

CHAPTER II

YOUTHFUL RECOLLECTIONS

BEFORE I proceed further, I must mention a few recollections of events which specially interested me when a boy. We had comparatively few holidays when at school, excepting in August during harvest time, when we had four or five weeks' rest from learning. The magistrates and parents of the scholars attended the final examination, and as the boys were leaving school, each was presented with a bag of sweetmeats. This was the case at Hardie's, while at Graham's, besides the sweetmeats, prizes were given to the best scholars.

One of our holidays was on the occasion of the Carters' Ploy. There were a number of cart horses in the town, used for conveying corn and goods to and from Edinburgh. The carters joined their funds together, and had a dance in the town hall in summer. One of them was elected to preside over the ploy, and was hailed as "My Lord." The carters dressed themselves up in a singular manner. They sent their hats to their sweethearts, mostly servant maids, who covered them with ribands, round the brim and the crown, and with many angles of ribands between. "My Lord" had generally a velvetten jacket, also decorated. The carters joined in a

procession, and marched through the town, mounted on their cart-horses. They stopped at the burgh schools, when "My Lord" entered, and craved a holiday for the scholars. This was always granted, and the boys went to see the race. It took place on the high road between Lawrence House and Begbie Coach Works. After the race, there was the dance; when "My Lady," the servant maid who had adorned "My Lord's" hat, opened the ball. I remember one of our servants being "My Lady."

This curious custom has entirely disappeared. Frightful accidents sometimes happened. A cart-horse was quite unfitted for galloping on a macadamized road. Occasionally the poor brute fell, and sustained such injuries that it had to be shot. The riders also occasionally suffered, in broken arms or legs. So the carters' ploy was discontinued, all the more surely, when the advent of railways greatly diminished the number of cart-horses in the town.

We had also holidays on the king's birthday, on the New Year's day, and on the annual Fast Day. On the first named of these festivals, the whole of the Burgesses met at the cross, and drank the king's health; and at night there was a bonfire in the streets, with much squib-firing, and reports of big and little cannon.

I must also mention another sight which struck me with horror. That was whipping house-breakers in public at the cart's tail. No doubt the burglars deserved their punishment; but it took place on market days, in order to have the fullest audience—when men, women, and children looked on. The whipping, with a knotted lash, took place at about six or eight appointed places; and then the criminal

was taken to the gaol to have his bloody back dressed.

There was another exhibition at our meeting house, quite as offensive as whipping men at the cart's tail. That was, publicly rebuking men and women on the cutty stool.* It was usually the women only; the men could not stand it, and fled. Fortunately, the children could not understand the meaning of the rebukes: they were often sent home.

The town had then its piper and drummer. It had been an ancient custom, and the magistrates revived it in my younger days. Donald Macgregor, the piper, skirled the Highland tunes while marching round the town. Old Baird, the drummer, called the attention of the public to rousps, sales, and such like. He was sometimes very drunk, and stuttered and havered, so that the people could not hear his announcements. He was at length dismissed, and "Hangie" was appointed in his place. "Hangie" was one of the town's officers, and, being in debt, he accepted £10 to lash one of the above burglars through the town at the cart's tail. He was ever afterwards called "Hangie." On Sundays, he used to march with the other officers in front of the magistrates from the Town Hall to the Established Church, where the latter took their places in the front of the "laft."

This special officer had another work to do. The town had been burnt down several times during the border wars between the Scots and English, and another great conflagration occurred through the

* "The cutty stool," said Sir John Sinclair, "is a kind of pillory, erected for the punishment of those who have transgressed in the article of chastity." Dr Jamieson, in his *Scottish Dictionary*, says, "It is the stool of repentance, on which offenders were seated in church, now generally disused."

carelessness of a servant, when the town was half burnt down. As a precaution to future servants, the following proclamation was made once a week, towards dark, for six weeks between Christmas and Candlemas :



“ A’ gud men servants where’er ye be,
 Keep coal an’ candle for charitie ;
 Your bakehouse, brewhouse, barns, and byres,
 It’s for your sakes, keep weel your fires,
 For oftentimes a little spark
 Brings mony hands to muckle wark ;
 Ye nourishes that ha’e bairns to keep,
 See that ye fa’ nae ower sound asleep,
 For losing o’ your good renown,
 An’ banishin’ o’ this burrow’s town ;
 It’s for your sakes that I do cry,
 Take warnin’ from your neighbours by.”

