

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIRESIDE AND THE BURNSIDE.

“The cheerfu’ supper done, wi’ serious face
They round the ingle form a circle wide;
The sire turns o’er, with patriarchal grace,
The big ha’ Bible, ance his father’s pride.

“THE COTTAR’S SATURDAY NIGHT.”

IF I were asked to name the two words dearest to a Scotchman’s heart, I would say that they are, *Mother* and *Home*. It is an old and trite saying that “Home is home, be it ever so humble.” To his home and to his native land a true Scotchman’s heart “untravell’d turns,” and to the memories that cluster around the old fireside where his mother rocked him in the cradle. The influence exercised by the mothers of Scotland upon their children can hardly be over-estimated. No matter how humble her dwelling is, its fireside is a consecrated place. To see her seated by it, with an infant in her lap and a child kneeling by her side lisping out its evening prayer—

“When I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep”—

is perhaps the most sublime sight to be imagined out of Heaven. The lisping child reads in its mother’s eyes the depth of the undying love that shines through them. All unconscious of its surroundings, the child bends its knees on the earthen floor of its humble dwelling and repeats its evening prayer to its mother’s dictation, feeling that the fireside is consecrated by her presence.

Poor “tempest-tossed and passion-driven” Burns could never quite cast off the influence of his father’s prayers offered on his behalf beneath the roof of the auld clay biggin’. In his “Cottar’s Saturday Night” he has given a picture of a humble cottar fireside that no pen but his could have portrayed—

“From scenes like these old Scotia’s grandeur springs,
That makes her loved at home, rever’d abroad;
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
‘An honest man’s the noblest work of God.’

And, certes, in fair virtue's heavenly road
 The cottage leaves the palace far behind ;
 What is a lordling's pomp ?—a cumberous load
 Disguising oft the wretch of human kind."

Many a child before it has acquired the art of reading has its mind stored with the tales and stories told or read to it for its amusement, and they often leave a deeper and more lasting impression on its blank and plastic mind than do the stories read in after life. I can well remember the first time that I heard "Tam o' Shanter" recited by our fireside, and I have even at the present time a vivid recollection of the fear and wonder that filled my mind at its recital. I trembled for the fate of the redoubtable Tam fleeing for his life, pursued by that short-sarkit cutty that had behaved so badly to her kind and God-fearing granny. The recital of "Thrummycap" never failed to fill my mind with a desire to "kick the ba'," and, although I have not seen a printed copy of the piece for sixty years, I remember almost every line of it.

Of all the prose stories that I read in my boyish days, none of them left so abiding an impression on my mind as the tale of "Abidla, the Persian Shepherd." "A great and wise Caliph of that empire was impressed with astonishment that he had not found one really happy man in his wide dominions. In order to see if there was a man happy and content in them, he disguised himself as a beggar and set forth on his quest through his kingdom. He was returning in despair when he espied a shepherd's cot. On entering it he was struck by the poverty of its interior, but on entering into conversation with the shepherd he found that he not only was content but supremely happy. The good Caliph revealed himself, and he carried the reluctant shepherd to his palace, clothed him in gorgeous apparel, and placed him in a high office. But from the day that he entered the palace he became an object of envy to the courtiers. They noticed that every morning he entered at the same hour a vaulted chamber beneath the palace, locking the door behind him when he entered. The envious courtiers told the Caliph that he was filling the vault with stolen treasure to be carried away. The Caliph did not believe the report, but to satisfy the importunity of his courtiers, one morning after the shepherd entered he ordered the door to be forced open. To his astonishment, there in a

corner sat the shepherd, clothed in his sheepskin garb, with his crook by his side, while he tuned his reed to a plaintive Persian air. He came forward, fell at the feet of the Caliph, clasped his knees, and asked for mercy and liberty to return to his humble cot. The good Caliph laid hold of his hand, lifted him up, and said, 'Go in peace, my son.'

If the supply of fireside literature for children was limited when our late beloved Queen ascended the throne, what little there was had a tendency to educate the moral faculties of the child. The Bible was more of a fireside book at that time than it is at present. No new stories that have ever been written can equal the grand old stories told in the Bible.

From the fireside to the burnside is only a transition from one pleasant place to another. Where can we find either an old or young Scotch schoolboy that has not "paidled in the burn" and roamed upon its banks, to him a veritable paradise. An Edinburgh lady took her Highland servant to see Martin's famous picture, "The Plains of Heaven." She earnestly looked at it, and turned to her mistress and asked, "Is there nae hills in Heaven? If there's nane, it maun be a dreary, waesome place." Let us at least hope that there are burns in "the better land." We know that there is a river in it, but for one river that we have in Scotland we have five hundred burns. Here in England we have "t' beck," but there is as much difference between a Scottish burn and a beck as there is between a Dutchman and a Highlander. While the sluggish beck flows on its lazy, noiseless course, the brawling burn rushes on its way, murmuring as it goes, in chorus with the birds that sing upon its banks. Hidden upon them, too, are countless treasures very precious to a schoolboy's heart. Away in yonder thicket there is a treasure only known to himself. Every morning before going to school he creeps stealthily into it, to see if another precious egg is deposited in "his" mavis's nest. The whole burnside is by right of descent the schoolboy's freehold. There he gathers his fruit and flowers, that cost him nothing for their cultivation. There he also has an aviary. The birds find their own food, and serenade him morning and evening. He fashions his own musical whistles from the arn (alder) bushes that grow by the burnside. He lops off the newly leafed twigs from the birch trees, and carries them home to

festoon the dresser and fill the house with the perfume of their aromatic leaves. He has also mining rights on both sides of the burn—at least this right was claimed by some of the old Aberlour schoolboys. When the time came to play marbles, they went to the “clay hole” on the burnside, worked up a quantity of it, from which was rolled into shape the needful marbles. After being dried in the sun they were burned in the fire. The sand that was famous for its golden colour was also mined on the burnside, and carried home to strew the newly swept earthen floor and “door-stane.” Sixty years ago poor schoolboys had to fall back on natural productions for the implements of their play. Were they less happy than the school callants of the present day with all their art-fashioned and mechanical playthings? No, they were content with such things as they had, and if they had fewer bawbees in their pouches than the present school callants of Aberlour, they were as supremely happy. But a really unhappy schoolboy is as rare as a white blackbird.