

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD KIRK OF ABERLOUR.

“In the antique age of bow and spear,
And feudal rapine clothed with iron mail,
Came ministers of peace to rear
The mother church in yon sequestered vale.”

WORDSWORTH.

I READ some time ago in a newspaper paragraph that Bailie Laing has in his possession the door of the old kirk of Aberlour. The old kirk had three doors, two in the south wall. The one nearest the east end was called the “Minister’s door,” and opened close to what had been the chancel rails. The west door opened into the nave, or body of the church, a long, narrow building with a transept on the west side. Fortunately the gable end of this transept is left standing, the only portion of the old kirk that now remains.

The third door was approached by a flight of stone steps, and led into the gallery in the west end. This gallery had evidently been erected after the Reformation, and the people must have had cool heads who ascended to it by the stone stairs with no hand rail to protect one from falling over them. The bell was rung from the narrow platform at the top of the stairs. For a number of years the kirk had been in a ruinous condition. Many appeals had been made to the heritors to build a new one, but all in vain. They put off drawing the purse-strings until an incident took place that roused them from their apathy.

One very sultry Sunday, as the minister (the Rev. Mr. Thomson) was delivering a very long and earnest exhortation to his hearers, a great crash was heard, and a shower of rotten wood fell upon the heads of the sitters below the gallery. When the minister and the congregation had time to collect themselves, they saw the extremities of “Muckle Tibbie M’C——” hanging through the “laft.” Tibbie was a heavy, fat, dumpy body, and

her short legs dangling in the air excited the risibility of the congregation.

“Run, John More, and help her up,” said the minister.

Tibbie was pulled up with great difficulty from the perilous position, more dead than alive.

The incident led in the end to the building of the present Church of Aberlour. By the munificence of the late Mr. Grant of Aberlour, the body of the church was lengthened and the steeple added to it. Altogether, it is one of the finest parish churches in Banffshire.

At the time of Tibbie's incident John More was bellman and gravedigger. He lived in one of the cottages that stood where the present Manse stands. It overlooked the graveyard, much in the same way as the ramparts of an old castle overlook the fosse beneath. The burn, hidden by its fringe of alder trees, ran close beneath the brae. It was the old man's wont every evening to walk to the end of his cottage and seat himself upon a turf seat. The entrance to the kirkyard was right in front of where he sat.

One evening in April he sat upon this seat in deep meditation, until one after another the surrounding hills were lost to view in a misty haze. His attention had been fixed upon the auld grey kirk and the stone stairs that he had so often ascended to ring the bell. The sweet aroma of the budding birch trees filled the air with its fragrance, and a mavis that perched on the top of one of them poured fourth his sweet, melodious song. John noticed that “the sough” of the river was “up the water.” The evening star rose bright and clear in the east, but it was “growin' dark” with the old gravedigger. He rose from his seat and entered his cottage and said—“I've seen a strange sight the night. I've seen mony a beerial enter the kirkyard, but I've never seen ane leave it.”

The following Sunday the old gravedigger took a fit and died in the church, and was carried home through the kirkyard.

It was said that he was gifted with the faculty of foreseeing events, and that he foretold every funeral that took place in the kirkyard during his time.

Jamie, his son, succeeded him as bellman and gravedigger. With his fathers, he, too, now sleeps beside the auld kirk, but there are some living now in the parish who must still remember

“the bellman.” He was a droll body—a bit of a philosopher, with a sort of humour quite his own. Dumpy in figure, his round, cherry-coloured face was set off by a pair of small eyes that twinkled with an expression of sly humour. As he stood, spade in hand, at the bottom of a deep grave, with the striped woollen nightcap on his head, he looked as if he would defy mortality. When he looked up from the grave to answer the many questions put to him by the loons, who never failed to be present when a grave was making, his remarks upon the relics that he had to unearth were always to the point, if not always complimentary.

One boy remarked that a skull that he was taking out of the grave was very large.

“Ay, ay, laddie, it’s a muckle skull, but there was never muckle sense in’t. I min’ weel fan he was beeriet. It was the winter o’ the muckle snaw, an’ a bonnie job they had tae get ’im ta’en tae the kirkyard. They got on gey weel till they cam’ below Ruthrie, faur the dykes waur blawn clean level. They had tae lift the coffin ower the dykes an’ come roon by Tombain, an’ a heavy lift he was. There was nae bigger man in the pairish; but he’s little eneuch bookit noo.”

