

PETER PATERSON, THE POET.

THAT jaunty and vivacious genius of the public platform, Professor Blackie, is credited with having estimated the living poets of Scotland as numbering several thousands. The estimate is greatly under the truth. The poets of Scotland at the present time are to be rated by tens of thousands, if not, indeed, hundreds of thousands.

Why this should be so is not explainable on ordinary lines. The Scotch are not at all an emotional people—their climate is not particularly poetical in its aspects—the mass of the people are sensible rather than frivolous—and lastly, the cast of the national head is after the shape and character of a well-fired brick, rather than approximating to anything like a copy of the ideal Shakesperian dome of thought.

But then, of course, Scotland has unequalled piles of lofty and rugged hills, glens, burns, lochs, rills, and rivers; and in these inspiring attributes of physical beauty the national lyre has all along been heartily twanged. Moreover, the Scotch have had a history at once the most romantic and manly in the world. And there again, heard or unheard, the native poets of the rural townships and country clachans have all along proved themselves to be, in the matter of verse-making at least, “the chaps that can’t keep still.”

Peter Paterson, a lowly-born, but romantic minded poet, had been a much-married man in his day. He had been three times a widower, no less, and was now a nightly inmate of a twopenny lodging-house, having no immediate prospect of a fourth wife. His first wife had lost her reason trying to appreciate his “poetry.” His second wife lost her life trying to live off it. His third wife had lost an e’e looking for money in his empty pockets, and on discovering a

“fowrpenny bit” one night, the unexpected shock had upset her reason and fairly killed her.

A single incident in this connection will show up Pate’s innocent, guileless, poetic ways, not less than his lofty estimate of married bliss:—

Being out into the country one summer day admiring nature, he found a half-mutchkin bottle of spirits lying on a turf dyke.

He smelt it—whisky! All right! still there was a certain risk. It might be drugged—poisoned—or anything you like.

Away home Pate goes, in a big hurry, the bottle of whisky in his pocket. The face of Nature, fair as it was in his poetic eyes, had no manner of charm equal to that of whisky!

Arriving at home, Pate said nothing, but filled out a glass, and bade his third wife drink. She drank it right off. He waited. No evil effects resulted. *She got no more of it.* Pate went for the rest of it like a soldier. A wife is sometimes a useful plague, after all, if one only knew, like Pate, how to utilise them.

Pate’s history, as embodied in his poetical experiences, is worth relating on account not only of its many racy passages, but also for the wholesome lecture it reads to those whom it closely concerns—the minor poets of Scotland. As one of its outstanding episodes, we shall here give a chapter on Pate’s experiences as a poet publishing his first, and, as it proved in Pate’s case, his last volume of verse; for Pate, poor man, like the typical washer wife, spent a lot of time over his *lines*, and found life full of nothing better than hard *rubs*.

Pate was one of the old-fashioned lun-cheek shaemakers, now all but obsolete, who did their trysted work and repair jobs mostly at their own kitchen fire-end.

Pate, however, had a soul above mere unpoetic shoe-

leather, and very early discovered a facile talent for glueing rhymes together, a practice which would have proved remunerative enough, no doubt, if the produce of the Muse could have been carried for sale to the market like cow heels, sheep-heids, live poultry, and other marketable commodities.

Pay or no pay, however, Pate was bound to regularly rhyme or break out in a sort of skin disorder analogous in appearance to the measles.

In the pursuance of this inborn habit he had rhymed to such purpose, in the matter of quantity at least, that a volume became in time a necessity of the hour and the occasion. A volume was, therefore, decided on. And why not, Pate reasoned with himself, his third wife, and his friends? Other working shoemakers had published volumes, and had in consequence become famous. Why not he? That's what Pate always wanted to know, or rather *not* to know. For a volume he was bent on producing, in the face of all odds, including his third wife—which latter obstacle heavily tipped the balance over all the rest.

Ah, yes, that was where the shoe pinched sorest. What then? Did Pate's third spouse discourage and underestimate his romantic genius? Well, perhaps she did—perhaps she did!

Pate never actually said so, but when asked if his wife fully appreciated his lofty poetic genius, he was in the habit of answering the pointed question by pushing the one side of his nose nearly flat down with his right forefinger on the opposite side of his face, and knowingly winking with his left eye.

However, Pate's unromantic spouse was in some effectual way bought over for the grand occasion, and the idea of a volume was proceeded with apace.

Having got a prospectus printed, Pate's next part of the business was to get a sufficient number of subscribers' names adhibited. And that proved the first rock of despair ahead

of Pate's onward and upward path; for Pate, notwithstanding his poetic elevation of soul, was in numerous instances most cruelly sat upon. Yes, sat upon. He was deliberately and most unfeelingly sat upon, and his projected volume was all but crushed in its beautiful and interesting bud.

