

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### "THE CRIPPLE WIFE OF FIFE-KEITH" AND OTHER BEGGARS.

**O**F all the occupations that flourished in my early days none have fallen into such decadence as begging. Whether the folk of Aberlour were kinder or more benevolent than the people of neighbouring parishes, I cannot tell, but beggars of every grade and description laid the people, rich and poor, under contribution.

Of the many beggars who periodically visited the Parish of Aberlour, none of them made such a lasting impression on my mind as "The Cripple Wife of Fife-Keith." The writer's first impression of her still clings to him. She was in many respects no ordinary beggar. When the swallows came and the buds of the birch trees were bursting into leaf, we looked for the coming of "The Wife," whom we considered neither more nor less than an incarnation of evil spirits. It would be impossible to give a description of her bodily appearance, as the writer never saw her out of the sort of box-cart that she sat in, covered up with blankets and shawls. The box was fixed on a sort of mason's hand-barrow, so that two people could carry her from house to house. In this fashion she toured over the country during the summer months. The news of her advent flew with lightning speed through the village, and every loon in it ran to meet her as she entered. "The Wife" was no easy burden to carry from door to door. "Bold was her face, and fayre and rede of hew," and her one-crowned mutch gave her the appearance of wearing a mitre, such as we see in the pictures of the early Popes of Rome. Her face was plump and rosy, with a pair of eyes that seemed ready to burst from their sockets when she had occasion to pour forth the full volume of her wrath, which she often did. It was the custom when two people carried her to a door for one of them to be relieved by the occupant of the house, who was in his turn

relieved at the second door. When a distance intervened between the houses, the burden was no light one, for besides her portly person "The Wife" carried her belongings in the box. One of them was a fair-sized greybeard "pig," containing, as she said, "mint water for the stamack." She never failed to call at old Aberlour House, for "Lowery" always filled the "pig" with an essence that suited "The Wife's" stamack better than mint water. After her call at the laird's she entered the village triumphantly, escorted by all the loons of the place. She carried a long hazel rung by her side, and if any "nickum" came within reach of it he had good reason to remember "The Cripple Wife of Fife-Keith" for some time after.

On one occasion the bearers set her down at Tommy Tethers' door. Although very lame himself, he showed no sympathy for "The Cripple Wife." When she had sat for some time at his door, she bawled out, "Are ye nae comin' oot wi' that aul' moggan fu' o' fite siller that never sees the daylight, tae help a puir cripple woman sittin' helpless at yer door?" "Gang awa', gang awa'; she's a puir body hersel'. She's lame, an' canna pit her fit to ta grun' or gang fae hame to sell her tethers," replied Tommy. "Gang fae hame, ye aul' Heilan' thief! ye dae naething but gang ower the hale kwintra cheatin', an' thievin' the hair tae mak' yer tethers! Ye sud be hanged wi' ane o' yer ain taws! I wonner at the fowk o' Aiberlour dinna droon ye in Spey an' gi'e yer siller tae the puir fowk!"

This episode was completely eclipsed when "The Wife" arrived at the door of Deacon Grant. He was whistling his favourite air, "The Castle o' Montgomery," and chalking the outlines of a coat when "The Wife" saluted him through the open window. "Are ye gaun tae lat a puir cripple dee at yer door, ye heartless heathen? If the Lord had only gi'en me strength I wud never ha'e come tae the door o' sic a sneevlin', sneeshin'-nosed stick-the-loose as you!" "Cripple Wife of Fife-Keith, begone! I spurn you from my door—begone! You ought to be turned into a pillar of salt and set up to be a warning to the people of Fife-Keith. I'll never condescend to carry such a drunken old harlot as you from my door. Begone!" said the Deacon in his most impressive diction. "Carry me," replied "The Wife," "ye aul' dementit Naboth! I'll leave yer door, an' may

the curse o' Cain fa' on ye!" was the "Cripple Wife's" parting salutation to the Deacon.

It makes me even now blush for the manhood of our village that many of them refused to carry "The Wife" from one door to another. Laden with the spoils of the day, she found quarters in "The Cottage," beneath the roof of Widow Cruickshank.

