

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MINISTER AND HIS HOUSEKEEPER.

“O, reason the need. Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous ;
Allow not nature more than nature needs.”

SHAKESPEARE.

WE read and hear a great deal about the excellence and virtue of domestic economy. In this respect the Manse of Aberlour was a model household. The Rev. Mr. Wilson having lived a bachelor life, his domestic affairs were presided over by Annie Dey, his housekeeper. Their requirements were almost wholly supplied from home productions, and the henhouse and the dairy were largely drawn upon. Economy was practised to such an extent that it was said the minister's shoes were blackened with the grime that adhered to the bottom of the kitchen kail-pot. Not having the qualities of “Day & Martin,” their gloss was always dingy. But the most remarkable thing about the minister's attire was that it never seemed to grow old. Like the garments of the children of Israel in the Wilderness, it seemed everlasting. Clad in a style that set off his bulky and picturesque appearance, he was a very striking figure as he wended his way along the village street. As he went he never failed to kick off any loose stone from it. My father's garden being below the level of the roadway, some of the stones rolled over into it. The encounters that took place between the minister and him on this account are still fresh in my memory. No Scottish Radical of the present day could have expressed more contempt and less reverence for men in authority than did my father upon such occasions for the minister. Yet they were good friends and neighbours when the storm blew over.

When “the minister cam' doon the street,” his movements were eagerly watched by wives and bairns from door and window, but his pastoral calls upon his flock were, “like angels' visits, few and far between.” His appearance upon the street never failed to attract attention, clad, as he always was, in a low-crowned,

broad-brimmed hat that, like his garments, never seemed to wear out, a long-tailed black coat and flapped waistcoat encasing his body, and his nether limbs enveloped in velveteen knee-breeches. White worsted stockings and low shoes of a dusty hue completed the everlasting toilet of the minister of Aberlour. It was generally believed that his ruling passion was the collection of one pound notes. At the time of his death four hundred of them were found in the case of the eight-day clock that stood in his sitting-room.

In proof of the economy practised in the Manse, a story is told of how his housekeeper and he arranged the dinner for a young preacher that came to "fill the pulpit." On one occasion an old friend, who had been a pupil of his when he was headmaster of Banff Academy, wrote asking the minister to allow his son, a young probationer, to preach in the Church of Aberlour. Had any other man asked the same favour he would have been refused. "Young chieles," he said, "mak' ower muckle use o' their neives, an' my pulpit winna stan' their duntin'."

For once the application was granted, however, and Annie and the minister sat in conference as to the resources of the household. It was decided that two chickens should be killed for the Sunday dinner. It was doubtful, however, whether the young minister would stay for dinner; if not, only one bird was to be cooked. When the young minister arrived, a short conference was held in the parlour. The minister remarked, "Ye'll bide an' tak' a bite o' dinner after the kirk comes oot." The young man pleaded want of time, as he was to preach in Rothies in the evening. The minister, seeing that he was not likely to stay for dinner, pressed his hospitality warmly, so that the young man consented to "bide for dinner." The minister rose and opened the parlour door and shut it behind him. As he went along the passage that led to the kitchen, he called out, 'Annie, are ye there, woman? Put the ither cock in the pot; he's bidin' yet.'

Once a year the minister dispensed his hospitality to the members of the Boys' Friendly Society, which met yearly at Christmas time in the Masonic Hall. After the formal business was transacted, the members, dressed out in their official regalia, the boys with gold-embroidered sashes over their shoulders, and with flags flying, marched through the village street to the front of

the Manse, with Josey Watt, their celebrated fifer, at their head, playing what he called "the minister's spring"—"If ye kiss my wife I'll tell the minister." Annie Dey stood beside the minister, bottle in hand, and served drams to the men, while her maids served bread and cheese to the boys. Josey, being first in the procession, was first served. His toast was, "Guid health an' lang life tae the minister, an' lang may his lum reek." "Noo, loons," he would say, "we'll gie Annie her favourite, seein' she's wet oor whistle." The procession then marched off, Josey playing "Haud awa' frae me, Donal'." Besides being a musician, Josey was a poet. His compositions were spiced with satire and broad humour that made the objects of his muse feel anything but flattered. Being very short-sighted, he acquired a peculiar habit of walking and lifting his snuff-box close to his eyes every time he took snuff. He had the same habit of peering into the finger-holes of his flute before he began to play. He was as voluble as a French man, and nobody liked to rouse his animosity, knowing that his biting tongue had poison in it.

I am indebted to my friend, Mr. Peter Weir, late of the Mains of Aberlour, for specimens of Josey's style and composition. Mr. Weir could imitate Josey to such perfection that it was impossible to detect any difference between the two. From the following effusion it will be seen that Josey was a true patriot, a sound Protestant, and a great Radical. He evidently lived before his time. In reciting his newly-composed pieces to Mr. Weir, at the end of every verse he made a pause, and delivered some pertinent remarks upon the appropriateness and force of his language, such as, "Ay, ay, Peter, man, there wasna sae mony fine braws fan Eve shewed the fig leaves thegither as there is now-a-days." The following is Josey's effusion :—

"When Adam first delved in his bonnie kailyaird,
 An' Eve tried her han' at the spinnin' o't,
 They werna oppressed by a factor or laird,
 Their gear was their ain for the winnin' o't.
 Nae tax-gatherer crossed their door threshold ava',
 Their goods werna 'peined' by the limbs o' the law;
 Although their first breeks were scrimpit and sma',
 They had a fell cosy beginnin' o't.

