

KENNETHCROOK:

SOME SKETCHES of VILLAGE LIFE.



CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

If you had asked me forty years ago where Kennethcrook lay I do not know that I could have told you. I knew it was a village located somewhere in central Scotland, but it would have taxed my memory to its utmost to have given you its exact situation. That was forty years ago. It is not so now. It is thirty-nine years come Martinmas since I (not then out of my teens) set my face towards Kennethcrook, and heard in the chime of its eight o'clock bell a future as grand and glorious as ever Dick Whittington heard in the music of the Bow Bells of London. I have heard that future rung from the Kennethcrook church tower many hundred times since then, and, although I may not have realized the visions of my youth, still I have found much to be thankful for in the little weaving and nailing village, where nearly forty years of my life have been passed. Sitting, tonight, in my little room which has been my place of habitation through all these years, and letting my mind wander back through the inter-

vening space, I am made conscious of many changes—made conscious that a new generation has arisen to fill the place of that which inhabited Kennethcrook four decades ago. Indeed, reflection forces me to the conclusion that the village of to-day has nothing in common with the Kennethcrook of my youth, and that I am fast following in the footsteps of one or two of my acquaintances, who, bearing the weight of a few more years, seem to have lagged superfluous on the stage.

But I have many links that bind me to Kennethcrook as it was forty years ago. I have only to look around me to find relics of departed friends. There is "Doric Lilts," the very sight of which recalls to memory its author and the untoward circumstances which attended its publication. Here, I have "Josephus," whose ponderous form was once dusted by the manse housekeeper, and whose very leaves seem to tell me of a long and close companionship with its former owner. There, too, in a corner of my desk, you will find some songsheets ; dirty and dog-eared they may be now, but they were clean enough when they hung on a string and served the purpose of a screen for Luckie Jack's window. Everything in my room, I might say, has a history and is connected with the village. The chair on which I sit has no varnish on its right side ; it was placed too near the Anti-Burgher minister's fire. It is well that the Anti-Burgher minister does not see his chair to-night ; the cushion is made of the French repp that used to cover the

Some Sketches of Village Life. 11

ould kirk pulpit. My table, too, has a history, but I have not set myself to chronicle the associations which cluster around my household gods, and so shall desist at once.

In introducing you to my home of forty years it may not be amiss, indeed, it may be appropriate, if I tell you a little of him to whom I owe my own introduction to the village. His acquaintance is one of the brightest recollections of my early days. With him I spent my evenings until my knowledge of the people widened the circle of my friendship, at which time, I doubt not, my visits to his house became less frequent.

His house was a one-storey building with thatched roof, and was situated at the southernmost end of the "Raw." You will search for it in vain now, but do not think my statement false. The "Raw" itself is changed since these days. It rejoices in the more dignified, if less suitable name—"The New Road"—and, as such, is recognised by the younger generation. The old folks are slow to adopt changes. With them it is "The Raw" still.

Into this little, humble dwelling, in "The Raw" of forty years ago, I would invite you to the company of my friend. Let the time be a Sabbath afternoon.

Even now I see him sitting in his arm-chair with a book resting on the little deal table that stands under the shadow of his eight-day clock, whose tick tick is the only sound that breaks the stillness of the room. It was no part of his etiquette to rise and welcome me, but his

welcome was none the less hearty. He had always a kindly word for me, and I enjoyed his "crack" to the uttermost. Pointing me to a chair, he would lay aside his book, and enter into such conversation as the sanctity of the Sabbath would permit. The book he had laid aside was sure to be the Bible or the "Scottish Christian Herald." These were the only books he read on Sabbath. His library consisted of about a dozen volumes ranged on a little shelf suspended by cords. The "case," as he called the shelf, was the handiwork of himself, constructed in his early days when his love for books was intense. Its contents had been purchased by him when literature was dear, and case and books were sacredly treasured. I often examined the volumes. They were typical of the old work-a-day Scotsman's library. I have a few of them before me as I write. They came into my possession many years ago, and now rest beside gaudier but not more treasured volumes in a corner of my more ambitious "case." The leaves are yellow and the bindings are shabby, but the books are interesting for all that. The fly-leaf of one of them tells a tale. It has been converted into a family register. I never knew how many children my old friend had, but his must have been a large family, as this book only serves the purpose of a supplementary register. Above the names inscribed on the fly-leaf we find the words, "Continued from the Bible." I have spent many an hour looking at the quaint characters traced by that father's hand as each successive child came to earth ;

