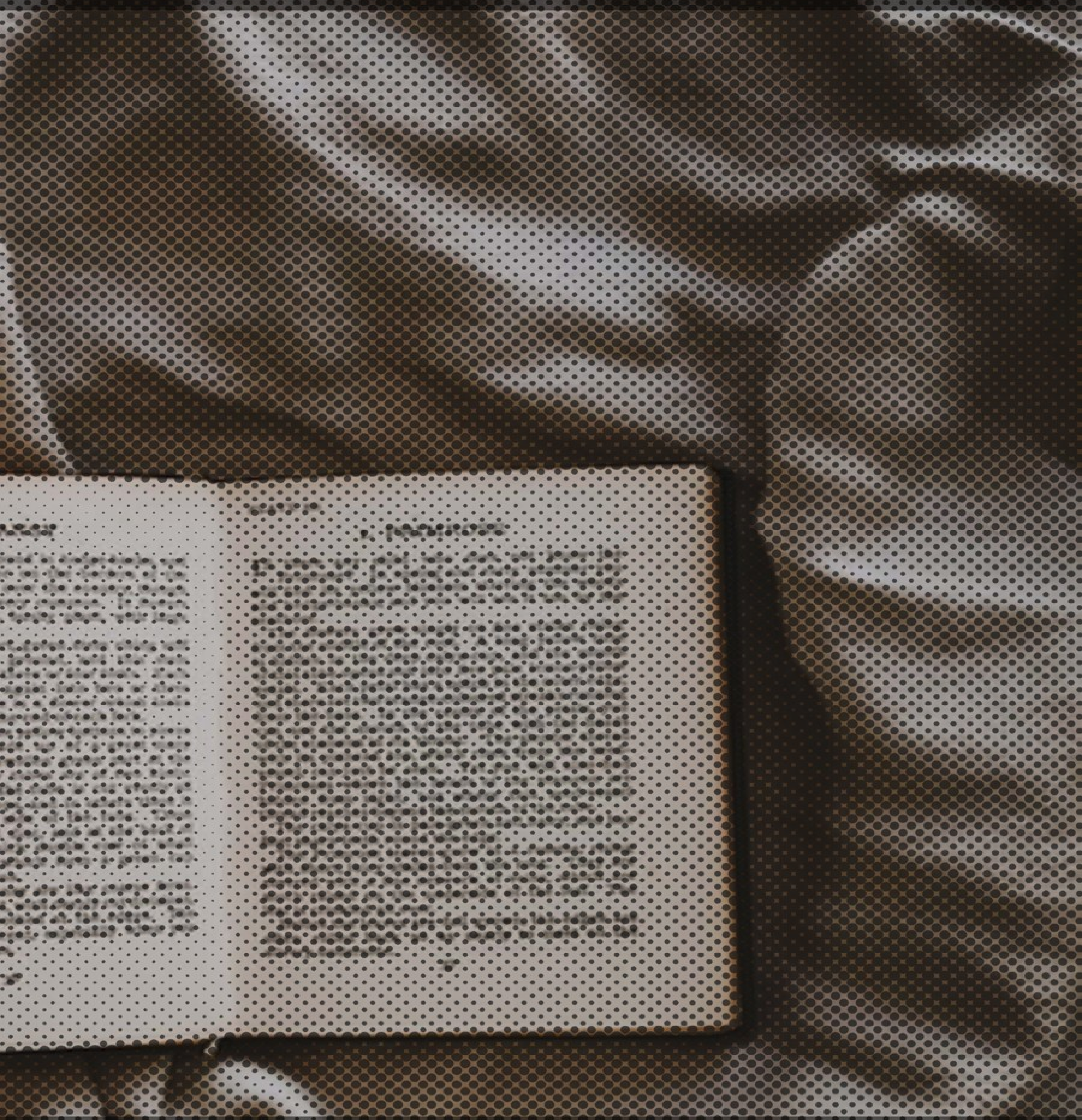
Robert Ford



Thistledown

Robert Ford

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A Book of Scotch Humour, Character, Folk-lore, Story & Anecdote

