

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUSTIC LIFE IN THE HIGHLANDS—THE PRINCES OF EILEAN AIGAS.

“ Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure ;
Nor grandeur hear with disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.”

GRAY'S "ELEGY."

THE social condition of the people living in the counties of Moray, Banff, and Aberdeen when the late beloved Queen began to reign was so different to what it is now that only those who took a share in the rejoicings at the Coronation can in any measure realise the wonderful change that has come over all aspects of social, domestic, and internal life in the counties named. The improved condition of the houses of the people and their better sanitary arrangements have been the means of preventing those fearful visitations of fever and smallpox so prevalent sixty years ago. One shudders at the remembrance of those deadly epidemics that carried away many young and promising lives in villages and farm towns, and cast a gloom over whole parishes. That the victims were generally young people made it more sad. It is now a rare thing to see a pock-pitted person, as they were termed ; but sixty years ago every three persons out of five that had passed middle life were more or less face-marked by that deadly scourge.

What are now termed the luxuries of life were beyond the means of poor cottars and country folks in general. Tea of very inferior quality cost from five to six shillings a pound ; raw sugar that in every respect resembled draff cost from eightpence to ninepence per pound ; treacle that resembled tar, fourpence and sixpence per pound. Coffee was almost an unknown article in a poor man's house. When we look at the quality and the price paid for these articles at the present time, one can only wonder how such a change can have been brought about. It is just a question

how far the cheapness of these articles has benefited and conduced to the health of poor folks. Simple as their daily fare was, there was no question about the health-giving properties of milk and meal, with butter and eggs. Flesh meat was a rarity in poor men's houses. Their greatest luxury was a "yalla haddick." It will scarcely be credited that Buckie fishwives carried heavy creels of fish up Speyside as far as Inveraven and Grantown. The weight borne by these stalwart women was a marvel. And what remuneration did their burdens bring them? From a penny to three halfpence was the price asked and given for far better cured and better quality of fish than can be bought at from sixpence to eightpence to-day.

In domestic articles there is a complete revolution. When the late Queen began to reign wooden utensils were fast giving place to delf. The housewife that had her dresser shelves well plenished with the blue willow-pattern plates, mugs, and pottingers was to be envied. Well do I remember the pride we all took in a plate with a picture of Queen Caroline that occupied the place of honour in what the people in the north of England call "the delf rack." We hear a good deal about being taught by object lesson. The picture of that ill-used and unfortunate Queen was, I believe, my first lesson in history, and was never forgotten. How many children yet unborn will look in future years upon the motherly and benevolent face of our late beloved Queen, and learn a lesson from it in the history of a woman who was indeed noble and royal? These are only earthly titles, borne often by the unworthy, but Queen Victoria adorned her exalted station with all the virtues of highest womanhood.

Amongst the great changes that have taken place, nothing in a domestic sense has surpassed what I may call the pictorial art in books and periodicals, as well as in the embellishment of almost every home in the land by artistic coloured wall papers and prints of every description, at a price within the means of the working man. We send our children to public schools to get what we term their education. There they acquire, or ought to acquire, practical knowledge; but the home is, or ought to be, the training school of the child in all the domestic virtues.

One of my most vivid recollections of the early days of Queen Victoria's reign was a visit to Speyside of the two men who repre-

sented themselves as two legitimate grandsons of the Pretender, and were known as the Princes of Eilean Aigas. Their names were John Sobieski and Charles Edward Stuart. It is well known that Prince Charles Edward Stuart left behind him no legitimate offspring. It is certain that they had no connection with the Royal Stuarts. They published a book in 1847, entitled "Tales of the Century, or Sketches of the Romance of History between the years 1746 and 1846." The story told by them in the above publication was to the effect that their father, instead of being a son of Admiral Allan, as was commonly supposed, was a son of Prince Charles and the Princess Louisa, whose birth was kept secret through fear of the Hanoverian family, and who was intrusted to Admiral Allan and passed off as his own son. It is not at all improbable that they themselves believed their own story, and were, strictly speaking, no impostors. At all events it was wonderful to see the deference and loyal respect that was shown to them by the people on Speyside whom they came in contact with. They were of unequal height. The tallest one bore a resemblance to pictures of bonnie Prince Charlie. Both were well made men, and appeared to great advantage in the full Highland garb and appendages that they wore. I believe all this had very much to do in drawing attention and respect to them. When the Queen began to reign the Highland garb was not much worn in lower Strathspey, so the sight of these men, richly clad in the Stuart tartan, was an object of great interest and speculation. Besides the work above-named, they published a book entitled "The Costume of the Clans," a copy of which was ordered at the time for the young Queen's library. Anyone who has read the introduction, which occupies about half the work, of this lofty and amusing book can only suppose that the men who penned it were weak-minded if they believed that at the beginning of the Queen's reign it was possible to incite the loyal Highlanders to enact a second '45.

Amongst other gentlemen's residences that they visited in Strathspey was Elchies. I was fortunate in being told off to direct them by a footpath through the woods to Boat of Elchies. The coin that one of them put into my hand as I parted with them was long treasured by me as a priceless gift, to be worn some day upon my breast "when the auld Stuarts got their ain

again," for had not my own mother's forebears, one a Macdonald and the other a Stuart, followed the Prince and fought for him on the fatal field of Culloden? But alas! the halo that surrounded the name of bonnie Prince Charlie became dimmer and more dim as the years of Her Majesty's reign passed by. Our early delusions die hardly. How we cling to them, even when the scales are fallen from our eyes! We are loth to give them up. Had I lived in the days of my great-grandfathers, I certainly would have done what they did, followed "the Prince." But I know now what I did not know when the Queen began to reign, that the man whose name stirred within one emotions of loyalty and piety showed eventually that he was devoid of all the virtues that make even poor men great.