

THOMAS RAEBURN.



AYRSHIRE HERMIT.

KIRKINTILLOCH; WILLIAM M. M'ILLAN.

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THE

AYRSHIRE HERMIT.

Gentle reader, did you ever see a hermit? If not, mayhap you have heard that such things are. I shall introduce you to one: but first let me relate a small anecdote:—Some years ago I dined in a small tavern in Greenock, with about a dozen other wayfarers. A jolly Skipper was present, who amused the company considerably with his yarns. Said he “some four years ago, we were wrecked upon a small uninhabited island near Newfoundland: we all got safe ashore, and a miserable looking place it was; but after climbing over a hill, we were all quite delighted to meet with 15 hermits and their dogs:” at this, ourselves and some others burst out in a horse laugh: “what the devil are you laughing at?” said Jack, somewhat nettled. “Oh, nothing at all; begging your pardon; I was only wondering where the 15 hermitesses would be all the while,” “Well, you may laugh as you please, young man, but

I tell you its a regular fact, and no mistako.' Jack turned out a very amusing and intelligent fellow; although not particularly versed in the niceties of Syntax and prosody.

To go on, however.—About mid-way between Kilmarnock and London Kirk, and half a mile off the public road, a small farm-house, or cottage, of the, old School,' that is to say, built of rough unhewn stone and covered with thatch; it is somewhat romantically situated, as it is nearly concealed by woods and rising grounds until you are within a few yards of it. As you enter the front door you may as well look to your feet as indications are visible that cattle and sheep reside under the roof: their locality is in the byre, upon the left hand. Turn to the right and you enter an apartment which served for 'parlour, kitchen, and all,' to the late proprietor, who was born in the cottage and died in it very lately, old and 'full of years.' It was left to him about fifty years ago, along with a few acres of land, by his late father, and was denominated Holmhead, properly, but the 'Ark,' by use and wont.

The walls of this apartment exhibited no tokens of the genius of a Rembrandt or a Raphael, or even of his illustrious namesake, but they were adorned with labels indicating that ginger beer was sold here, and lemonade also, and a few other items for the benefit and accommodation of tee-totallers. The furniture was such as may be seen at any time in some remote log-house in the 'far west' of the giant Republic: a good clock, however, told that time was not forgotten here.

Thomas Raeburn was born here, in 1769. He used to remark to his customers and visitors, that three very great men were born in that year,—'anc o' them was Bonaparte, an' anither, Wellington, an, the third anc is amang us here, ye may guess wha.' His father, although he could have well afforded to give his son a liberal education, was content that he should receive instructions in simple reading and writing. The old man used to say, 'what's the use of giein' Tam Latin or Greek,

may be he wad turn a Roman or a Papist a'thegither.' Tam throughout a long life, although fond of news and information on all subjects, never evinced any peculiar liking to dip deep at Learning's fount. It is said that he never in his life purchased a new book or a newspaper; he possessed a Bible however, and a few books, in a huge chest that he opened only on 'occasions.'

After his father's death Thomas, although he might have cultivated his farm to advantage, chose rather to work as a farm labourer, or a gardener to a gentleman in the neighbourhood. At this period of his life there was nothing peculiar or eccentric in his dress or his behaviour, till about 35 years before his death he became involved in a law-suit with a neighbouring proprietor, and was cast in heavy damages. Poor Raeburn took this sadly to heart; he considered himself (as most people do who come off second best at the law) marvelously ill-used—he was trampled upon and cheated of his lawful money, and vowed that he would go to war with the world, for it was a bad world, else he would have received justice, and not injury. Hereupon Thomas, the hermit, although in our opinion, he was not a regular hermit, for he maintained an old hand-maiden in his cottage, and did not live altogether upon raw turnips and cold water, and wear away the skin from his bones in prayer, but the world entitled him so, and what 'a' body says maun be true,' according to the old proverb. Thomas, the hermit, we say, declared war with the world, its fashions and customs, and except upon one occasion, until the day of his death, wore his hair and his beard, and the same dress, if a dress could be called the same which was a complete mass of patch over patch, while the original garments were altogether obliterated in dire confusion. When Thomas was remonstrated with on the subject, and advised to trim his beard in a Christian-like manner, and wear becoming raiment, he would say, 'I think I am much more Christian-like than yourselves. I am so far keeping by Scripture that I shall not mar the corners of my beard,

