

CHAPTER X.

THE PENNY WEDDING.

“ When wild war’s deadly blast was blawn
And gentle peace returning,
Wi’ mony a sweet babe fatherless,
And mony a widow mourning.”

BURNS.

A WEDDING is always an interesting event in all countries. The manner of conducting the ceremony in England differs widely from the way it is conducted in Scotland. A private marriage is a rare event south of the Tweed, where the parties are joined together in church or chapel, as the case may be.

During the long tenor of Mr. Wilson’s ministry in the parish of Aberlour, the marriage ceremony was performed by him in the kitchen of the old Manse. In certain cases, when the couple were of the well-to-do class, he performed the ceremony at the house of the bride’s parents.

After the battle of Waterloo was fought and peace proclaimed, no less than three retired soldiers found homes in the village. Although they all had special peculiarities and habits that characterised them, none of them acquired the notoriety that old Francie did. He had served in the “Forty-twa” for over twenty years. After his discharge he came to the village, and lodged with the widow of a comrade who fell at Waterloo.

Meg had been with the regiment. On her return she bought a pony and started in the fish trade. She lived in a cottage at the Foggy Boorach.

Having known Francie in Flanders, and being childless, she was glad to have him as a lodger. He soon acquired a wide notoriety in the parish. He was never seen abroad without “Old Bess,” as he called his gun. On pension days he was as much dreaded by every boy and girl as if he had been an African lion let loose. If any of them on their way home from school came

upon Francie lying drunk, with "Bess" by his side, they fled in mortal terror to the nearest refuge they could find. It was supposed that the fearful oaths he uttered upon such occasions were acquired by him in Spain. The remark once made by a Buckie lass to her comrade helps to confirm this impression. On meeting her comrade one morning, she exclaimed—"Oh! lassie, oor Jock cam' hame last nicht fae the sodgers. We hardly kent him, an' he speaks sae gran'. Oh! Betty, ye shud hear him. His language is beautiful if it wasna sae sinfu'."

If my memory serves me right, I don't think that old Francie or the Buckie lassie's brother had any need to leave Banffshire to acquire a fair proficiency in forcible expletives.

It was soon noised about that Meg and Francie were negotiating a matrimonial alliance and were likely to come soon to terms. The farm chieils in the neighbourhood resolved that when Meg and Francie ratified the contract they would celebrate the event by the revival of a "penny wedding."

As soon as the day was fixed, all arrangements were made. Everyone subscribed so much to a common fund, to be expended in the purchase of meat and drink for the occasion.

Johnny Mackay, the weaver, being a native of Inverness, was considered the best man in the parish to act as master of ceremonies, being a genteel body of good address, with the manners of a real gentleman, and the possessor of a blue swallow-tail coat with brass buttons.

At length the eventful day came, and Johnny duly appeared at the residence of the bride. Before starting for the Manse an awkward parley took place. Francie was determined to carry his gun, and Meg was as determined not to go if he took the gun. In the end Meg had to surrender, and she marched off with Francie, gun and all. Johnny, bottle in hand, headed the cavalcade, with a reserve bottle in each of his coat-tail pockets.

Meg wore a mutch with scarlet ribbons streaming over her shoulders, which were covered by a light-coloured silk shawl brought home from Spain. Francie's uniform was a rough grey suit of home manufacture. The coat had long tails with large pockets, each capable of holding a hare or half-a-dozen moorfowl. His powder horn hung dangling from a belt at his left side. When the bridal party arrived at the kitchen door of the Manse, the

minister's hens fled in terror from the green in front of it, where they were daily fed by the minister and his housekeeper. Long before the poultry mania had broken out, the minister, as she remarked, "was aye lookin' oot for ony new kind o' fools." It was said that the sore upon his nose was caused by the bite of a kestrel hawk that a boy, knowing his love of rare "fools," brought to the Manse for the minister. I cannot vouch for the truth of this statement, but the sore never healed to his dying day. Every Sunday morning the late Dr. Stephen went to the Manse and dressed it, putting on a fresh plaster. It was said that in his haste one morning he cut off a portion of the heading of an *Aberdeen Journal* with the word *Journal* printed on it, and clapped it on the minister's nose. His nose was in proportion to the size of the man, and it was just possible that such a thing happened. I daresay there are persons still living in the parish who can remember the minister and his singular appearance with a patch on his nose.

