

## THE BEAR BARREL.

“O gie me the times when auld ploys were in vogue,  
An’ the cake an’ the kebbuck gaed down wi’ the cogue !”

*How Ainslie.*

THE ancient hamely fare of the Scottish peasant has undergone a change within the last two or three generations. The halesome parritch is still, indeed, the chief of Scotia’s food, though to a less extent than it was when Burns proclaimed its praise. Toasted cakes of oatmeal are, however—the more’s the pity—perceptibly rarer even in farm kitchens than they were wont to be, while girdle cakes are practically unknown. To many people, whose immediate forefathers were possibly reared upon them, the distinction between those varieties of cake is probably only speculative. But while oatmeal has been declining somewhat in popular favour among our rustics, barley-meal may be said to have gone out of use altogether. The souple scone, the wale o’ food, is merely a memory. It is almost necessary to say nowadays to an unenlightened public that it was a creation of barley-meal. John Barleycorn is still, no doubt, the king of grain on hundreds of Scottish farms. His tribute to the Scottish kail-pot, not yet entirely transmuted into that soft and fushionless

concession to enfeebled digestions, rice, still tumbles in a rollicking dance with beef and greens in "the boiling flood;" but the barley bannock, at which our brave forbears took many a whang, and on which, as auld sangs asseverate, they upheld the national independence, has been for some time ungenerously banished from the bill of rural fare. It has no longer an honoured place on Highland dresser or in Lowland aumrie. What was once good feeding for the old Scots nobility is now scornfully rejected by the Scottish crofter and cottar—except, perhaps, in inaccessible regions of Perthshire and Aberdeenshire. The ploughman's palate despises what the aristocratic throat took down with a relish—for how goes the auld Scots sonnet of John, Duke of Argyll?—

"At the sight of Dumbarton once again  
I'll cock up my bonnet and march amain,  
With a gude claymore hanging down at my heel,  
To whang at the bannocks o' barley meal."

Did our swank country lads know how appetisingly sustaining a barley scone can be made—especially did our comely country lasses, our rustic Helens and Hebes, realise the virtues, of beauty to the skin and sweetness to the temper, which reside in bannocks of bear-meal—there would be, I am firmly convinced, such a revival of this well-approved ancient feeding-stuff as would send down the price of wheat, and drive tapioca and similar foreign skinking ware that jaups in luggies clean out of caup and market. It is only now and again, at rare intervals, that some patriotic and patriarchal

bonnet-laird, earthfast on his own acres, takes a greening for the barley piece which consoled his youth, and orders a melder of bear to the mill for his individual consumption, starting off with a baking of half a firloot. But for these intermittent and, alas! ineffectual plunges into the cookery of a remote past, the memory even of the barley bannock would be lost to the whole countryside.

It was not, however, for his benefactions to broth-pot and bake-board that John Barleycorn got title to rank as King of Grain. It was for the gift of his strong heart's blood. There truly he still "shines chief," whether in the etherealised spirit that has jinked through wimpling worms to the glass, or in the rich brown browst that reams owre the brink of the jug in glorious foam. It was for this aspect of John Barleycorn that Burns sang in laudation of the juice Scots bear can mak' us—gude auld Scots drink. And justification of the bard's jubilation is not far to seek; for of the four elements necessary, in his own estimation, to his earthly felicity, John Barleycorn furnished two. Rowth of rhyme was, of course, essential; but scarcely one whit less indispensable were a scone and whisky gill—both of them, there needs no telling, gifts of the bold son of Ceres. A pair of breeks, thrown in adventitiously—a haill pair for preference—completed the condition of the poet's dream of happiness. It is the capabilities of John Barleycorn in this double aspect of him, the scone-and-gill aspect, that gives him his pre-eminence over the kindred grain. But it is easy to multiply the beneficial aspects of John Barleycorn

