

RECOLLECTIONS OF A SPEYSIDE PARISH.

CHAPTER I.

“THE MUCKLE SPATE.”

“The rising rivers flood the nether ground,
And rocks the bellowing voice of boiling seas rebound.
The father of the gods his glory shrouds,
Involved in tempests and a night of clouds ;
Deep horror seizes every human breast,
Their pride is humbled and their fears confest ;
The rocks are from their old foundations rent,
The winds redouble and the rains augment.”

DRYDEN.

HAD the great flood or “muckle spate” of 1829 never occurred, in all probability my “Recollections of a Speyside Parish” would never have been written. To many readers it may seem strange that a boy who had not completed the fifth year of his age could retain so vivid and clear a recollection of that event and the incidents connected with it. To me those impressive events are as clear in my memory as they were on the days of their occurrence. Most people have heard of the old practice of “riding the parish boundary,” and that young boys were whipped at certain places, so that in after years they would remember the spot and be able to testify to the boundary of the parish if it was ever disputed. If a boy in his after life could remember the spot where he was whipped, it is no wonder that so appalling an event as the “spate” left a lasting impression on the writer’s mind. He can clearly remember one incident that took place before “The Flood.” That was a visit to my father’s house by Jamie Dean, the dominie. He came in with a handful of blue official-looking papers, and announced the appalling news that my

father was "drawn" for the militia. The terror that filled my bosom at that announcement cannot be described by me in words. Young as I was, the terrors of the press gang and the thought that my father would be sent to fight filled my mind with fear, and this fear was deepened by the visits of an uncle of my father's who had fought at Waterloo. On his evening visits to our house he recounted the fighting and the carnage of that memorable battle while I lay in bed listening to him. Neighbours came to condole with my father. Amongst them were my grandfather and uncle, to consult about what steps were to be taken to procure a substitute. Anyone "drawn" had the option of serving by a substitute. My father had neglected to join a club for the payment of a substitute for any of the members who happened to be "drawn." A substitute was sometimes difficult to find, and the money paid to one was far beyond the means of most working men. A substitute was found for my father, and my mind was relieved on that matter; but there still remained the phantom of the press gang haunting my imagination.

Before entering upon the narration of my "Recollections," I may say during the early years of my life many of the incidents recorded were kept fresh in my mind by my mother, who was gifted with a wonderfully retentive memory and receptive mind. My father, a native of Rothes, chanced to meet her at the house of his aunt in the parish of Aberlour. Her name was Mary Stuart. He fell in love with her, and in due time they were married in her father's house in the parish of Inveraven. He brought his bride home to a house in the Burnside of Rothes. Their "hame-comin'" was characteristic of the times. The bride came all the way on foot, escorted by a great number of relatives and friends part of the way. Some of them came the whole distance, and stayed for "the kirkin'," when the bride appeared to the whole congregation in her wedding braws. Many years after that event I had the testimony of a venerable Rothes wife "that a bonnier or mair weel-faured an' clean skinned couple was never kirked in Rothes in her time." The friends who stayed for "the kirkin'" were quartered in neighbours' houses, and the event was long remembered in "the Burnside." As the young wife had been a resident with a "well-to-do" aunt, she was expected to show "toon breedin'" and possess "fine claes." A set of china given by her

aunt was admired by every wife in the village, but they were soon forgotten when they went "ben the hoose" to "taste," and to see the parrot that she had brought to her new home. The fame of "the funny bird that could speak" brought crowds of bairns round the door to get a sight of it. The poor bird was all unconscious of the admiration bestowed upon it. When it spoke, the children stared at it in amazement and wonder, and the older people were as much astonished as the children. Where did it come from and where did she get it? was the question of all who came to see the parrot.