neither shall I take thought of wherewithall I shall be clothed ; and as for shaving I pay plenty of taxes without wasting soap in such a way as that.' There was one occasion, however, in which the hermit was persuaded to put on a decent suit of apparel, and it arose from this ;—The person with whom he had the lawsuit happened to come home one night from a fair in Kilmarnoek somewhat under the influence of strong waters, and bethought himself of taking a near cut through Thomas's domain. As accident would have it, he encountered the hermit, who endeavoured to make him retrace his steps. Both were powerful men, and ' when Greek meets Greek then comes the tug of war, the poor hermit was worsted, for his opponent in a most unfair and unmanly manner seized Thomas by the beard, and actually tore away part of it. An action of assault and trespass followed, and Thomas for once found the law on his side, and obtained damages. It was upon this occasion that the Sheriff induced Thomas to appear in court in suitable clothing, but his hair and beard maintained their station in spite of every remonstrance. The hermit had no great liking for lawyers, tax-gatherers, and excisemen—or gangers, as he called them. " They are just a' the Deevil's ain pack," said he, " created just to skin and torment puir sinners in this weary war!" and their maister will get them a' at the lang run, that's ae comfort," would he repeat as he chuckled to himself. The hermit in these cases, to give him his due, spoke from feeling, for upon one occasion he was fined in no less than 25 pounds for selling spirits without a license ; he considered himself altogether wronged in this ease—" vile, greedy villains," said he, " to meddle wi' a puir body for selling a wee drap o' guid liquor when the folk were really needing it, an' me trying to earn an honest penny."

He was also incarcerated several times—once for refusing to pay poor rates, and another time for violating an interdict against him. Upon all these occasions, when other men would probably have received a little

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sympathy, poor Raeburn was only laughed at, for it was well known that he was worth thousands.

Not many years before his death the Hermit was arrested for threatening to shoot a workman who was trimming a hedge which Raeburn asserted was altogether on his property, but which the other party asserted was on the boundary line, and therefore he had a right to trim one side of it. The matter came to court, and after much litigation, during which the hermit expected to be successful, the case was at last decided against him. He actually fainted in court, or at any rate 'shammed Abraham,' but it was 'no go;' no one sympathised with him, and he was left to brood more and more on his misfortunes, and these came not singly upon the poor fellow. In 1842 a gang of robbers broke into his house by the window, and holding loaded pistols to his breast, threatened to murder him if he did not surrender up all his money; after searching every corner, 'the villains went off with about £.30 in gold, silver, and copper, and had the audacity as they went away to fire their pistols in the air by way of defiance. One scoundrel, Duffy, was transported 10 years for this, and his wife imprisoned for 6 months. The law was surely very remiss here; we have seen men again and again hanged in Glasgow for crimes not one-tenth so bad as Raeburn's case; and yet for all this some of his biographers seem to chuckle over the unfortunate man's misfortunes as a piece of merriment. The poor fellow seemed to feel gratefully when any of his visitors sympathised with him in his mishaps; and is there any thing to be amazed at in this? Human nature, to a certain degree, operates in like manner in every breast, and he who has no sympathy for misfortune unmerited, is unworthy the name of man.

The hermit several times entertained the notion of paying her Majesty, Queen Victoria, a visit, and laying his complaints before her when he had no doubt they would be redressed. "She was a good little woman," he said, "a very good woman, and would get back his

L 25 with interest, and punish the vile gaugers." He actually went as far as Edinburgh at one time to wait on the Queen, but was persuaded to go no further. A few years ago he sent the Queen a rare silver coin, for which he received an official letter acknowledging receipt, but there was no contents for the hermit, as he sanguinary expected—disappointment again for poor Raeburn.

The hermit, although very fond of money, was not altogether uncharitable; he sometimes gave the way-faring beggar a handful of meal, but money he would not part with. One day on the public road he came up with a poor woman who knew him, and just as he came close to her, he saw a bawbee on the ground and lifted it. "Hech, Tammas," said the poor wife, "ye ken ye have thousands: its no worth your while to keep that bawbee, ye'll better gie it to me." "Gie it to you; Chirsty, aye, ye're a queer ane, fu, bawbees for yoursel', my lass," and so saying, Thomas slipped the coinage into his pocket.