—it is easy to see double on such a theme. “An’ ye wanted fire and meat and claes, and were deeing o’ cauld, and had a sair heart—whilk is warst o’ a’—wi’ just tippence in your pouch, wadna ye be glad to buy a dram wi’t, to be eilding and claes and a supper, and heart’s ease into the bargain, till the morn’s morning?” It is the testimony of Scott, and the argument of Maggie Mucklebackit. But for sober purposes the twin aspect of the subject need only be insisted upon at present. And in the history of John Barleycorn’s ministrations to man, the solid and substantial scone, there is hardly a doubt, came first. But the flowing gill also is of a high antiquity, and seems destined to outlast the scone. At all events, it is for liquid rather than for solid uses that a greater breadth of Scottish farmlands than at any time in past Augusts waved with “mixing” barley, is waving “all fading green and yellow” with it to-day. From the Lothians in the south to the scarcely inferior barley soils of Moray in the north, the great mass of the bear harvest is destined for distillation and brewing, and only an insignificant proportion will find its way to the mill. The flower of it goes to the brewer; the distiller gets the inferior quality; but even when barley-bread was a staple food in the farm towns and burgh towns of Scotland, it was still the lighter qualities of both bigg and barley that were dressed or ground at the mill for pot and girdle.

Before the glory of the old harvest-field disappeared, on the advent of the mechanical reaper, a special distinction was given to the barley harvest over that of

other grain. The festival of Harvest Home, otherwise known as the Maiden, or the Kirn, though unhappily dying out, is at least known by repute to every one. But only few can now remember that, before the grand concluding festival of the autumn season came round, a kind of snack or foretaste of its ampler fun was the custom, now grown obsolete, on nearly every farm. It marked the stooking, that is the gathering into stooks, of the barley harvest; and the celebration of that event was known as "The Bear Barrel." In respect of name it might be regarded as a set-off to the Kirn festival. Each of those autumnal merry-makings was named from the part played at their celebration by the contents proper to these vessels—whisky (not beer, as might be imagined) in the one case, and cream in the other. The ambrosial composition called "cream-crowdie" was originally, and still is—where the festival is correctly observed—an essential part of the great banquet of the Kirn. In comparison with the Kirn, the celebration of which was preceded by elaborate preparations, and accompanied by Gargantuan eating and drinking, and quite a programme of pastimes, the ploy of the Bear Barrel was simplicity itself. The barley crop, as even towns' bodies know, ripens soonest, and is generally taken in Scotland in the end of August or the beginning of September. While it was being gathered, in an earlier generation, by the old-fashioned hook into sheaves, and the sheaves fastened by bandsters and "stood" up into stooks to dry and harden, the oats—and wheat; where wheat was grown—were qualifying for the sickle in their turn; and it usually happened that just when

the barley maiden was taken—that is, when the last handful of ripe barley on the farm was shorn—the reapers, without any cessation of field work, could go forward to the wheat and oats. It would sometimes occur that a little of the latter was taken before the barley harvest was quite finished ; on the other hand, there might be an occasional lie day or two, rarely amounting to a week, but according to the character of the particular season and the state of the weather, during which period the harvesters would have to wait till the remaining corn was matured. But whenever it happened that the barley was all cut down on the farm, whether the oats were already touched or still grew in their green virginity, the event was marked in the evening by the little Maiden of the Bear Barrel. When the day's work was done and supper was over, just as it all went on upon ordinary harvest days, signs of something extraordinary began to show themselves both in the roomy barn, where the fee'd harvesters—weavers of both sexes, for the most part, from the nearest vilage—were accommodated, and in the scarcely less roomy farm kitchen, where the entertainment was to be held. In the barn, or at the barndoor, if the air was tranquil, the members of the bandwin or bandwins (a bandwin included two men and four women shearers) began towards gloaming to pay a little unusual attention to dress, and to personal appearance generally ; the men performed ablutions, handled a comb, perhaps a razor ; tied round bare, sun-scorched craigs, with more or less grace and comfort, a woollen scarf of faded tartan or other check ; made gallantry to the girls, and perhaps opened a communication through

the herd with the harvesters on the adjacent farm. The women, who always made themselves tidy of an evening, seemed on their part in gayer spirits at the prospect of a ploy, and perhaps added a brighter snood or head riband than usual to the adornment of their hair. Meanwhile, in the farm kitchen the keg of whisky—the caggie, as it was endearingly called—containing a matter of some three or four gallons, was solemnly introduced, or rather inducted, and the farmer presently appeared, with the gravity of an officiating elder, in the ha' doorway, and briefly demanded in a stoor voice, directed at the barn, "whether they werena coming to taste the Bear Barrel." This was understood to be a pressing invitation, as indeed it was meant to be; and it was accepted for the most part with such an air of gloomy indifference, or reluctant obedience, as a rustic thinks it necessary to assume when approaching the House of God on a Sunday. They sauntered singly or in silent knots across the yard with a ridiculous air of decorum—unless some frisky young fellow, the wag of the party, probably a tailor by trade, cut a caper to make the maids giggle, or inquired in a loud whisper of some douce Jeanie Deans among the young women "whether she had mindit to bring her Bible and a peppermint?"