In fact, the pure ruffianism and obtuse hard-headedness displayed by the public in the matter was quite appalling, and on several occasions very nearly choked the poor poet outright. One rascal whose name was solicited threatened to send the dog after him. A second ruffian offered him so much the hundred for unsold copies of his book when ready to be used as butter paper. A third callous wretch recommended him to shave his head and wear a damp cabbage blade inside his hat as a check to the poetic measles. While another shocking vagabond, of the sarcastic Mark Twain type, asked the poet if the hallucination was a family one? and whether he (the poet) liked his whisky neat or watered? suggesting that he rather thought he preferred it neat, if the seventeen prismatic colours of his highly-artistic nose went for anything!

Pate persevered through it all, however, and finished the business on the right side of the subscription sheet by getting over three hundred pledged subscribers, and about twice the amount of open insults. He had his revenge for the latter by writing a poetical address to those who wouldn't subscribe to the venture, the closing verses of which were as follows:—

Such is the fate of genius, such
 The doom the poet shares;
 He and boot leather are *in touch*
 If he but show his wares.
 "Be off!" the great man thunders forth.
 The poet, with shock'd ears,
 Retires, an injured man of worth,
 To porter! and to tears!

At last, however, Pate's book "cam' oot," and the proud

poet at once proceeded with the distribution of his subscribed-for copies. And here Pate's real troubles began. The job consumed more time and developed more incident than he had bargained for. To begin with, he was more successful in leaving his books with subscribers than in getting paid for them. "Call again" was reiterated in poor Pate's despairing ears fifty times a day. Some paid the half-crown with a grudge; others wanted 3d. off the shilling, as they could purchase books in the town at that rate; while one brick-headed ruffian coolly accepted the book *for nothing*, and flung it carelessly aside, with a grumph.

"Hauf-a-croon, sir, if you please," meekly said the poor poet, extending his open hand.

"For what?" gruffly questioned the savage satirist.

"My book of poems," said Pate.

The next moment the fellow handed back the poet his book, remarking with callous lips—

"There's a jobbing tradesman up the street a bit who slates roofs and damaged heads at a trifling cost. I can recommend you to him. Couldn't entrust your Byronic cocoa-nut to a safer hand."

More personal still, there was a Dutch-built cook serving a family in Monteith Row, in whose praise the guileless poet had indited a perfectly gushing poem, and in which he had addressed her as his "Bonnie Pot o' Jam," making the word "jam" rhyme in every alternate line with an imaginary love-swain called "Tam." This same rather fleshy nymph of the scullery, however, took offence at the "bonnie pot o' jam" comparison, and by way of resentment threatened the poor poet with the "dish-cloot" instead of the more useful half-crown. Under the crucial circumstances, Pate was glad to pocket his volume and cut his stick without further loss of time.

Worse than even that, the unfortunate poet was one day set upon by a local pawnbroker's auctioneer whom he had

rather satirically "poemed," comparing him to a member of the fighting P.R. in the sense that it was his professional business to "knock down" everything that came before him.

The guileless poet thought the comparison was a stroke of pure poetic genius, and secretly complimented himself on its cleverness. The satirised auctioneer, however, took a diametrically opposite view of the matter, and meeting the poet with his books on his back, said he had a precious good mind to knock *him* down on the spot for one.

"It would be very much in the line of your business," the poet faltered out, trying to whistle up his sinking courage.

"Exactly—going, going, *gone!*" replied the auctioneer, and, driving out his dexter fist, down went Sir Poet with his bundle of books on the pavement.

The assailant thereupon walked rapidly off, thinking he had done a rather smart thing—a belief which the knocked-down poet fully shared.

Pate got up and made tracks for home, but experienced considerable difficulty in reaching his humble domicile, for the confusing reason that (thanks to the auctioneer's well-planted right-hander) he was seeing about six different ways at once.

When he did reach his own humble domicile, he sat down by the fireside in a condition of mind which could scarcely be called acutely happy. For the two succeeding days he kept the house, fully occupying his spare time by nursing his damaged eye with a piece of raw steak. Ever afterwards poor Pate's opinion of auctioneers was strictly private and reserved.

As for the newspaper editors to whom he sent copies of his book for review, they, knowing their business better, let him so softly down that the innocent-minded poet thought he was being kindly, not to say handsomely handled, which was indeed the case, though not in the flattering sense that the poet viewed it.

But the "bubbly-jock" of life turned up here also, as ill-luck would have it, in the person of a reviewer of a humorous type, who styled Pate a "rhyme-struck lunatic," and who further declared that the author's book, like his head, had as much wood in it as would successfully swim it ashore from a mid-ocean wreck. He further wagered that Pate was not clever enough to find a rhyme to the word "orange," offering to print a second edition of his poems for nothing if he succeeded.