I have never been able to account for the repulsive practice, common in my boyish days, of lifting the decaying bones of the dead from the grave when a new interment was made in it. One of the most remarkable sights that I have seen is the so-called “Ripon bonehouse.” The vaults below the Cathedral are filled with bones that have been disinterred from the surrounding graveyard. They are piled away pretty much like wine bottles in a cellar.

The bellman was seen at his best on a Sunday morning carrying the books from the Manse to the Church. Black Rod never comported himself with more official dignity. If the two or three red-cloaked old women did not retreat from the pulpit door to let the bellman and “the buikes” have free entrance, he did not hesitate to give them a push off their stools. One of them that generally sat nearest to the pulpit door was considered “nae verra canny,” but the bellman feared no enchantment, and often treated her with contempt. He was a man “by ord’nar.” Had it been his fortune to have filled a higher official station, he would have brought honour to his native parish.

When the kirk "skailed," the congregation followed him to "The Square" to hear "the cries." When he called out "Notice!" every voice was hushed. What a contrast! The minister's sermon was listened to with little interest, but not a word that Jamie uttered fell upon deaf ears. Some of his commissions were startling utterances, especially when he had to give them by word of mouth. One Sunday he gave "notice" that Nelly Grant, at the head o' the toon, had "killed her twa swine, an' is sellin' them at saxpence a pun' ready money."

At the time Jamie was a tenant of Nellie's. She was a well-known spinster, and possessed a house of her own in the village. Every year she killed two pigs. To say that she fed them would exceed the limits of truth, and the pigs themselves, had they been permitted, would have put on record their veto against such an insinuation. Nettle kail was their daily fare as long as a nettle blade was to be found in the parish, supplemented by the parings of her poorer neighbours' potatoes. When Nelly died, many pounds, all in copper, were found in her house, all accumulated from the sale of her berries to the village bairns. Many of the pennies and bawbees were glued fast together by verdigris. In domestic economy Nelly far surpassed the minister.

Upon another occasion Jamie gave the following cry:—"Notice! Twa yowes an' a blackfaced ram have been either stolen or strayed fae Blair—n. The ram was marked wi' keel at the reet o' the tail an' the yowes upon their hips. Onybody bringin' them tae Blair—n will be weel rewardit."

It was when he had a roup to "cry" that the bellman was heard at his best. The different items were read out in a style and voice that showed that he had in him the making of a minister.

The "cries" were a very interesting institution in my early days.

The Sunday bell that tolled at morn
 Will greet my ears no more ;
 Alas ! no more my friends I'll meet
 Around the old kirk door ;
 In friendly talk no more I'll join,
 Nor ever want to know
 If beasts be selling cheap or dear,
 Or grain priced high or low.

Ye grey-haired fathers of my youth,
 I'll meet you there no more ;

Just like a stream, in years gone by,
You've reached the boundless shore.
Yonder around the old kirk walls
Your final rest you take,
To earthly change and busy life
No coming morn will wake.

Next to the old kirk, the most interesting object is the brig that spans the burn close to the churchyard. The idea that it was erected by General Wade cannot be entertained for a moment. There is no doubt that it is coeval with the erection of the church. During the winter months the burn continues more or less in flood for weeks together. When the church was erected the most populous part of the parish was on the north-western side of the burn. When the burn was in spate no one from that side could cross it to church, much less could they cross it with a funeral. The people of Aberlour may rest content that in "the aul' brig" they possess a very interesting relic, and they would do well to see to its preservation.

The rude old font has found a place in the churchyard. There can be no question about its antiquity. Most people in the parish are more or less acquainted with the story of the man who attempted to drown himself in the Spey. Being prevented in his purpose, he was taken to the church and locked into it. When his people came to release him they were horror-stricken to find that he had kept his head in the water that filled the font long enough to drown himself. The old kirk must have had a very rustic appearance when it was "theekit" with heather. Every parishioner was bound to bring yearly a "birn (burden) o' heather" to repair, if need be, the "theek."