As likely as not, more especially on hill farms, the whisky was a home product or smuggled manufacture, and at the time referred to—a few generations ago—did not in any case stand the farmer in more than twopence a gill of three glasses. As much as an English pint, consumed in the course of the evening,

a glass at a time, was the average allowance to each harvester's mouth, male or female, at the fête of the Bear Barrel. It was held to be a sufficiently sober splore at that. Exceptions there were, of course, to the moderation of this allowance; some drouthy carle of a bandster, for example, might prefer his share in a caup or luggie, declaring that his mouth held just a gill, and that a less measure only gave his tongue "the smell o't;" while, on the other hand, a modest bit lassie at her first hairst would be content to cough at a thimbleful. Unstinted bread and cheese or butter (not both—those who united butter and cheese were counted menseless) lay to hand on the kitchen table, but the entertainment was distinctly a liquid one; it was in no sense a supper. The tups' heads and trotters, the links of puddings black and white, the sides of mutton, or chines of beef, and all the rest of it, which supported the long revelry of the Kirn, were out of place at the modest carousal of the Caggie. And here, by the way, the reader of this paper, who may be interested in the antiquities of Scottish social customs, might be referred to an incidental account by Sir Walter Scott of the festivities at a harvest home on Tweedside three and a half centuries ago. The scene is laid at the Tower of Glendearg, and the account will be found in the thirteenth chapter of *The Monastery*. But to come back to the Bear Barrel and the youth-time of the nineteenth century. The invited reapers stepped into the glow of the kitchen awkwardly, bashfully, almost apologetically, as if the expected entertainment was hardly to be taken seriously. They caught the eye of the farmer, stand-



ing like a Colossus on his own floor-head, as they entered, and fell with him into a discourse on the evening's weather, shaping their remarks to meet the wishes of their employer and entertainer. There was of course some talk on the excellence of the barley, and the farmer was sure to be complimented on the fineness of his crop, both head and stalk o't. He would probably acknowledge the compliment by treating himself incontinently to a huge pinch of snuff, and sending his mull on a coasting voyage round the apartment. It was still the age of rappee, pipe tobacco being as yet left to tinkers and other gangerels. The men folk hung about the floor, while the women gathered into knots on long forms at the wall. Presently the tap was turned, and the Master of the Harvest ran off a glass, held it up, making the while critical grimaces with one side of his face at the yellowish liquid, pree'd it deliberately, smacked his lips twice amid the universal hush, and pronounced it gude. The next glass he dedicated at a throw to the health of the company. Then came the harvesters' turn. They toasted their entertainer and each other in an informal way ; the wag, who was also the buck of the party, winked his regards to the girls, and pretended to be suffocated at each sip ; the character of the whisky was favourably commented on, as if it were the newly manufactured juice of the barley they had just been praising. One, perhaps, to uphold his credit as a connoisseur of whisky, reserved his judgment, though frequently appealed to, till a late hour in the evening, when curiosity was no longer excited, and had then the hardihood to declare that he had

tasted a better brew. But the farmer was generally a match for such impertinences, and, in a case like the one supposed, would be kittle to retort with the coarse but conclusive proverb—"Ay, ay, Tammy, ma man! as the soo fills, the draff spills!" By and by, under the influence of John Barleycorn, the wheels of life, as the poet says, began to scrieve along wi' rattlin' glee. Strangers from the neighbouring toun, aware of the night's frolic, peeped in blately at the open door, were made welcome, and added their news and their nonsense to the bustle that now filled the wide kitchen. Every tongue was going, and the conversation, which had first spread out from the more particular occasion of the gathering into channels of general interest, was now racing along in twenty different courses, here noisily and argumentatively, there jocosely and banteringly, and yonder sweetly and smoothly with whispered favours "secret and precious." Some one at last calling out that the night was wearing, the cry for a song or a dance was raised—just one. Where concertinas are now plentiful, the fiddle was not rare in those days; if the fiddle failed, probably a bag-piping shepherd in his hut on the braes was to be had for the hazard of rousing him. Failing both windbag and catgut, there was the diddler. Anybody could diddle who had good lungs and a sense of rhythm. But the man or woman who had the reputation of being good at diddling was at once called for with a voice there was no denying. It was an accomplishment so much in demand at the daft days, and at other convivial seasons, that we have known a woman-servant who, in enumerating the list of her qualifica-