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PREFACE

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An eminently learned and genial ex-Professor of one of our Universities not long since pointed out how Scotland was remarkable for three things—Songs, Sermons, and Shillings. And whilst it may not be disputed that she has enormous and ever-increasing store of these three good things—and that, moreover, she loves them all—there is a fourth quality of her many-sided nature which is more distinctly characteristic of Auld Caledonia and her people, and that is the general possession of the faculty of original humour. Not one in ten thousand of the Scottish people may be able to produce a good song, or a good sermon; not one in twenty thousand of them may be able to "gather meikle gear and haud it weel thegither;" but every second Scotsman is a born humourist. Humour is part and parcel of his very being. He may not live without it—may not breathe. Consequently, it is found breaking out amongst us in the most unlikely as well as in the most likely places. It blossoms in the solemn assemblies of the people; at meetings of Kirk-Sessions; in the City and Town Council Chambers; in our Presbyteries; our Courts of Justice; and in the high Parliament of the Kirk itself. Famous specimens of it come down from the lonesome hillsides; from the cottage, bothy, and farm ingle-nooks. It issues from the village inn, the smiddy, the kirkyard; and functions of fasting and sorrow give it birth as well as occasions of feasting and mirth. It drops from the lips of the learned and the unlearned in the land; and is not more frequently revealed

in the eloquence of the University *savant* than in the gibberish of the hobbling village and city natural.

Humorous Scottish anecdotes have been an abundant crop; and collectors of them there have been not a few. Dean Ramsay's garrulous and entertaining *Reminiscences*, and Dr. Charles Rogers' *Familiar Illustrations of Scottish Life* excepted, however, the published collections of our floating facetiæ have been "hotch-potch" affairs. Revelations each of some little industry, no doubt, but few of them affording any proof of the compiler's familiarity with the subject. And as none of them have reached farther back than Dean Ramsay, and all have been content to take the more familiar of Ramsay's and Rogers' illustrations and anecdotes, and supplement these in hap-hazard fashion with random clippings from the variety columns of the daily and weekly newspapers, the individual result has been such as Voltaire's famous criticism eloquently describes:—They have contained things both good and new; but what was good was not new, and what was new was not good.

To the present work the critical aphorism of the "brilliant Frenchman" may not in fairness be applied. In any attempt to afford an adequate representation of the humours of the Scottish people, illustrations must of necessity be drawn from widely different sources, and I have, consequently, to confess my indebtedness to various earlier gleaners in the same field, chiefly to Dean Ramsay, Dr. Rogers, and the genial trio, Carrick, Motherwell, and Henderson. But for representative illustrations of Scottish life and character I have gone further back and come down to a later period than any previous writer on the subject. And so, whilst the

reader will discover here much that is old and good, he will find very much that is new, which, as illustrative of Scottish humour and character, will compare with the best of the old.

No pointless or dubiously nationalistic anecdote or illustration has been admitted. The work has been carefully and elaborately classified under eighteen distinct headings, each class, or section, being introduced by an exposition of the phase or phases of life and character to which it applies, and cemented from first to last by reflective and expository comment.

Essentially a book of humour, it is hoped that the reader will find it to be something more than a merely funny book. If he does not, the writer will have failed to realize fully his aim.

Robert Ford.

[1891.]

THISTLEDOWN

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CHAPTER I
THE SCOTTISH TONGUE—ITS GRAPHIC FORCE AND POWERS OF PATHOS AND HUMOUR