"The long-remembered beggar was her guest,  
The broken soldier, kindly bade to stay,  
Sat by the fire, and talked the night away."

Amongst the gentlemen beggars we had "Hector Hairy-Purse." Clad in kilt and sporran, like a tourist, he carried neither bread nor meal, only his wardrobe in a wallet on his back. He never solicited alms of any kind. Who ever saw a kilted Highlander begging? Like Rob Roy, he would spurn the idea of such a "dooncome," as did Rob when the Bailie offered to make weavers of his sons. It was no disgrace to a kilted Highlander to take what he wanted from the store of the Lowlander. Two of them entered the cottage of a poor widow on their way home from the defeat at Prestonpans. Famished with hunger, they, figuratively speaking, ate up the poor widow. One of them noticed a web of plaiding standing in a corner. They at once cut off the web a few ells apiece. The poor widow in her sorrow and wrath declared that they would have to pay dearly for the plaiding at the last day. "Och," said one of them, "that be a lang credit; we'll tak' her a'." Hector was in all respects a Highland gentleman. Once a year he came to Ruthrie, where he got a kindly welcome from the late Mr. and Mrs. Green, who never turned a beggar from their door. The face of the old man was adorned with a long flowing white beard, a thing not common at that time. His features were sharp and regular, and he had light blue eyes—altogether such a face at Raphael loved to paint. The writer has never forgotten the first time he lighted the old man to his bed. Before he lay down on it, he knelt in prayer. When I laid the blankets over him he exclaimed, "God bless ye; they're a' kind folks here." This was the man whom I feared to meet in my childish days.

There was one happy wight that the writer envied, namely, "The Mannie wi' the three Newfoundland dogs." They were harnessed to a tiny carriage with three wheels. Like a prince of the

blood royal, "The Mannie," seated in it, went bowling along the highways in the North of Scotland like the wind. No wonder that his face beamed with smiles. That he came "frae the Sooth" was evident—his tongue betrayed him. Fluent it was, and every wife and bairn in our village considered it a great honour to minister to his wants. To be allowed to stroke the heads of his faithful dogs was looked upon with the satisfaction and pride that an alderman feels when he shakes hands with Royalty. If "The Mannie" had an eye for scenery, what an opportunity he had for seeing it when riding in state in the Highlands, through the Pass of Killiecrankie and down by bonnie Kinrara. One thing was certain—"The Mannie "

"Was a care-defying blade  
As ever Bacchus listed,"

and he would have been a welcome guest in Poesie Nancy's far-famed howf.

The jolly beggar—where is he? Supplanted by that lazy, dour, long-faced lubber, the tramp. What a substitute we are saddled with in the place of the immortal Eddy Ochiltree and the tinker bard who tuned his lyre to such good purpose that Nancy's wa's shook with thunders of applause!

I believe that Mr. Carnegie, our country's greatest benefactor, was the first to inaugurate in this country the driving tour. On reading a description of his progress from Land's End to John o' Groat's, I bemoaned my poverty that compels me to take my limited travelling tours at "a penny a mile." By the laws of this old, thread-bare country, Mr. Carnegie is prevented from enjoying what I verily believe is the highest pleasure and enjoyment a man can attain to, namely, to drive through his native land in a tiny three-wheeled carriage drawn by three Newfoundland dogs. We have read that a fabulous reward was offered to the man who would invent a new pleasure. The man who first drove through the country in a carriage with three Newfoundland dogs might have reasonably claimed the reward.

There was a form of begging in my early days that has entirely disappeared in the North of Scotland, called "thiggin." Poor crofters and feuars went from farm to farm begging oats or bere to sow their land. There was also a curious form of charity generally given to an orphan boy. If such there was in the parish, he had

the privilege of going to the mill when the parishioners ground their corn. They gave him a quantity of meal in proportion to the size of their melder. During the early and middle decades of the last century there lived in a Speyside parish a wealthy and widely known man who as a boy "took up his lick at the mill."