tions for farmhouse service, crowned the catalogue by intimating that she was "a grand diddler." She was engaged off-hand. The diddler, then, whether man or woman, was put into a corner, and the dancers took the floor. A veteran diddler dashed courageously into his duty. Following or falling into a tune, he opened his mouth, and sang or said, to the beat of his foot on the kitchen tiles, "Diddle-diddle, diddle-diddle," and kept on singing or saying, "Diddle-diddle, diddle-diddle," with little variety of tone, but without a pause, and with due attention to time, till he was black in the face, and his tongue was as dry as a parrot's. He required frequent slockening—that is, a drink at the end of every dance; and if that was not reward enough, he had the appreciation of the dancers, and the proud consciousness of controlling a principal part of the evening's amusement. After the one dance and a circulation of drinks, a song—only one—was probably called for. Burns's ballad of the life and death of John Barleycorn was often given, as appropriate to the occasion of the Bear Barrel; but each district had its favourite songs, which were certain to be demanded and given, whatever the occasion of the social gathering might be. A great favourite in Strathmore farms at one time was the Forfar Pensioner. I have never seen it in print, and it is too long to give here; but whether from youthful associations or intrinsic merit, it will remain in my memory when many a more popular rhyme has been forgotten. It is a sort of rustic Odyssey, recounting, in the first person, the adventures of a Forfar lad who enlisted in the time of the Napoleonic wars, and fought in the Peninsula:—

“ We mairched thro’ mony a market place,  
 An’ wandered up an’ down, sir ;  
 My coat was covered owre wi’ lace,  
 An’ powdered was my crown, sir.”

But marching orders of a different kind were issued,  
 and he was “ ca’d owre to Spain”—

“ Where fifty regiments in a raw  
 Cam’ mairchin’ owre the plain, sir.”

The night before his first encounter with the French  
 was a sleepless one to him—

“ Dreary thochts cam’ in my mind  
 O’ Farfar an’ my daddie.”

It made his heart beat when the French came on pell-  
 mell, but—

“ Farfar bluid was ever true,  
 Sae I did not retreat, sir.”

A ball struck him, but he loaded and fired again.  
 At last

“ The bluid cam’ bockin’ thro’ my hose,  
 I could nae langer stand, sir,  
 I flang my gun amang my foes,  
 An’ sat me doon an’ sang, sir  
 ‘ Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled,’  
 Syne ‘ Up wi’ Maggie Dick,’ sir ;  
 My wounded leg grew unco sair,  
 An’ stiff as ony stick, sir.”

He came home with the help of an oxter staff, and  
 lived snugly on his well-earned pension. Scarcely  
 less popular was the amatory song of a ploughman lad  
 from Stirling braes, whose vagaries in drink had rare  
 power of diverting the rustic mind. Even the English  
 song of the Derbyshire clown was a prime favourite  
 among the farms and bothies of Strathearn. Its action

chorus of beating a drum was not its least attraction. It began in some such way as this--

“ A sturdy clown from Derbyshire,  
Fed up on mirth and loyaltee,  
With his sturdy legs and his shoulders broad,  
But as ignorant as a child could be ;  
He went to a sergeant recruiting there,  
With a broad red sash about his waist,  
‘ Come, tip me your fist, for I mean to list,  
And I hope you will speak and get me placed !’  
With a row-dow-dow,” etc.

Dance or song, one led to another—the dance, as giving active employment to most, or even to all, predominating ; whisky was shed like water, till the kitchen smelled like a change-house at a Holy Fair celebration ; and when ten o’clock struck through the revelry, it was recognised at once that the Bear Barrel for the year was over. Duty required that the harvesters should be astir next morning at five ; there was no allowance made for late hours at a Bear Barrel merrymaking ; it was a mere episode, which was suffered in no way to retard the operations or dislocate the arrangements of the precious harvest season. The mirth was hearty for the two or three hours it lasted, and strangers from the neighbouring farm were welcome to a taste of the liquor and a share of the mirth. But there was no attempt to abuse the farmer’s hospitality or demoralise the farm-town. In a few minutes after ten everybody was either fast asleep or falling over—those in the latter condition perhaps with the half-formed wish that the morning might be wet, so as to secure a long “ lie” for limbs doubly tired with the toils of the hairst field and the festivities of the Bear Barrel.