A short delay took place at the kitchen door. Annie Dye was in the midst of ironing one of the minister's frilled "sarks." On such occasions he always assisted in the operation by taking the heaters from the fire with the tongs and dropping them into the box-iron which Annie held ready to receive them. The invitation was given to "Come in." Francie refused to enter without the gun, but after much persuasion he handed "Bess" to Deacon Grant with the remark, "Haud the mou' o' her doon, Geordy; I wadna like her tae sheet a tailor." "Gang awa' in, Francie, my man," replied the Deacon; "ye'll fin' the fire o' Meg's tongue waur tae stan' than fechtin' at Waterloo."

The kitchen of the old Manse of Aberlour, where the minister performed the marriage ceremony, was in all respects a remarkable place. One storeyed, it joined the Manse at right angles, a large henhouse adjoining it. The barn, cowhouse, and stable were in a parallel row, thus forming an oblong square in front of the Manse.

Daily after breakfast the minister and his housekeeper fed the flock of ducks and hens that congregated there. When Annie and he had taken stock of the laying hens and those likely to lay soon, they retired to the kitchen, followed by a feathered train. The ducks, after flapping their wings in chorus, waddled off to the burn. Before the bridal party could enter, a number of hens had

to be driven out ; but the doos, which roosted on the joists and rafters that crossed the open roof of the kitchen, returned to the top of the box bed that stood at the far end of it. No sooner had the minister commenced the solemn service than they began to make love in their own language, coo-cooing and curring so loud that the minister ceased the service and said, "Annie, woman, tak' the lang beesom an' reesle them doon." But the doos, like the Irish tenants, refused to quit their holdings, and Annie failed to eject them. Francie was heard to remark—"Deil be in them, if I had 'Bess' at their tails I wud seen stop their din." During the parley the minister had time to look about him, and to notice two loons perched on the lid of the meal giral. "Come doon, ye idle rascals, aff there. Ye hae nae bisness here. Be aff wi' ye." Had it been on any other occasion when the minister had his well-known blackthorn rung in his hand, we would have felt its weight. So, crestfallen, we retreated, to be greeted with derision and laughter by our comrades. For this reason, the writer was unable to hear the minister's well-known admonition to the bride.

During the ceremony, Johnny Mackay, with the help of the souter, dispensed drams very freely outside the door. When the bride emerged from it, the gallantry of the master of ceremonies nearly cost him his life. He went forward and attempted to salute the bride. In the twinkling of an eye Francie's great brown hand sent him rolling on the grass, amidst the shouts and laughter of the crowd. He tried to take "Bess" from the Deacon's hand, but Meg intervened and laid her hand on the gun, saying, "Haud awa', ye goukit feel ; we'll hae nae sheetin' here. The puir body has mair sense than you, ye muckle feel ; he kens gweed breedin'." "Haud aff yer han', woman," replied Francie, "or I'll sheet ye baith." Poor Johnny was set on his feet by kind hands and the quarrel was ended. Like Pharaoh's butler, Johnny was restored to his office, and eventually he put the cup into the hand that had so recently cast him down.

When Meg and Francie, walking side by side, emerged from the front of the Manse, in turning the corner of the peat stack they were saluted by a volley of musketry from a number of gunners who had mounted the stack. On the leader calling out "One, two, three !" a volley rent the air. Amidst cheering and clapping of hands, down tumbled the end of the peat stack,

the gunners landing right in front of Meg and Francie. The sternness of old Francie relaxed and he laughed outright, a thing that no one had ever seen him do before. But his countenance quickly changed when Tommy Tethers came limping towards Meg with a hair tether in his hand, exclaiming by way of salutation, "Och, she's ponny, real ponny! There's a tow to tether the horsey. She'll maybe gi'e her ta fish for it some day." Before the poor Highland cripple had time to hand the tow to Meg, Francie's foot sent him a yard or two distant, with the remark, "Lie there, ye fumart-faced Hielan' monkey!" And the cripple towmaker did lie until he was lifted into a wheelbarrow and trundled to his filthy den, amidst the laughter and shouting of the village loons, who had been disappointed at the small amount of "ba' siller" that was thrown amongst them at the wedding. Francie's best man was "Lang Charlie," in whose pouches coin wadna bide, so there was no "fite siller" to scramble for, and consequently no broken heads or bloody noses.

On their way home the bridal party made a halt at the Cottage Inn, to be treated by the sweet and smiling-faced hostess, Widow Cruickshank. Her face still bore traces of her great sorrow for the sad and untimely death of her husband, who was swept away by the great flood of '29 in sight of his house and family. The history and details of his tragic death are recorded in local history.