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We are frequently told—and now and again receive unwelcome scraps of evidence in confirmation of the scandal—that our dear old mother tongue is falling into desuetude in our native land. Already, it must be confessed, it has been abrogated from the drawing-rooms of the ultra-refined upper circles of Scottish society. The snobbish element amongst the great middle-class, ever prone to imitate their "betters," affect not to understand it, and blush (the sillier of them) when, in an unguarded moment, a manifest Scotticism slips into their conversation. There is a portion of the semi-educated working population, again, who, imitating the snobbish element of the middle grade, speak Scotch freely only in their working clothes. On Sundays, and extra occasions, when dressed in their very best, there is just about as much Scotch in their talk as will show one how poorly they can speak English, and just about enough English to render their Scotch ridiculous. Observing all this, and taking it in conjunction with the other denationalising tendencies of the age, there are those who predict that the time is not far distant when Burns's poems, Scott's novels, and Hogg's tales will be sealed books to the partially educated Scotsman. That there is a growing tendency in the direction indicated is quite true, but the disease, I believe, is only skin deep as yet, and the bone and sinew of the country remain quite unaffected. That

there will be a sudden reaction in the patient must be the sincere desire of every patriotic Scot. If the prediction of obsoletism is ever to be realized, then, “the mair’s the pity.” Scotland will not stand where she did. For very much—oh, so much—of what has made her glorious among the nations of the world will have passed away, taking the sheen of her glory with it. What Scotsmen, as Scotsmen, should ever prize most is bound up inseparably with the native language. Ours is a matured country, and the stirring scenes of her history on which the mind of the individual delights to dwell, are so frequently enshrined in spirited ballad and song, couched in the pithy Scottish vernacular, that, to suppose these latter dead—they are not translatable into English—is to suppose the best part of Scottish history dead and buried beyond the hope of resurrection. For its own sake alone the Scottish tongue is eminently deserving of regard—of cultivation and preservation. Scotsmen should be —and so all well-conditioned Scotsmen surely are—as proud of their native tongue as they are of their far-famed native bens and glens. For why, the rugged grandeur of the physical features of our country are not more worthy of admiration than the language in which their glories have been most fittingly extolled. They have characteristics in common; for rugged grandeur is as truly a feature of the Scottish language as it is the dominant feature of Scottish scenery. True, its various dialects are somewhat tantalising. The Forfar man is vividly identified by his “foo’s” and his “fa’s,” and his “fat’s” and his “fans”; and the Renfrewshire man by his “weans,” his “wee weans,” and his “yin pound yin and yinpence,” etc. Taking a simple phrase as an

example—(*Anglice*):—“The spoon is on the loom.” The Aberdonian will tell you that “The speen’s on the leem.” The Perthshire man will say “That spun’s on the luim”; and the Glasgow citizen will inform you that “The spin’s on the lim.” In a fuller example, a Renfrewshire person will vouchsafe the information that he “Saw a seybo synd’t doon the syvor till it sank in the stank.” A native of Perthshire will only about half understand what the speaker has said, and may threaten to “rax a rung frae the boggars o’ the hoose and reeshil his rumple wi’t,” without sending terror to the soul of his West country confederate. Latterly, an Aberdonian may come on the scene and ask, “Fa’ fuppit the loonie?” and neither of the forenamed parties will at once perceive the drift of his inquiry. To illustrate how difficult it may be for the East and the West to understand each other, I will tell a little story. An Aberdonian not long ago got work in Glasgow where they used a quantity of tar, and was rather annoyed to see his fellow-workmen wash the tar off their hands while he washed and rubbed at his in vain. His patience could stand it no longer, and going up to the foreman, and, stretching out his hands, he asked:—“Fat’ll tak’ it aff?” “Yes,” replied the foreman, “fat’ll tak’ it aff.” “Fat’ll tak’ it aff?” “Yes, I said fat would tak’ it aff.” “But *fat’ll* tak’ it aff?” persisted the Aberdonian. The foreman pointed to a tub, and roared: “Grease, you stupid eediot!” “Weel than,” retorted the Aberdonian, “an’ fat for did you no say that at first?”