When its mistress resided in Aberdeen she had to go daily to "the shore." Her aunt's husband superintended the salmon fishery carried on there, and in going to and from his office, the black-haired Highland lassie was noticed by a sailor lad passing and re-passing his ship, just returned from India. He made bold to speak to her one morning. "Would you like to see the great ship and the wonderful things on board?" She declined his offer, but every morning as she passed the ship the sailor lad managed to speak to her. In the end, he, sailor like, told her that his heart was hers—"Would she take him?" When he heard how hopeless his plea was, he descended to his cabin and returned with a beautiful parrot in a cage, and said "Take this bird; I brought it for my mother. It will remind you of the poor sailor who loved you." She refused his gift, but the sailor sent it to her aunt's house the night before he sailed. When she left Aberdeen to be married, she took the parrot with her on the top of the great carrier's cart that she travelled by from Aberdeen to Huntly, where she left the cart to trudge on foot for nearly thirty miles to her native place, Inveraven. When she started from Aberdeen at midnight, the parrot's cage was carefully wrapped in a Highland plaid, which served to tie it on my mother's back. As she left the town of Huntly, many eyes were turned upon her with the cage on her back. Footsore and weary with her unwonted burden, she reached Dufftown, where she got some refreshment and fed the parrot. Very soon the news of her arrival got wind, and boys and girls flocked to the inn window in the hope of getting a peep at the wonderful bird. Several boys volunteered to carry it and show her the nearest way through the hills. It was late in the afternoon before she emerged from the rugged pass between the Conval

Hills. To her dismay, she noticed that great heavy clouds came rolling over the top of Benrinnes, and before she reached the Moor of Rinachat a dense mist covered the landscape. She tried in vain to find the toll road that passed at a short distance, but she had turned in the wrong direction. After wandering about until it was quite dark, she saw a light in a cottage window, and knocked at the door. After much parley and explanation she was admitted, the woman of the house remarking, "If it hadna been for yer weel-faured face ye wudna come in here the night. But fat's that, bairn, that ye ha'e on yer back? Gweed ha'e a care o' me! ye're surely a witch-wife, tae carry a cratur like that. Gang oot o' my door at aince wi' yer evil speerits. Fat has brocht ye tae my door—a puir widow that never did onybody ill?" Like a true Speyside woman, my mother remarked that "oot o' this hoose I winna gang the night. Wud ye put oot a puir lost woman tae perish in the moss because she has a puir hairless parrot on her back?" The bairns began to peep at "the bonny bird," as they called it, and by and by the mother was convinced that it was no evil omen.

Next morning the sun rose without a cloud. Before leaving the cottage my mother pressed payment upon her hostess, but she absolutely refused to take it, saying, "Gweed forgi'e me! I took ye for ane o' you caird-queans that gang aboot tellin' fortunes for bawbees." After bestowing her bounty upon the bairns, my mother, with the cage upon her back, reached her father's house in Inveraven in due time. The news soon spread that Mary Stuart had come home to be married, and brought "such a funny bird" home with her that could speak. Katie Drum, a celebrated "daft wife" that roamed the country round, came amongst the rest to see it. Katie carried a short stick in her hand, and a great pouch hung at her side filled with scraps of waste paper, which she called "sharges." She declared that everyone she met was indebted to her, and served them with a "sharge." She attended all the fairs in the district. On one occasion, at a Peter Fair, she espied General Grant of Ballindalloch; she went up to him and presented him with a "sharge." The General said, "Go away, you impudent woman." "Weel, then," said Katie, "if ye'll nae tak' a 'sharge,' tak' that," hitting the General a good rap on the knuckles with her short stick. When she saw the

parrot and heard it speak, she lifted up her hands in astonishment and said, "Mary, is that ane o' the folk that live ower the sea, or is't a fairy that ye caught on yer wy hame through the Glacks, far the fairies bide? If I had been a God-fearin' man like yer father, Jeems Stuart, I wudna latten the cratur come ower my doorstane."