Some Sketches of Village Life. 13

but genealogy is not my object here, and so I need not dwell longer on the writing that is becoming dimmer with every day. His library consisted of books specially interesting to Scotch Presbyterians. There were four volumes of the "Christian Herald," Boston's "Fourfold State," Pollok's "Course of Time," the "Scots Worthies," and several others dealing with the Covenanters. He was fond of his books; they were his companions through many silent hours, and he was thoroughly conversant with them. Nothing was more appreciated by him than a discussion of, and an expression of sympathy with, the sufferings of Helen of the Glen and Ralph Gemmel, or the other worthies of the covenants.

As I have already told you, it was from him that I learned a little of the history of the village and the villagers. He had never been a week out of Kennethcreek at a time; he knew everybody and everybody knew him. For the last few years of his life he watched the ways of the village with interest. Here, on the one hand, in the "Hallow," were the carpet mills that supplied the village with existence, there, on the other hand, in the Raw was the public road to the north that many young men, ay, and young women too, have taken, bidding farewell to their native village, and going out to push their fortunes in the greater centres of the commercial world. Keeping his constant vigil he wove out the web of his existence. He always sympathised with me, both in my joys and in my sorrows, although, perhaps, I

never realised the sincerity of that sympathy until I experienced the want of it. I tried to brighten the evening of his life, and I am inclined to believe that I succeeded in some measure, for he always seemed pleased to see me. It may appear strange that I should write in this fashion after so many years, but kind deeds done and kind words spoken live when life has spent itself.

He died in the early spring. His relatives had been expecting the end for some time, but when it came, it came all too suddenly. It was an afternoon in February. The snow had been falling incessantly during the day and, flake by flake, had spread its virgin mantle over the earth. Towards the afternoon, however, a keen frost set in, and, when the stars peeped out from their azure bed, it was as beautiful an evening as one could wish. The moon, in the first arc of its fulness, was sailing proudly across the heavens, making the snow the whiter for its light. The far away Grampians that bounded the northern horizon stood out like sheeted ghosts against the blue of heaven. It was just such a night as one would suppose the angels would select for their mission of soul-seeking, and it was on this night that my old friend was taken home.

We were gathered round his bed. I was considered a friend and had been called. There was no light burning, but the moonbeams shone brightly on the coverlet and played sweetly on the features that were setting in death. The clock struck out five clear notes painfully loud

Some Sketches of Village Life. 15

in the deathlike stillness. As though recognising the voice of an old friend, he turned his head at the clock's first chime, and, ere it had finished, he had gone. A "large and respectable company" gathered round the grave that Saturday afternoon as we laid him to sleep. He is still remembered by many in the village although his relatives have long since left Kennethcreek. His was one of those sweet lives that help to bring humanity nearer its ideal; that help to efface the work of sin and restore the image to a nearer resemblance to its Maker. His face lingers with me still. I hear his voice through the years that have fled, and perhaps you will forgive me if I tell you I sometimes ponder at his grave. Last evening my room seemed fresher than it does to-night, for I had a little glass of snowdrops on the table. I laid them on his grave this morning.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAGE.

ALTHOUGH in my introductory words I was forced to the confession that forty years ago I knew not the location of Kennethcrook, I am not in that position to-day. The village around which my story gathers lies near to the battlefield of Scottish independence. It sleeps at the foot of the hill on which Rockburgh stands, and no spot is more famous in Scottish annals than that of Rockburgh. Much there is that I might tell you of the historic connections and time-honoured traditions that hover around Kennethcrook, but that is without my province at present. My work lies more in village life and story, lived and told during the last half-century.