There are, however, dialects and provincialisms in the language of every country and people under the sun, and the Scottish vernacular is not worse—not nearly so bad as many are. Our dialects are mainly the results of a narrowing

and broadening of the vowel sounds, as exemplified in the instance of the words “spoon” and “loom.” I have spoken of the rugged grandeur of the Scottish Doric, and its claims to preservation. There are single words in Scotch which cannot be adequately expressed in a whole sentence in English. Think of “fushionless,” “eerie,” “wersh,” “gloamin’,” “scunner,” “glower,” “cosie,” “bonnie,” “thoweless,” “splairge,” and “plowter,” etc., and try to find their equivalents in the language of the school. Try and find a sentence that will fairly express some of the words. “A gowpen o’ glaur” is but weakly expressed in “a handful of mud”; “stoure” is not adequately defined by calling it “dust in motion”; “flype yer stockin’, lassie,” is easier said than “turn your stocking inside out, girl.” “Auld lang syne” is not expressible in English. “A bonnie wee lassie” is more euphonious and expressive by a long way than “a pretty little girl.” “Hirsle yont,” “my cuit’s yeukie,” “e’enin’s orts mak’ gude mornin’ fodder,” “spak’ o’ lowpin’ ower a linn,” and “pree my mou’,” are also good examples of expressive Scotch. Nowhere, perhaps, is the singular beauty and rare expressiveness of the Scottish national tongue seen to better advantage than in the proverbial sayings—those short, sharp, and shiny shafts of speech, aptly defined as “the wit of one and the wisdom of many,”—and of which the Scottish language has been so prolific. “The genius, wit, and wisdom of a nation are discovered by their proverbs,” says Bacon; and, verily, while the proverbs of Scotland are singularly expressive of the pith and beauty of the vernacular in which they are couched, they also reveal in very great measure the mental and social characteristics of

the people who have perpetuated them. “A gangin’ fit’s aye gettin’, were’t but a thorn;” “Burnt bairns dread the fire;” “A’e bird in the hand’s worth twa in the bush;” “A fool an’ his siller’s sune parted;” “Hang a thief when he’s young an’ he’ll no steal when he’s auld;” “There’s aye some water whaur the stirkie droons;” “Moudiwarts feedna on midges;” “When gossipin’ wives meet, the deil gangs to his dinner;” “Hungry dogs are blythe o’ bursten puddin’s;” “He needs a lang-shankit spune that wad sup wi’ the deil;” “A blate cat maks a prood mouse;” “Better a toom house than an ill tenant;” “Lippen to me, but look to yoursel’;” “Jouk an’ lat the jaw gang by;” “Better sma’ fish than nane;” “The tulziesome tyke comes hirplin’ hame;” “Ha’ binks are sliddery;” “Ilka cock craws best on his ain middenhead;” “Lazy youth mak’s lowsy age;” “Next to nae wife, a guid wife’s best;” “Lay your wame to your winnin’;” “It’s nae lauchin’ to girn in a widdy;” “The wife’s a’e dochter an’ the man’s a’e coo, the tane’s ne’er weel, an’ the tither’s ne’er fu’.” These give the evidence.

Ours is a language peculiarly powerful in its use of vowels, and the following dialogue between a shopman and a customer is a convincing example. The conversation relates to a plaid hanging at a shop door:—

Customer (inquiring the material)—“Oo?” (wool?).

Shopman—“Aye, oo.” (yes, wool).

Customer—“A’ oo?” (all wool?).

Shopman—“Ay, a’ oo” (yes, all wool).

Customer—“A’ a’e oo?” (all one wool?).

Shopman—“Ou, ay, a’ a’e oo” (oh, yes, all one wool).

A dialogue in vowel sounds—surely a thing unique in literature!

In his Scotch version of the Psalms—“frae Hebrew intil Scottis”—the late Rev. Dr. Hately Waddell, of Glasgow, gives many striking illustrations of the force and beauty of idiomatic Scotch. His language partakes rather much of the antique form to be readily perceptible to the present generation, but its purity is unquestionable, and its beauty and power inexpressible in other words than his own. Let us quote the familiar 23rd Psalm.

“The Lord is my herd; na want sal fa’ me.

“He louts me till lie amang green howes; He airts me atowre by the lown waters.

“He waukens my wa’gaen saul; He weises me roun for His ain name’s sake, intil richt roddins.

