

CHAPTER XXIV.

OUR MITHER TONGUE—FUNERAL PRACTICES.

“ My mither tongue, ye’ll haud the grip
While words ha’e power to teach ;
While feelin’s link themsel’s
To blyth or dowie speech ;
While hopes and fears, an’ joys an’ griefs,
While loves are said or sung,
Ye’ll haud the grip in spite o’ a’,
My couthie mither tongue.
Till suns grow cauld an’ Nature’s sel’
Creeps feckless ower a rung,
Ye canna dee, ye winna dee,
Dear Scotia’s mither tongue.”

THOSE who have wandered “ far frae hame ” know how pleasant it is to hear the music of their “ mither tongue ” in a strange land. Some may smile at the idea of the doric speech being musical. The words of very many of our beautiful national songs are pure doric.

“ A wee bird cam’ to oor ha’ door,
An’ O, he whistled rairly,
An’ aye the owercome o’ his sang
Was waes me for Prince Charlie.”

The doric tongue is not only musical, but it is expressive in a high degree. There are people gifted with “ an ear ” for the different accents of the doric tongue and the different local dialects. There is what may be called the educated accent of the Scotch tongue. The late eminent Dr. Guthrie possessed this faculty to a high degree. To have heard him read to 139th Psalm was to listen enraptured with eloquence that the greatest tragedian could not have surpassed. We have heard it said that the people of Inverness speak the best English in Scotland with the native accent. Whether they have any claim to such a distinction or not is a question that we cannot answer. There is no doubt that some of our local dialects are anything but musical, but if they are deficient in this respect they make up for it in

force of expression. And if the people of Skirdustan sixty years ago could not lay claim to a musical accent, no parish in the North could boast of a more fluent expression of forcible speech, while every man in it was distinguished by special traits of character, and those of them who imbibed the spirit of "Macallan" developed under its influence traits that showed them in a new light. Poor Johnny M'Kay bemoaned the loss of his dear mother in the melodious speech of his native town, Inverness. Another man, remarkable for his taciturnity, was wont to expatiate to his listeners in fluent grammatical English.

"Lees me on drink,
It gives us mair than either school or college;
It wakens wit, it kindles lear,
An' primes us fou o' knowledge."

No one in the parish was better known for ready wit and facetious humour than old "Craggans." When he got "a dram" he never failed to denounce in vehement language against the "new-fangled" practices that were creeping in and undermining the fine old institutions so long established in the parish. When the late Rev. Mr. Wilson died, on the day of his funeral the parishioners assembled in front of the Manse to escort his remains out of the parish to be interred at Banff, his native place. While the people stood around the door waiting for them to "lift," they noticed that "Craggans" went about fuming and muttering to himself. At last he went up to the late Mr. Green of Ruthrie and said, "Dod, sir, fat dae ye think? Are we gaun tae get neither bite nor sup? Are they gaun tae beery the aul' man like a beast? Dod, this coves the gowan!" Soon after the minister's funeral, "Craggans" took seriously ill. He felt that he was drawing near his end, and calling his sister to his bedside, said to her, "Lassie, sen' tae the Kirkton for the souter tae tak' aff my beard. I'm finished at last. I ken there's nae siller in the hoose; ye maun sell the hummel stirk an' get plenty meat an' drink in, an' lay me doon decently like a Christian. An' if ye hear ony ane at my beerial speakin' ill o' me, keep a close mou', lassie, for I'll nae hear them."

At the time of poor "Craggans'" death there lived in the village a tall, powerful man with one eye. It was said that he lost his other eye in a funeral fight. No matter how distant

the graveyard was from the house of the deceased, the remains were carried to it on hand-spokes by his relations and friends, and it was the custom to carry spirits to the graveyard to be drunken after the interment. But if the distance to it was some length, the coffin was set down on the ground and whisky was handed round. The funeral at which the man referred to lost his eye took place in Glenlivet. After crossing a burn on the way to the churchyard, they set down the coffin, had a drink, quarrelled and fought, and our newly resident villager got "the reddin stroke." His eye was knocked out with the end of a hand-spoke. True or not true, this was the tale told about "muckle gleyed Sandy."

The change that has taken place in the manner of conducting funerals in Scotland at the present day is in remarkable contrast to the way they were conducted in the past. Not that they were then irreverently conducted, for Scotch people are naturally reverently disposed, and they look upon death as a solemn event. In the early years of the last century there were many ceremonious practices in the dwelling where a death occurred. The first thing done was to stop the clock and cover its face with a cloth. This was also done in the houses of near relations. When the corpse was "streakit" the cat was locked in a room or carried to a neighbour's house, to be kept there till after the funeral. A bowl of salt was placed on a table in the room where the corpse was laid. On the table the Bible was also placed ready for the "sitters-up" to read during the solemn hours of night. Young as I was, I have on several occasions "sitten up" to watch the dead and read chapters from "The Holy Word" selected by my elders. Even at the present time I have not forgotten the solemnity of such events. The great clock at Balmoral was stopped when our late beloved Queen breathed her last. I leave the solution of these old practices to the interpreters of our "folklore." There is little doubt about their antiquity. Those referred to are not by any means the only ceremonies that were practiced at the time of a death in the family. Happily the days of feasting and dram-drinking at funerals are passed away, and the solemn rite is consecrated by reading and prayer. During the time of the late Mr. Wilson's ministry in Aberlour, men and women were carried to the grave from their homes without any religious ceremony at either place.

The absence of the usual bottle and the basket of bread and cheese at the funeral of Mr. Wilson was more a matter of economy than an act of reformation. James Moir, the bellman's, remarks on that event were pertinent. "They've ta'en him awa' tae beery in his ain place. If he had had ony say in the maitter he wud hae objected tae sic a lot o' needless expense, an' been laid doon in the corner that I keepit for him ahin' the gairden dyke. It's maybe jist as weel they've ta'en him awa', for the aul' miller an' him wad hae never lien sae close tae ither in peace."