The old gentlemen “residents” wore toupées, a kind of peruke tied with a riband, hanging down the back of the neck. Their hair was powdered, and knee-breeches and buckles on the shoes were common. I saw the last of the Spencers—named after the third Lord Spencer, who first wore it ; it was used either by men or women ; and modern fashion seems trying to restore this article of dress.

Although I have written a book about “Thrift” when a man, I was not at all thrifty when a boy. We children had all penny-pigs, or thrift boxes, to implant the idea of saving spare money. But I was never a saver. I thought that the principal use of money was to be spent. I occasionally put a few pennies into the slit, but I soon worked them out again by means of a table knife. My brother Jack filled his to the top, and when it was quite filled the

pig had to be broken to get out the contents. Mine was usually empty. I suppose years and discretion brought the idea of "Thrift," but I continued to spend money pretty freely.

I remember, when a little boy, getting my first introduction to the novels of Walter Scott—then the "Great Unknown." One of my sisters, when an infant, was sent to the country to be nursed; and I used to accompany Peg Nielson, our servant, to see the child on Saturday afternoons. Our way was through Clerkington Park, a charming place about a mile from the town, with the river Tyne meandering through the demesne. Peg was a capital story-teller, and many a time did she entertain us with "auld-waird" tales of brownies, fairies, ghosts, and witches, often making our flesh creep. But she could also be amusing and cheerful in the adventures she narrated. While on the way to Clerkington Mains, I asked her to tell me a story. "Yes, she would: it was a story of a gypsy woman and a little boy who was carried away in a ship by the smugglers." And then she began, and told me, in a manner that seemed most graphic, the wonderful adventures of Harry Bertram and Meg Merrilies, as related in the well-known novel of *Guy Mannering*. Many years after I read the book, and found that she had omitted nothing of the story: her memory was so good and her power of narration so excellent.

When a boy, I was taken by my father to see the Parliament House at Edinburgh. The courts were then sitting, and in one of them I saw the "Great Unknown." He was then Clerk to the Court of Session, and sat, with another clerk opposite him, beneath the Judges, of whom Charles Hope was Lord President—a handsome, splendid-looking man,

with an admirable voice. I saw Walter Scott rise, and limp round the table to his fellow-clerk; then, leaving the Court, he proceeded down Parliament House. He used to be called Peveril of the Peak, because of the loftiness of his head. I saw also in the Court, Francis Jeffrey and Henry Cockburn; the former a bright, keen-sighted little man, with a finely chiselled face; and the latter distinguished for the penetrating darkness of his eyes.

I return to the description of my native town. Haddington lies in the valley of the Tyne, at the foot of the southern slopes of the Garleton Hills. There is a pleasant walk up the first Plantain to the top of the Kayheughs. From the summit, not far from an ancient British earthwork, and looking to the south, a splendid view is to be seen. In the bottom of the valley winds the river Tyne. In the hollow lies the old town, with its ancient cathedral, the Lamp of Lothian, with its massive central tower, rising above all. There sleeps the hallowed dust of many generations.

To the west, lies the richly wooded fertile valley, over the woods of Saltoun, once the seat of The Patriot, Andrew Fletcher, towards Moorfoot and Soutra Hill. Looking due south, the eye stretches over the plantations surrounding the ancient fortalice of Lethington, once the residence of Chancellor Maitland (the astute secretary and adviser of Mary, Queen of Scots), where the "Political's Walk" is still to be seen. The eye wanders south, over the swelling wooded country about Eaglescarnie, Coulston, and Gifford, with the "Goblin Ha'" amongst the trees, until the view ends in the lofty range of the Lammermuirs with their blue summits against the sky.

Down the valley of the Tyne, towards the east, the landscape extends over Amisfield, Whittinghame, towards Hailes Castle, where the ill-fated Queen Mary took temporary refuge with her third husband, after spending the night at Bothwell House, Haddington. Waprain Law shuts out part of the view to the east. The Law is a huge dome, having no connection with any other mountain range. It is a mass of trap rock, which doubtless resisted, in some remote age, the mighty current of water and glacier ice which rolled over the country from the westward.