Within the past forty years the population of Kennethcrook has materially decreased. Then it stood at 2000 ; according to the last census returns its inhabitants do not number more than 1000. The advance of civilization—the achievements of steam—sounded the death-knell of the village, and to-day the hand-loom industry and nail manufacture are lingering out almost unconscious lives. “Loem Lane” when I knew it first well deserved its title. On either side there was a row of low, thatched houses—sheds you might have called them, and not been

Some Sketches of Village Life. 17

guilty of using a misnomer—and each of these gave accommodation to four weavers. Four weavers! Yes, four seems to be a fated number. There are four hand-loom weavers in Kenneth-crook to-day. Nailmaking, too, has vastly decreased. Indeed, if I except the machine work that obtains in the village and gives employment to something like a dozen hands, I may say there is not a nailer in the place. Within the past few years a row of trim, little cottages has been erected on the road leading into Rockburgh. The cottages are the suburban residences of Rockburgh's wealthy merchants. But just step over to old Duncan Watson, and ask him where "Nail Raw" stood. You will not be the first who has asked him that question, for many a time has he pointed to the suburbs of Rockburgh, and, with something suspiciously like a sneer, remarked—"There, whaur that raw o' doo-cots stands, stood the 'Nail Raw.'" If he is in a talkative mood he may enter into a detailed description of "Nail Raw" as he knew it in the palmy days of hand-nailmaking.

"Six-and-thirty fires," I have heard him tell, "were since ablaze in 'Nail Raw.' It began wi' Tammas Tamson at the north end and feenished wi' John M'Gregor at the sooth. Ay! an' mony a brow penny's been made in that Raw, though there mayna be naething to tell o' siccan things as nailmakin' unless ye coont the smiddy ase that's strawn fornent thae dandy doors."

If all stories are true, Duncan made a good round sum in his own interests. "Nailer's

sons," as the villagers say, "are no made meenisters aff naething."

To this falling off in the industries is due the depopulation shown by the latest census returns. So long as the weaving of a yard of cloth was to be obtained, or a hundred pitcher ears were required, the villagers never thought of removal. But the dark day came. When Colonel Robertson of Blair betook himself to the fashionable circles of London, the last prop of the village was cast down. He stood by Kennethcrook like an anxious doctor at a patient's bedside, and tried to prevent the ebb of its life. But in time London came to have its attractions, and when he divided the energies he had hitherto concentrated on the village, Kennethcrook sank for want of support. It is sinking still. It lingers on scarcely conscious of the outer world. At times there appears a ray of hope, but it appears only to vanish, and vanishing, leaves the village darker than before. Some of the villagers are of opinion that a brighter day is in store for Kennethcrook, but these are the village optimists. The proverb which says:—"Ilka cloud has its siller side," is an article in their confession of faith, but if you had watched the ebb and flow of industry as I have done, you would be no party to the acceptance of that article. It is easy to be mistaken, but I fear the sun of commerce has set on Kennethcrook.

Forty years have seen great changes. I have heard it said that men who have been cast away on a desert island have kept count of the days by taking a stick and adding a notch to it every

Some Sketches of Village Life. 19

evening. If I had adopted that plan and cut a notch for every man who has passed away, I think the stick would have been notched into nothingness long ago. But, there, I have said enough, and will now tell you a little of Kennethcreek as I knew it first.

It had one street and it was called the "Main Street." A later generation saw fit to change its name, and it is now "Henderson Place." I believe its re-baptism was a thing to be desired, for what is the use of calling a street the "Main Street" when it, practically, is the only street of any importance in the village? At the north end of the street, running at right angles, were the "Shirra's Brae" and "Loom Lane." The "Shirra's Brae," which ran eastward, was so named in compliment to a bumptious weaver who took upon himself the meting out of justice in the village, and for his kindly interest was dubbed "the Shirra." I may be forgetting, but I think that was the only payment his judicial services ever brought him. "Loom Lane," which ran westward, was so called from the fact that it consisted of two rows of loom shops. Here, through the long summer day, sometimes from five in the morning till nine in the evening, you could hear the "rickety, tickety, tik, tik, tik," of the looms, and between hours, when the day's work was done, or the web completed, indulge in a crack with the weavers. Turning southwards from "Loom Lane," and running parallel with the "Main Street" was "Nail Raw," so named from circumstances akin to those which led to the