Pate thought that the proper use of an orange was to be sucked dry, and not to be dragged in as a rhyming corollary. Notwithstanding this, he made an exhaustive effort to find a rhyme to the word "orange," but couldn't. True, he got the length of "porringer" to the word "oranger," but there he was fatally fixed up and pumped dry. No nearer rhyme could he get, try as hard as he would; so the second edition of Pate's gifted book of poems remains unprinted till this day.

The jokes of friends on the sore subject were hard enough to bear, but Pate experienced even a worse sting in the biting sarcasm of his third wife, who had all along expected a new silk gown out of the profits of the poems at the least.

She nagged at him so continuously on the sore subject, and on the "orange" challenge for some days, that the poet at last threw himself into fierce poetic form and wrote out a powerful remonstrance and challenge, which opened as follows:—

Woman, thy mission is to work the pot-stick,
 And not to make of me a blooming hot-stick;
 To be or not to be? that is the question!
 Whether this "orange" and its vile suggestion
 Of my poetical incompetence
 Is to be trailed under my nasal sense—
 T' excite me as a red rag does the bull?
 By Shakespeare, no! say I. My soul is full
 Of high communings with the Sacred Nine—
Take away that dish-clout!—I am half divine.

It will be guessed from the tone of this lofty and indignant remonstrance that Pate was not only "half divine," but that he was in addition wholly angry, and that he had more than a merely poetical antipathy to that article of domestic use, the dish-clout. The fact is, Pate had a perfect horror of it, as his third wife was in the invariable habit of enforcing her arguments with it by vigorously swinging it round her head, to the serious danger of her husband's beautiful, not to say poetical, nose, the point of which turned itself up to the empyrean airs of heaven as naturally as the flowers turn their petals to the warm sunlight.

Pate was so angry with the jocular editor referred to that he sent him an indignant "epistle" in rhyme, threatening a personal visit on the following afternoon.

Pate called at the editor's office the next day, as threatened. The editor, cleverly estimating his man, had prepared another mild joke at the poor poet's expense.

"Is the editor in?" asked the poet at a counter clerk in the office, which was situated on the ground flat.

"Your name?" said the clerk.

"Pate the poet, they ca' me. I'm the author of——"

"Yes, yes, I thought so. I saw genius in your fine electric-lighted eyes. You deserve a rise in the world. Come this way, please," and he led the guileless poet across the floor to the "hoist," upon which he invited the poet to step.

Pate delightedly did so, and the next moment he found himself alone, and on the decided "rise."

"A real gentleman this commercial man is—a perfect gentleman," said the poet to himself. "He saw genius in my very eyes. Wonder if the stupid owl of an editor will? Not likely, I fear."

Suddenly the hoist stopped short, like somebody's "grandfather's clock," which clock was probably overwound or run

out, as the hoist in question at this particular moment certainly was. Anyhow, the hoist suddenly stopped, and Pate, stepping out, found himself—on the roof!

A workman was busy repairing a damaged bit of the slated portion thereof.

Pate's breath suddenly left him. He had a glimmering suspicion that he had been "sold again," as the Cheap Jacks commonly say of their disposed-of wares.

"Is the editor about?" he timidly inquired of the workman.

"Busy slating his upper storey," said the jocular workman, suggestively tapping his forehead. "If the editor's anywhere, he should be down-stairs, I conclude. Leastways his boots should, of which, if you're a poet, pray have a proper care!"

"Yes, sold again," said the poet to himself, as he sadly turned his fine eyes from the contemplation of this jocular slater.

He went home that day, the poet did, sad at heart, and with the conviction deeply graven on his mind that the newspaper editor was the born "bubbly jock" of the present-day poet—his sworn enemy, his stumbling-block, the fatal bar to his upward singing and winging progress.

Ever afterwards, if an editor's name was mentioned in Pate's hearing, especially in connection with poetry, the poet invariably shied at the head of the offending party the article nearest at his hand at the particular moment, which was a pewter porter-pot oftener than anything else; or, failing that, the blackened remains of a smoked-out clay pipe.

Such, alas! is too often the sad fate of genius—such the dire insults and contumely to which that exquisite and neglected being, the poet, is too often forced to suffer during his melancholy progress through this wicked and prosaic wilderness of thorns.

We conclude the tragically amusing record of Pate's

graphic experiences as a Scotch poet by quoting one of his own finest and truest stanzas :—

THE POET'S FATE!

Misluck and trouble haunt the poet's life,
Who oft resorts to gentle shifts and tricks,
Run down, his fine soul wearies of the strife—
Denying IOU's and dodging bricks!
Thus, thus the poet lives, his angel wings
Worn to the bone on life's hard, flinty rocks;
His harp of gold repaired with old ham-strings,
His last reward—a pauper's wooden box!