But fine though the view is from the southern side of the Garleton Hills, it is still finer from the northern. From the Skidhill there stretches out a far-reaching plain, containing some of the finest agricultural land in East Lothian. It extends from beyond Dunbar in the east to Musselburgh in the west. All round this smiling country, lies the Firth of Forth, and in the northern distance the blue hills of Fife. Beyond Musselburgh Bay, Arthur's Seat lies like an elephant at rest, with the pillars of the National Monument on Calton Hill, and the smoke of Edinburgh in the distance. The view is infinite and varied. Looking northward, some five miles off, we see the woods of Gosford (the seat of the Earl of Wemyss), Aberlady Bay—where Napoleon was to effect his landing—Gullane Hill, and still eastwards, the ruins of Dirleton Castle, Balgonie, the Red House, North Berwick Law (a long extinct volcano), the Bass Rock, the crumbling ruins of Tantallon—one of the strongest castles of the Douglasses, and the last which remained in their possession; and far out at sea, at the mouth of the Forth, the Isle of May, crowned with its lighthouse.

One fine afternoon, in August 1822, I went up to the Garleton Hills to see the Royal Fleet on its voyage up the Forth to Leith. Beyond Gullane Hill, three ships were seen nearly close to each other; and we were told by some naval men, who had their spy-glasses with them, that the centre ship had George the Fourth on board, on his way to Leith and Edinburgh. For many weeks before our town had been in a state of excitement. The Mail and the Union were loaded from day to day. Carts and waggons passed through the streets, full of heather, the national badge at the time. Everybody must go to Edinburgh to see the famous procession, and the welcoming of the king. I was considered too young to go, but my eldest brother went with my father, to witness the wonderful sight.

We had our August vacation, and I afterwards went to see my numerous relations at Dalkeith while the king was still residing with the Duke of Buccleuch. I saw the "curled darling" pass along the High Street, on his way from the duke's palace, to visit the Marquis of Lothian at Newbattle Abbey. I had merely a sight of the king in passing, for his carriage drove on at a rapid rate. The Scots Greys were then at Dalkeith, and their band played nearly every morning in front of the Parish Church. The grey horses were terribly used up by their frequent galloppings to and from Edinburgh when escorting the king.

After I had seen my relatives at Dalkeith, I went to Lasswade, Loanhead, Hawthornden, and Rosslyn, to visit other friends there. The scenery along the North Esk is very charming; and the walk by Poulton, through Hawthornden to Rosslyn, is almost unsurpassed in river scenery. The remains

of the old castle at Rosslyn and the exquisitely restored chapel—a marvel of architectural art—attract strangers from far and near.

My grandfather was still alive. He was still acting as an elder of the Cameronians. Some years before my last visit to him, I was present at a field-preaching of the congregation. The people came from great distances. They sat or lay about on the grass; and the preachers succeeded each other, with intervals, during which psalms were sung; the services lasted until near sunset.

I fear I must have been a great “tease” to these old people during my holidays. I had a little cannon and gunpowder, and kept firing away nearly all day long. The neighbours complained, but still I went on; at length I burnt my hands with an explosion of gunpowder, and then I was cured.

My grandfather was a fine-looking old man. He was very gentle in nature. His long, white hair fell over his shoulders. At my last visit, he accompanied me down the loan for about a mile. He was evidently growing weak and feeble. He bore his ninety years well, but age was telling upon him. At last he said, “I am weary,” and sat down upon the milestone. After he had got his breath, he went on, “My dear laddie, I shall never see you any more. I am getting very frail. There is only one thing I have got to do, and that is—to dee. Ye are very young, but ye will hae to do the same, and follow me. Now, be a good boy; read your Bible; obey your parents; farewell, Samuel.”

And so, taking a loving farewell of the old man, I left him there. On looking back, I saw him toddling feebly up the hill. I never saw him alive again. The next time I witnessed his placid face, he was in his

coffin. I attended his funeral at the end of the same year, on a snowy winter's day. He was buried in Lasswade churchyard, near the monument erected to General Sir Archdale Wilson (the victor of Delhi), which overlooks the beautiful valley of the Esk.