"But times took a turn, an' the pair got a fa'—
 Foul fa' the black thief for the deein' o't,
 His fause, sleeky tongue maist ruined us a',
 I wish it had been skaued in the skinnin' o't,

For fraud and oppression hae ever sin' syne
Laid their han' heavy on frail Adam's line,
An' vice aften triumphs ower virtues that shine,
An' justice, the stream's hardly runnin' o't.

“The poor man labours 'mid trouble an' care
At plooin' an' delvin' an' winnin' o't,
Wi' his belly aft pinched, his back aften sair,
While he toils hard at the winnin' o't ;
His substance is seized on for taxes or rent,
The priest tak's his tithes an' preaches content ;
Wi' hardship an' labour the puir man is bent,
An' sorely oppressed wi' the winnin' o't.

“The farmer should live by the fruit o' the soil,
An' the workman be clad by the spinnin' o't ;
The honey bee suppeth the fruits o' her toil,
But the drone never toils at the winnin' o't.
May want, discontent, an' turbulence cease,
May men live thegither in concord an' peace,
May Britain aye yield a rich crop an' fleece,
To keep oor hands full wi' the spinnin' o't.”

As true poets are many-sided, Josey has a fling at the Emancipation Bill of 1831 :—

“The other day as I did stray
Where Flora gay dispersed her treasure,
Each flower in bloom with rich perfume
My heart rejoiced above all measure ;
And when I strayed beneath a shade,
Down where the little streamlets meander,
As I drew nigh I heard a cry—
'Oh ! let us die ere we surrender !'

“I stood and gazed some time, amazed
To hear so strange a declaration ;
It was no song, I listened long,
Till I was filled with consternation.
'Dear Josey, lad, the case is bad,
It puts me mad with pure vexation
To think that we content can be,
Or bear to see Emancipation.

“The news we hear, I greatly fear,
Will drive us fairly to distraction,
Since Popish Dan, I understan',
Again has won the Clare election.
In his seat he'll not be blate,
In spite of faith and faith's defender,
And he intends to put an end
To Orangemen that won't surrender.

“Forbid that we should ever see
The Ministry of Great Britannie
Become the slaves of Popish knaves,
And bend the knee to Rome's auld granny.

If she breaks loose we'll be crouse,
 Her auld staff we'll break asunder ;
 Our Limerick tie she will deny,
 But let us die ere we surrender.

“ May the auld deil tak' partial Peel—
 Why did he yield to Popish Donnell?
 And Wellington, who laurels won,
 How fast he's run to join O'Connell.
 Our Orange flags may gang tae rags,
 And lie moth-eaten in a corner,
 But up, my men, in strath and glen,
 And stand for Britain and her honour.”

Like one of the old minstrels, Josey travelled from parish to parish playing on his flute and reciting poems. Altogether he was a remarkable character—a man worth knowing. One dark November morning, he stumbled over a plough in a field on the farm of Drumfurrich, near Craigellachie, and broke his leg. After that event his journeys were shorter. At last the end came. During a great snowstorm he died in the parish of Glenlivet, and was buried in the Bridge of Livet cemetery. I am told that a stone is erected there to his memory by his old friends, the Weirs, a family as remarkable for their benevolence and kindness to the poor as they were for their intelligence and mental gifts. The late esteemed minister of Drainie was one of them. When quite a boy at school, James Weir was distinguished for his mental gifts and amiable disposition. Poor Josey was a welcome visitor at the “Mains.” There he found appreciative listeners to his droll stories. Many of them were worth remembering. On one occasion Josey borrowed a horse to go to Elgin. On the road he met a factor, who had been recently made a J.P., who saluted him with, “Josey you're well mounted to-day. You ought, like the wise men of old, to ride an ass.” “I canna get ane for love nor money,” replied Josey; “they're makin' them a' into factors an' Justices o' the Peace.”

When Josey died, one of the best-known Speyside celebrities disappeared from his usual haunts, missed by many who relished his philosophy and biting mother wit.

After the procession of the day, the boys met again in the evening to don their regalia for the ball that took place in the Masonic Hall. Annie Dey gave it her patronage, and led off the dancing with a spirit and grace surprising in such a portly dame.

Few of the younger lasses could so lightly "fit the floor." Jamie Peterkin, one of the most inoffensive and harmless creatures in the parish, never failed to put in an appearance at the procession and the ball. It was truly affecting to see the pleasure that the poor imbecile evinced when the master of ceremonies invested him with a sash. His vacant eyes rolled and his face beamed with pleasure. Poor Jamie was a source of harmless amusement to every loon in the parish. After taking snuff with him, they began—"Noo, Jamie, lat's hear ye spell Rottenslough." Instantly Jamie's eyes began to roll, and his mouth worked as if he was choking. Then he got out "R-o-etn-etn-s-l-o-ech-ech." "Capital, Jamie!" was echoed from a dozen voices at once. "Noo, can ye spell Ecclefechan?" But this was too much for poor Jamie's stuttering tongue. After another pinch of snuff all round, the poor harmless creature went on his way, well pleased with himself, but he was the first member (self elected) to put in an appearance at the next Christmas meeting.