In his youth the hermit was a handsome and a very powerful man, measuring 6 feet 2 inches in height, with a fine broad chest and proportionate limbs; in his old age he became bent, as most men do; yet notwithstanding, the ravages of time, his outlandish-beard, and his uncouth raiment, he still manifested the ruins of a noble frame and visage. The love of money was his great besetting sin; it contributed however, to render him abstemious both in regard to meat and drink, although in regard to his food it was carried to such a height as to injure his health occasionally. It was seldom indeed, he tasted anything stronger than water, although report gave him the credit of having become intoxicated one night in returning from Ayr races. A party of pretended friends inveigled him into a road side tavern, and in all probability they had hocused his drink, as he fell into a deep sleep, and upon awakening found that, like mighty Samson of old, he was "shorn of his locks." This was cruel and mean in

the extreme ; but how often are such tricks done ? The perpetrators thereof ought in all cases to be well pumped with cold water, and then tarred and feathered. Poor Raeburn, would to Heaven that many of thy species (except gentlemen with smooth chins and fashionable garments) could lay their hands upon their hearts and honestly declare that they had been drunk only once in their course through life,

Among the accomplishments which the hermit could boast of, we must mention his proficiency in the use of the rifle. In a trial with a celebrated rifleman he came off victorious, having killed 15 rabbits out of 17 shots. He used to say that he was the Scotch ‘ leather stocking ‘. He could also use the common fowling-piece to advantage, to the fatal experience of many an unfortunate mavis who looked upon Raeburn’s cherries as common property ;

It was already mentioned that he maintained an ancient hand-maiden to take charge of his diary and do household work. From the length of time they lived together we may infer that Thomas was no tyrant, or oppressor ; and he displayed one most unequivocal token of a kind heart—he displayed great fondness, nay, affection, to the little dumb creation he kept about him. He had as many cats, and fed them as well as any old maid ever did in broad Scotland, and was so well known to the little birds of the air that they would come with fluttering wings at his call, perch on his shoulder, and peck the very crumbs from his Aaronic beard.

Some years before his death Raeburn slipped his foot during frosty weather and broke his arm ; as he included the sons of Galen in the same category with lawyers, taxmen, and gaugers, he would not call a doctor, so that the bone never having reduced *SECUNDUM ARTEM*, his arm was rendered nearly useless.

Thomas was no great philologist, and yet he could readily detect any breach of the purity or elegance of language in others ; and many were the times when young gents. who imagined they were perfect James

Chrichton's in learning, felt the keenness of his criticism. He was by no means a second Solomon in wisdom, but had a tolerable share of wit occasionally. His visitors were many, indeed it would fill a volume to recount their names. He was asked once by a visitor if he might light his pipe; "No," said Thomas, "but you may light what's in your pipe." "Were you ever drunk, Mr Raeburn," said a rather rude customer one day; "No, sir," answered the hermit, "but I'm next neighbour just now to a chiel that's drunk as often as he can get it." Thomas was brought up a Calvinist, but for the last thirty years and upwards, never went to church; he probably felt that his OUTER appearance would cause more evil in and to others, than all the good he could receive. At one time he admitted of no visits on Sabbath, but latterly his house and garden was filled on that sacred day with crowds of every age and sex from morning till night. We are sorry to record this part of the hermit's character, but TRUTH as well as MURDER must out.

Although Thomas was very fond of money, he betrayed great inconsistency in some matters, suffering his farm to lie unploughed, and the manure of his cattle to run to waste.

He left several thousands of pounds, as far as we can learn, among distant relations. He never enjoyed the true comforts of life, and yet, after all, he perhaps enjoyed in his own way, what he deemed happiness. He is only another proof that all is vanity beneath the Sun.

We cannot conclude without observing, that although Scotland, by the all-powerful hand of Death, is now deprived of her Ayrshire hermit, there exists a *BONA FIDE* one about a mile past Kilmun kirk. We saw and conversed with this recluse last July. He resides a few yards off the right hand side of the public road which leads to Straehur. He is a tall thin man, above sixty years of age, and took up his abode there some years ago. It would appear that, like Thomas Raeburn, he had been unfortunate at LAW, and although not dis-

gusted with the world, determined to live perfectly as a recluse. He has a neat little cottage, (built with his own hands if we recollect aright) and there are no windows in it, properly speaking, only a few small holes near the top of the wall, about a foot square each. He cultivates a little garden, beside which falls a spout of clear water ; and he keeps a few goats. He is very polite and conversible with strangers ; who generally make him a small present. Gentle reader, you can any day in 3 hours sail, and at the expense of a few shillings, see and converse with this REAL living hermit, for; unlike Raeburn, he has no hand-maiden. Further, should any of you be particularly inclined, whether through disappointment in love or money matters, or by having too much of the latter to look after, to become hermits or hermitesses, be kind enough to send us your address and a postage stamp, and we shall direct you to a safe location, where you will run little risk of being intruded on by "villainous mankind," and at the same time enjoy plenty of turnips and cold water.



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