When my mother's "plenishing" was carried down Speyside to her new home in the Burnside of Rothes, the parrot sat proudly perched on the top of the cart. For seven successive summers she was hung out every fine day on a nail in the front wall, facing the grey remnant of the old Castle of Rothes. On the morning of the 3rd of August, 1829, she was hung out as usual. Very soon she began to scream in a way that betokened fear. My mother being confined, was unable to ascertain the cause of her alarm. After being brought indoors, she still showed fright, and it was noticed that a strange, blue, lurid light was hanging over the top of Benaigen, and the air had a peculiar, sultry feeling. Very soon large raindrops began to fall heavily, but no one dreamed of the overwhelming calamity that was close at hand. All through the following night rain fell in torrents, and when morning broke it was seen that the burn in front of my father's house had overflowed its banks. The village of Rothes is intersected by two impetuous mountain burns, which when in spate come rushing down with great force. My father being a bee-keeper, had taken his skeps to the heather. Early in the morning he went to look after their safety, placing two burns between him and his home. When he got to the back burn, which runs at the east end of the town, he found that the parapets of the bridge had been swept away. Several other men like himself were there. Cut off from their homes, and made desperate by the thought that their wives and families were in danger of being swept away with their houses, they arm in arm rushed over the broken arch of the bridge, to be confronted by a new danger. The water of the middle burn, being impeded by the bridge, left its course and came rushing along the New Street with a force that no one could breast. Through a side lane they were able to reach the Breich Street and get to their homes in safety. In the meantime neighbours had cut turf and placed it against the doors of my father's house to prevent the water from entering, but all was of no avail. The water

rose to the window-sills, and came rushing in through holes in the wall. One bed was placed upon another to raise my mother above the water, with her infant in her arms. The poor parrot was lifted up beside her, screaming with fear, intermingled with the crying of the terror-stricken narrator of this scene. Though less than five years of age at the time, he can still remember the agony of that fearful time. Fortunately there was a back door to the house, but it was blocked by beds and presses. Shortly after my father's arrival, the house opposite, that stood with its back to the burn, gave way with a crash. The thatch and timbers of the roof were hurried against the front of our house, blocking the light of the windows. At this supreme moment the well-known voice of Jamie Gordon was heard calling out, "Come, men, for the Lord's sake, an' save the puir wife an' her bairn. Knock the door in Johnnie Forsyth, rin for yer muckle aix ; ye ken foo tae hanle't." Before Johnnie had time to return, the brawny arm of Archie Leslie with his felling axe very soon broke in the door. The beds and presses were greater obstacles, but they were soon torn in pieces and flung to the devouring flood. My mother and her child were carried safely out amidst the congratulations of her neighbours. I was also carried out more dead than alive.

The minister, old Mr. Cruickshank, was there with his kindly words of comfort. He ordered her to be carried at once to the Manse, but before she could get there a wall at the top of the garden had to be surmounted. A ladder was procured, and she was carried safely to the top, being placed in a chair. Two stalwart men carried her safely to the Mause through the garden. Terror-stricken as I had been, I never forgot the impression that garden left upon my mind. I had no doubt heard of the Garden of Eden. When I saw the trees and bushes laden with fruit of all kinds, I imagined that it must indeed be the Eden that I had heard about. We got a kind and warm welcome from the minister's wife, although folks said that she was "verra different fae the minister" in her respect for the poor. She was reported to have said on one occasion to a guest who at breakfast praised the quality of the eggs, "Ay," said she, "eggs are a very dainty bit, but they are common amongst poor folk." We had no reason to believe this ill-natured report, for eggs were amongst the dainties we feasted on. Having no family of her own, Mrs.

Cruickshank took great interest in me. Every morning a great flock of poultry came to be fed by her on the green in front of the Manse door. She never failed to take me to assist at this interesting function. The first time that I appeared on the scene the great fiendish turkey cock flew at my bare feet and legs. Terror-stricken, I ran to the kitchen door for safety.