“Na! tho’ I gang thro’ the dead-mirk dail; *e’en thar* sal I dread nae skaithin; for Yersel’ are nar-by me; Yer stok an’ Yer stay haud me baith fu’ cheerie.

“My buird Ye ha’e hansell’d in face o’ my faes; Ye ha’e drookit my head wi’ oyle; my bicker is *fu’* an’ *skailin’*.

“E’en sae sal gude guidin’ an’ gude gree gang wi’ me ilk day o’ my livin’; an’ ever mair syne i’ the Lord’s ain howff, *at lang last*, sal I mak bydan.”

Hear also Dr. Waddell’s translation of the last four verses of the 52nd chapter of Isaiah, they are inexpressibly beautiful:—

“Blythe and brak-out, lilt a’ like ane, ye bourocks sae swak o’ Jerusalem; for the Lord He has hearten’d His folk fu’ kin’; He has e’en boucht back Jerusalem.

“The Lord He rax’d yont His hailie arm, in sight o’ the nations mony, O; an’ ilk neuk o’ the yirth sal tak tent an’ learn the health o’ our God sae bonie, O!

“Awa, awa, clean but frae the toun: mak nor meddle wi’ nought that’s roun’; awa frae her bosom; haud ye soun’, wi’ the gear o’ the Lord forenent ye!

“For it’s no wi’ sic pingle ye’se gang the gate; nor it’s no wi’ sic speed ye maun spang the spate; for the Lord, He’s afore ye, *ear’ an’ late*; an’ Israel’s God, He’s ahint ye!”

These suggest “The Lord’s Prayer intill Auld Scottis,” as printed by Pinkerton, and which is cast in more antique form still:—“Uor fader quhilk beest i’ Hevin, Hallowit weird thyne nam. Cum thyne kinrik. Be dune thyne wull as is i’ Hevin, sva po yerd. Uor dailie breid gif us thilk day. And forleit us our skaths, as we forfeit tham quha skath us. And leed us na intill temtation. Butan fre us fra evil. Amen.”

No writer of any time—Burns alone excepted—has handled the native tongue to better purpose for the expression of every feeling of the human heart than has Sir Walter Scott; and in Jeanie Deans’ plea to the Queen for her sister’s life there is the finest example of simple pathos, dashed with the passion of hope struggling with despair, that is to be met with anywhere in literature. It shows the extent in this way of which the native speech is capable.

“My sister—my puir sister Effie, still lives, though her days and hours are numbered! She still lives, and a word o’ the King’s mouth might restore her to a heart-broken auld man, that never, in his daily and nightly exercise, forgot to pray that His Majesty might be blessed with a lang an’ a prosperous reign, and that his throne, and the throne o’ his

posterity, might be established in righteousness. O, madam, if ever ye kend what it was to sorrow for and with a sinning and a suffering creature, whase mind is sae tossed that she can be neither ca'd fit to live or dee, hae some compassion on our misery! Save an honest house from dishonour, and an unhappy girl, not eighteen years of age, from an early and dreadful death! Alas! it is not when we sleep saft and wake merrily oursel's that we think on other people's sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us then, and we are for righting our ain wrangs and fighting our ain battles. But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body—and seldom may it visit your leddyship—and when the hour of death comes, that comes to high and low—lang and late may it be yours!—oh, my leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for oursel's, but what we hae done for others, that we think on maist pleasantly. And the thought that ye hae intervened to spare the puir thing's life will be sweeter in that hour, come when it may, than if a word o' your mouth could hang the haill Porteous mob at the tail o' a'e tow."

