CHAPTER V.

VILLAGE WORTHIES.

"No more that meek and suppliant look in prayer
Nor the pure faith to give it force are there;
But he is blest, and I lament no more
A wise, good man, contented to be poor."

IF Christian rectitude and moral worth is the true standard of man, the Parish of Aberlour possessed such men. Two of them, pre-eminent for their unobtrusive piety, deserve to be remembered, for their names are certainly written in that book which will be brought forth at the great assize, when judgment will be passed upon all men according as it is written therein. James Grant and William Shearer, the one a shoemaker and the other a weaver, were members of a religious body called Seceders. Unlike many sects of the present day, they had none of that clamorous, aggressive self-glorification that we hear so much of now-a-days. When they prayed they entered into their closets and "shut the door." They prayed in secret, but it was openly known, and the influence of their prayers was a rebuke to many around them who neglected the good old habit once so prevalent in Scotland—family prayer.

It was a privilege to be permitted (as the writer was) to spend the long winter evenings in the shoemaker's shop. At that time there was no Sunday school, reading room, night school, or any society for the intellectual improvement of boys or young men in the parish. Literature of any kind was beyond their reach. Even books were a very scarce commodity. When one reads that Burns and Janet Hamilton had the writings of our great classic authors in their libraries, we see what an advantage they had over the youths of many a northern parish, whose literature consisted of the Scriptures and a few dry religious books, many of them unattractive to the young. There was a certain sort of literature of a very objectionable kind carried about the country by chapmen, from whom this class of books derived the

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name of "chap-books." Many of them were coarse and vulgar in the extreme, with a broad humour very detrimental to the morals of the young, who eagerly read them for lack of better entertainment. I am sorry to say it, but Aberdeen has much to answer for in the production of "chap-books" and vulgar ballads, which generally had a pictorial heading of the rudest kind. It is utterly impossible for the young people of the present day to fully appreciate the advantages they possess over the youths of a northern parish sixty years ago. Illustrated periodical literature was a thing unknown to them at that time. An enterprising merchant, who made occasional visits to London, brought home from there a first copy of the *Illustrated London News.* He kept the village post-office, and hundreds of people crowded to the shop to look at this "world's wonder."

The writer has seen a goodly number of pictures and illustrated periodicals since he looked at that first copy of the *Illustrated London News,* but the picture that has left the deepest impression on his mind was a woodcut plastered on the wall above the fireplace in James Grant's shop. It represented the seven stages of a man's life. On the left hand, the boy, gleeful and buoyant, stood upon the first ascending step; step by step he ascended until he stood upon a platform erect in the vigour of manhood. On the right, he descended step by step until he reached the lowest one. There he stood, staff in hand, bowed and decrepit, ready to drop into the grave. Such a picture had no need of an inscription beneath it.

When quite a little boy, the writer had gathered together a varied store of inartistic, rude pictures from the fly leaves of "chap-books" and ballads. So greatly were they prized by him that they were pasted on the inside of a "muckle claes kist." On Sundays, when the parlour was occupied, permission was granted to lift the kist lid and display the picture gallery for the entertainment of the assembled family. Every new addition to the collection was looked upon as a priceless treasure. Besides the pictorial adornment of the lid, the kist contained other family treasures that were looked upon with wonder and admiration. It contained a Leghorn bonnet of enormous dimensions, given to my mother by her aunt, along with a brown bombazine gown, which had a long tasselled cord to tie round the waist. The

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shoulders were adorned with epaulets, like a soldier's coat, with tassels depending from them. These treasures were a useless legacy to my mother, being considered "ower braw for a puir man's wife to wear," for she never had a straw bonnet on her head, being always content to wear a pleated muslin mutch with a broad ribbon. The sight of these and other family treasures never failed to remind us that we could claim kindred "wi' great folk."

Another village worthy was James Petrie, familiarly termed "The Dyster." He had been a dyer by trade, and he had made a small competence. He "took up hoose" in Aberlour, with his sister Eppie as housekeeper, neither of them having ever been married. Each had their department in the work of the household, which they carried on by ceaseless labour and economy. During the summer months Eppie spent her time in herding the cow and the stirk. She carried with her a bundle of wool, which she span with an ancient spindle that she carried at her apron string. Her brother employed his time in tilling and tending his acres. To assist him in his work he had a horse named Tommy. If it were possible to believe in the doctrine of transmigration, he must have been the spirit of some sly, cunning dodger sent into the world to bamboozle and perplex the poor old "Dyster." He was a great, powerful brute, with flowing mane and great hairy fetlocks. His skin had a silken gloss, and he was as fat as a well-fed alderman. His master would not have blinders on his bridle because they "preventit the puir dumb beast fae seein' fat was ahin' him," nor would he have a bit "pit in the puir creatur's moo." The eyes of Tommy bespoke the spirit that was in him. You had only to look into their depths to see that the brute was possessed of more than human cunning and penetration. In the morning, when James tried to bridle him, he refused to have the bridle put on. On such occasions the poor "Dyster" tried to coax him with "Hoot-toot, Tommy, fat's the maitter wi' ye this mornin'? Come, come, lat the bridle on. We're nae gaun tae the peats this mornin'; only up tae Allachie for a puckle gress." If it did not suit Tommy, he would not leave the stable for days. Sometimes he got as far as the door and stood there for hours. At other times he came out, but refused to be yoked to the cart, and he had to be led back to the stable, James remarking, "Hoot-toot,

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Tommy; ye're nae gaun tae be lazy; ye'll dee't the morn."

On one occasion James had business in Elgin. Tommy was surprised into submission by the novelty of James mounting on his back. They started early in the morning on their journey. At midnight they had only got as far as the Gedloch, in the Glen of Rothes. The "Old Baker," who dwelt in a cottage there, was a character known far and wide for his drollery and eccentricities. A baker by trade, he kept at one time a public-house in the village of Rothes known as "The Sclaty Inn," so called from being the first house in the New Street of Rothes that was covered with slates. He went to all the fairs and markets round about. "The Baker's" tent was well patronised. The best fun of the fair was there. No clown that ever trod the stage could have acted his part better than did "The Baker" o' Rothes. He generally stood at his tent door with a big-bellied bottle, treating friends and strangers alike to a dram and a taste of his drollery. His free hospitality drove him from "The Sclaty Inn" to the barren Glen of Rothes, where he built a cottage "an' selt a dram." "Seein' 'The Dyster'" (as he termed him) "stanin' in front o' my hoose, at twal' o'clock at nicht upon a muckle black horse, I said 'Fa are ye seekin' the nicht, man? If ye're nae an aul' gager, ye maun be Aul' Sandy himsel' come fae Spynie.'" It took two days to accomplish what James termed his weary ride to Elgin. He was a kind and neighbourly man, and every loon in the village had reason to remember him, for he lent them his hobby-horse for their Christmas diversions. They requited his kindness by running off with his cart and leaving it stranded in the burn, and every time that they saw Tommy take "the stoops" on the village street they roared with laughter, calling, "Tak' Tommy oot, an' tak' the shafts yersel'."

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