When the present Manse was built, it was hoped that the beautiful old Cottage Inn would be left standing outside the garden; but that hope was dispelled, and the minister's out-houses now stand upon its site. Its old whitewashed walls were thrown down, and the beautiful honeysuckle bushes that covered them and filled the air with their perfume were uprooted. The writer in his journey through life has seen many prettily-situated Scottish inns and cosy English hostelries, but none of them have left upon his memory so deep and lasting an impression as did the Cottage Inn of Aberlour.

After tasting Widow Cruickshank's hospitality, with her good wishes for the happiness of the newly-wedded couple, they made their way home, escorted by a train of followers, all eager to share the fun. Muckle Nelly was seen standing in the doorway with a sieveful of bread and cheese. As the bride entered, she threw the

contents over her head, exclaiming, "God gi'e ye aye plenty meal an' claith."

The largest pot in the village of Airngarrow was too small for such an occasion. A great copper kettle was borrowed and hung over a fire out of doors, and several old women, like the witches in "Macbeth," kept stirring the bubbling cauldron. The tables were laid in Fiddler Macpherson's barn, where the guests plied their horn spoons to some purpose. Knives and forks were generally absent from the feast. Francie utilised his skeandhu and others their gully knives.

But not until John Hay, the celebrated Strathspey fiddler, rode up to the door on his shely, with his famous fiddle-case strapped to the saddle behind him, did the fun really begin in earnest. When he took the fiddle from its case and ran his fingers over the strings, all eyes beamed with pleasure and the lads "cleekit" up their partners. Johnny Mackay took up the bride, and kissed her unseen to Francie, then off they went through the maddening maze of a Highland reel. So quickly did the dances follow that John Hay had soon to doff his well-known short-tailed tartan coat, after which operation he gave his memorable fiddler's toast—"May ye never ken a fiddler's drouth." By and bye off came his neckerchief, then the neck button of his shirt was unloosed and the fiddle bow freshly rosined. Then the greatest fiddler in Strathspey was seen at his best. There have been violin players in Strathspey his superior in artistic manipulation of the bow, but the volume of music that he drew from his tiny instrument was truly marvellous. Alas! his bow has lost its cunning and his fingers will finger no more the strings that set the rustic dancers wild with delight. To have heard him play "Tullochgorum" or "The Haughs o' Cromdale" was something to be remembered through life. At the end of the feast the "bedding" was announced, but Francie stood guard at the bedroom door with "Bess" under his arm, and swore that he would shoot the first man or woman that tried to "gang ben the hoose."

On his way home the master of ceremonies saw a scarecrow made up like an old woman. He declared that it was his departed mother, as he affectionately termed her. Nothing would convince him to the contrary until he clasped the scarecrow in

his arms, when the stick that supported it broke, and Johnny and his "departed mother" lay flat between two potato drills, blue coat and all.

Another famous old soldier returned from the wars to his ancestral home beneath the shadow of the Convals. He was discharged without a pension, and he had to take to "the leam" and ply the shuttle. He was in all respects the very opposite of old Francie — cheerful, light-hearted, and voluble, and he could occasionally draw the "long bow" to some purpose. On being told that Jamie More, the bellman, was building a very long stone dyke on Kinermony, he replied to the narrator, "T'ach, man, that's nae dyke at a'. Ye sud see the dykes they hae in Spain. I saw ane there seven mile lang, an' it was coppit wi' rams' horns." He affirmed that he understood the language of the crows. In proof of this he said that one morning in April a flock of them from the Knockie lighted on the grass field behind his dwelling, and there held a council. Their leader, a lang-nebbit, grey-headed patriarch, counselled them as follows:—"Dinna gang near the Bush; Bushy's a very deevil at sheetin' wi' his new dooble-barrelled gun. Bogindee has sawn his bere. Hugh never fires a gun; gang ower the burn." We feel certain that the Recording Angel only smiled when he heard poor Charlie's harmless fibs, and never "put them down." I fear that it was otherwise with a certain soldier's widow who took up her abode among us for a short time. Her husband was in the Gordons, and fell at Waterloo. His wife followed him to the field, and found him amongst the killed. Around him lay dozens of dead Frenchmen, and it occurred to her mind that she ought to "spoil the Egyptians," and that blatant, foul-mouthed monster rumour declared that she carried a stocking with a stone in it, and the wounded Frenchmen who objected to be relieved of their belongings had a taste of Mary's stocking. Having heard of Meg's marriage, she came to Aberlour, "wi' plenty o' siller to look for a man." If this was her object, she failed in it. A man or woman may as well escape from their shadow as fly to a place where rumour won't follow them. The moral atmosphere was rarified when "Moggan Mary" departed to her native place, Old Aberdeen.