Then the vigour and variety of the Scottish idiom as a vehicle of description has perhaps never received better illustration than in Andrew Fairservice's account of Glasgow Cathedral:—"Ay! it's a brave Kirk," said Andrew. "Nane o' yere whigmaleeries and curliwurlies and open steek hems aboot it—a' solid, weel-jointed mason wark, that will stand as lang as the warld, keep hands and gunpowther aff it. It had amaist a douncome lang syne at the Reformation, when they pu'd doon the Kirks of St. Andrews and Perth, and thereawa', to cleanse them o' Papery, and idolatry, and

image-worship, and surplices, and sic like rags o’ the muckle hure that sitteth on the seven hills, as if ane wasna braid enough for her auld hinder end. Sae the commons o’ Renfrew, and o’ the Barony, and the Gorbals, and a’ aboot, they behoved to come into Glasgow a’e fair morning, to try their hand on purging the High Kirk o’ Popish nick-nackets. But the townsmen o’ Glasgow, they were feared their auld edifice might slip the girths in gaun through siccan rough physic, sae they rang the common bell, and assembled the train-bands wi’ took o’ drum. By gude luck, the worthy James Rabat was Dean o’ Guild that year (and a gude mason he was himsell, made him keener to keep up the auld bigging). And the trades assembled, and offered downright battle to the commons, rather than their Kirk should coup the crans, as others had done elsewhere. It wasna for love o’ Papery—na, na!—nane could ever say that o’ the trades o’ Glasgow. Sae they sune came to an agreement to tak a’ the idolatrous statues o’ sants (sorrow be on them) out o’ their neuks—and sae the bits o’ stone idols were broken in pieces by Scripture warrant, and flung into the Molendiner burn, and the Auld Kirk stood as crouse as a cat when the flaes are kaimed aff her, and a’ body was alike pleased. And I hae heard wise folk say that if the same had been dune in ilka Kirk in Scotland, the Reform wad just hae been as pure as it is e’en now, and we wad hae mair Christianlike Kirks; for I hae been sae lang in England, that naething will drive out o’ my head, that the dog-kennel at Osbaldistone-Hall is better than mony a house o’ God in Scotland.”

No man, it is well known, had ever more command of the native vernacular than Robert Burns. In a letter written at Carlisle, in June 1787, to his friend William Nicol, Master of the High School, Edinburgh, he has left a curious testimony at once to the capabilities of the language and his own skill in it. “Kind, honest-hearted Willie,” he writes, “I’m sitten doon here, after seven-and-forty miles’ ridin’, e’en as forjeskit and forniaw’d as a forfoughten cock, to gie you some notion o’ my land-lowper-like stravaigin’ sin’ the sorrowfu’ hour that I sheuk hands and parted wi’ Auld Reekie.

“My auld ga’d gleyde o’ a meere has huchyall’d up hill and doun brae in Scotland and England, as teuch and birnie as a vera deevil wi’ me. It’s true, she’s as puir’s a sang-maker, an’ as hard’s a kirk, and tipper taipers when she tak’s the gate, jist like a lady’s gentlewoman in a minuwae, or a hen on a het girdle; but she’s a yauld, poutherie girran for a’ that, and has a stamach like Willie Stalker’s meere, that wad hae digeested tumbler-wheels, for she’ll whip me aff her five stimparts o’ the best aits at a down-sitten’, and ne’er fash her thoom. Whan ance her ring-banes and spavies, her crucks and cramps, are fairly soupl’d, she beets to, beets to, and aye the hindmost hour the tightest. I could wager her price to a thretty pennies, that for twa or three wooks, ridin’ at fifty miles a day, the deil-stickit a five gallopers acqueesh Clyde and Whithorn could cast saut on her tail.

“I hae dander’d owre a’ the country frae Dunbar to Selcraig, and ha’e forgather’d wi’ mony a gude fallow, and mony a weel-faur’d hizzie. I met wi’ twa dink queynes in

particular. Ane o’ them a sonsie, fine, fodgel lass, baith braw and bonnie; the ither was a clean-shankit, straught, tight, weel-faur’d wench, as blythe’s a lintwhite on a flowerie thorn, and as sweet and modest’s a new blawn plum-rose in a hazel shaw. They were baith bred to mainers by the beuk, and ony ane o’ them had as muckle smeddum and rumblegumption as the half o’ some Presbytries that you and I baith ken. They played me sic a deil o’ a shavie, that I daur say if my harigals were turn’d out ye wad see twa nicks i’ the heart o’ me like the mark o’ a kail-whittle in a castock.

