmates, every cottage should have at least three sleeping apartments—one roomy one for the man and wife, and two smaller ones for the boys and girls.* There is an “Association for promoting Improvement in the Dwellings and Domestic Condition of Agricultural Labourers in Scotland,” which has already been of service, and might be of much more. It sup-

* This subject has been again “ventilated” in the “Times” during the past autumn, by the well-practised and forcible pens of “S. G. O.,” and others. An argument brought forward against the *three* (or even *two*) sleeping-rooms is, that you will thereby increase the evils which you seek to remove, by giving the cottagers an opportunity to take in lodgers; and that experience tells us that they will avail themselves of that opportunity. This difficulty, however, may be readily overcome (in all those cases where the landlord is prepared to do his duty) by the landlord’s permission being first required before a lodger is permitted to be taken. The landlord (or his agent) would determine whether or no the circumstances of the case permitted of the second or third bedroom being sub-let to a lodger; and if a lodger was taken contrary to orders, the tenant should be dismissed. The gentleman to whom this book is dedicated has, during the past year (from the designs of the author), erected eight cottages, each containing three bedrooms, where the above rules are insisted upon and observed.

plies designs for Highland cottages; but the designs are somewhat too strictly confined to the present national characteristics of thick-walled cottages of one-story high, with bed-recesses in the living rooms. An infusion of English comforts and conveniences would benefit the designs, and still more the Highlanders.

Landlords, to the rescue! and do your best to put an end to the evils of the bothy system; and make your habitations for human beings at least as comfortable and commodious as your stables and kennels.