After we left home the poor parrot was carried out and placed amongst the swine that had been set free to prevent them being drowned in their styes. One of them put its nose into Jenny Dustan's treacle-pot, upsetting it, and smearing its face with the contents. It ran screaming amongst the affrighted hens, overturning the parrot's cage. The poor bird ultimately followed us to the Manse. Much to the grief of my mother, the parrot began to droop, and died in a few days. The kindly old minister sympathised with my mother in her loss of so interesting a companion. After ten days' sojourn at the Manse, we left its hospitable roof to return to our desolate home.

It is utterly impossible to convey to the reader a full description of the scene of ruin that met our eyes. The gravel and stones which had been piled up by the flood against the front of our house had been thrown back upon the *debris* that filled the roadway, obscuring the light of the windows, and rendering the inside of the house dark and dismal. The floors were a quagmire; boards were laid along the passages to prevent our sinking in them. "Ben the hoose" the kindly neighbours had tried to light a fire upon the sodden hearth, but they failed in their purpose. The peats were so wet and sodden that they would not burn. When Jamie Gordon appeared he brought both warmth and cheerfulness, for he carried a girdle with a burning fire upon it, which he hung on "the crook" in the fireplace, with the remark, "It's a caul' hame for ye, Mary, but as lang's there's a stick in Jamie Gordon's hoose ye'll nae want a fire."

As soon as it was possible after our return home, we ascended the Castle Hill to view the desolation around. When Nehemiah went round the walls of Jerusalem to view the ruins thereof, he must have seen some picturesqueness in the decay and ruins of that once magnificent city; but the scene that met our eyes had no redeeming feature. Sir T. Dick Lauder, in his book "The Moray Floods," gives a very graphic account of the devastation

wrought in and around Rothes, but no pen could describe the utter desolation of the scene that we looked upon. Below us lay the fertile and once beautiful haugh of Rothes. The rich crops of corn and hay that made it a joy to look upon were buried beneath stones and gravel or swept to the sea by the raging flood. The ruins of Widow Riach's farm-house at the upper end of the haugh completed the picture of desolation. The village houses seemed deserted, and their straw thatched roofs looked like clay huts. The crops in the gardens lay beaten to the earth. A great chasm of stones and gravel marked the course of the burn that divides the village into two parts. The bridge that crossed it was entirely swept away, thus preventing communication by wheeled vehicles from either side. On the opposite side of the river the beautifully wooded banks below Arndilly were converted in many places into naked yellow crags. In whatever direction our eyes were turned nothing but ruin and desolation was seen.

The event had such a depressing effect upon my mother that she lost her usual cheerful spirits, and the dampness of the house affected her health. My father therefore decided to go up to Aberlour and "tak' aff" one of the feus that were at the time being granted by the laird of Elchies in the newly laid out village of Charlestown. He set to work at once to erect a house upon his newly acquired stance, where in due time my mother and all her belongings were brought to spend the remainder of her life. "The flitting" is so deeply engraven upon the writer's mind that time cannot efface it. Having been placed in the first cart of the procession, we left the door of our early home amidst the tears and blessings of our friends and neighbours. To me the first great terror of the journey was the crossing of the temporary wooden bridge thrown over the burn. On leaving the village we passed the ruins of Widow Riach's farm. Every step brought to view trees torn up by the roots, many of them hanging from the tops of standing trees. In passing the beautiful and once fertile haugh of Danda-leith our hearts grew sad at the sight of such desolation. A great number of men were employed in cutting deep trenches to bury the stones and gravel that covered the ground, in many places to a depth of two or three feet. At the present day I have not forgotten the terror that I felt in passing under the rocks and over the iron bridge of Craigellachie. My terror was

increased when we crossed the airy wooden structure that united the bridge to the high road. Although the bridge itself was not injured by the flood, at the southern end it made a deep channel, over which for the time the wooden structure referred to was erected. So great was the effect upon the imagination and boyish mind of the writer, that a year or two after, while on his way to visit his native place, nothing would persuade him to walk across the bridge on his feet. He is even now not ashamed to tell the reader that he crossed upon his hands and knees.