baptism of "Loom Lane." In that row we had the other industry of the village represented, and although there are only two sheds now engaged, I remember when both sides of the Raw were occupied, and three or four nailers in each shed. The fourth side of the square—three sides of which were formed by the Main Street, Loom Lane, and Nail Raw—was occupied by what is now known as the New Road. Forty years ago it was the "Raw," and was the place where the general merchants—those of them who did not live at the back of their shops—together with the foremen at the mill resided. Andra Duchart, with his usual sarcasm, referred to it as—"The Terrace" of Kennethcrook. In the centre of the square thus formed stood the mill. On every side the ground sloped downwards towards the factory, and the villagers called it "the Hallow." Down in its very depths the Lunarty wound its way, turned out of its natural course to supply the mill with water, after which it found its way back to its own channel just beneath the bridge in the centre of the "Main Street." The mill was the property of Colonel Robertson. On his removal to London it fell into the hands of his sons, and since that time has given continued evidence of a decaying industry.

Into this square of streets the life of the village was gathered. One or two cottages were built beyond the general contour of the place. These, however, with the exception of the farms that were recognised as part of Kennethcrook, were the only erections that did not comply with the

Some Sketches of Village Life. 21

apparent design of the village. The suburbs of Rockburgh and other buildings have done much to extend the boundary of Kennethcrook and take from it the compactness for which it was famous, but these buildings are modern structures built by folks who have little sympathy with the older village.

Kennethcrook was called a double village. It had two kirks, two ministers, two beadles, two precentors, two dominies, two bellmen, and, I think two of everything you could name. The most conspicuous couples, however, were those I have mentioned, and nothing had disturbed their uniformity until 1846, when the Free Kirk seceders built a place of worship for themselves. That was a sad day for the village. Under the triple order things might have gone well enough, but the triple order was not sustained. The seceders added a kirk, a minister, a beadle, and a precentor, but stopped there. It looked odd like, the villagers said, but two years later all was righted. The Free Kirk built a school and got a dominie of its own, and Kennethcrook dispensed with its bellmen. "It's a great shame," said Tammy Roy, one of the bellmen when he learned that his services were no longer required; "ay, its naething mair nor less than a disgrace that twa decent men should be thrown idle to please the norrie o' twa-three idle folk." But the idle folk failed to see it in that light, and though Tammy pled his cause to the very last, and swore on his deathbed that if there were courts of justice in the other world he would appeal to be reinstalled in office, he failed to carry conviction

to the hearts of the villagers, and since then Kennethcrook has never recognised a bellman among its functionaries. I visited Tam one day during his last illness, and after some conversation he turned our talk to the defunct office of bellman. After recounting many of his red-letter days when he had been instructed to make some most important proclamations, he spoke in terms which I do not care to repeat of the manner in which he had been discharged.

"Ay," he said, closing his eyes and his argument, "they speak o' a twasome toun, but there are some twafaced folk that bide in't."

Tam's words have become proverbial, and some are inclined to think that, taking everything into consideration, he was very near the mark with his criticism. But it is not my intention to deal with the double character of the village here. I shall tell you more of it again.

Kennethcrook to the casual observer is no very attractive place. Far away, from the heights of Rockburgh, you can see its red tiles rising from the rich pasture land of the Carse of Forrie, broken by one or two squares of thatch—the roofing of older houses. The spires of the churches rise high above its inhabitants, but their grandeur is lost by their surroundings. There is nothing, indeed, in its appearance—if appearances go for anything—to invite the visitor on a tour of inspection. Still, beneath a shabby coat there oftentimes beats an honest heart, and honesty in tatters is no unknown quantity. So it is with the village. In the midst of its antiquated appearance and fragile

Some Sketches of Village Life. 23

construction there dwells a sweet homeliness whose tender influences oft touch the soul to finer issues. It is a ripple of love that sings merrily among the pebbles of humanity that have gathered themselves into the retirement of the village—a ripple whose song and influence alike would be lost in the rush and roar of the rivers of the outer world.