“I was gaun to write you a lang pystle, but, Gude forgi’e me, I gat mysel’ sae noutourously bitchify’d the day, after kail-time, than I can hardly stoiter but and ben.

“My best respecks to the guidwife and a’ our common friens, especiall Mr. and Mrs. Cruikshank, and the honest guidman o’ Jock’s Lodge.

“I’ll be in Dumfries the morn gif the beast be to the fore, and the branks bide hale.

“Gude be wi’ you, Willie! Amen!”

That letter might fairly be made the “Shibboleth” in any case of doubt regarding one’s ability to read Scotch. It would shiver the front teeth of some of your counterlouper gentry. Yet it is not an overdone example of the Scotch Doric as it was spoken in Edinburgh drawing-rooms a hundred years ago—*vide*, Henry Cockburn’s *Memorials*. Between it and the “braid Scotch” of half a century earlier there is a marked difference.

In the *Scots Magazine* for November, 1743, the following proclamation is printed:—

“All brethren and sisters, I let you to witt that there is a twa-year-auld lad littleane tint, that ist’ ere’en.

“It’s a’ scabbit i’ the how hole o’ the neck o’d, and a cauler kail-blade and brunt butter at it, that ist’er. It has a muckle maun blue pooch hingin’ at the carr side o’d, fou o’ mullers and chucky-stanes, and a spindle and a whorle, and it’s daddy’s ain jockteleg in’t. It’s a’ black aneath the nails wi’ howkin’ o’ yird, that is’t. It has its daddy’s gravat tied about the craig o’d, and hingin’ down the back o’d. The back o’ the hand o’d’s a’ brunt; it got it i’ the smiddy ae day.

“Whae’er can find this said twa-year-auld lad littleane may repair to M—o J—n’s, town-smith in C—n, and he sall hae for reward twall bear scones, and a ride o’ our ain auld beast to bear him hame, and nae mair words about it, that wilt’r no.”

Hogg, in his “Shepherd’s Calendar,” referring to the religious character of the shepherds of Scotland in his day, tells that “the antiquated but delightful exercise of family worship was never neglected,” and, “formality being a thing despised, there are no compositions I ever heard,” he continues, “so truly original as those prayers occasionally were; sometimes for rude eloquence and pathos, at other times for an indescribable sort of pomp, and, not infrequently, for a plain and somewhat unbecoming familiarity.” He gives several illustrations, quite justifying this description, from some with whom he had himself served and herded. One of the most notable men for this sort of family eloquence, he thought, was a certain Adam Scott, in Upper Dalgleish. Thus Scott prayed for a son who seemed thoughtless—

“For Thy mercy’s sake—for the sake o’ Thy puir, sinfu’ servants that are now addressing Thee in their ain shilly-shally way, and for the sake o’ mair than we daur weel name to Thee, hae mercy on Rab. Ye ken fu’ weel he’s a wild, mischievous callant, and thinks nae mair o’ committin’ sin than a dog does o’ lickin’ a dish; but put Thy hook in his nose, and Thy bridle in his gab, and gar him come back to Thee wi’ a jerk that he’ll no forget the langest day that he has to live.” For another son he prayed:—“Dinna forget puir Jamie, wha’s far awa’ frae us this nicht. Keep Thy arm o’ power about him; and, oh, I wish Ye wad endow him wi’ a little spunk and smeddum to act for himsel’; for, if Ye dinna, he’ll be but a bauchle i’ this warld, and a back-sitter i’ the neist.” Again:—“We’re a’ like hawks, we’re a’ like snails, we’re a’ like slogie riddles; like hawks to do evil, like snails to do good, and like slogie riddles to let through a’ the gude and keep a’ the bad.” When Napoleon I. was filling Europe with alarm, he prayed—“Bring doon the tyrant and his lang neb, for he has done muckle ill this year, and gie him a cup o’ Thy wrath, and gin he winna tak’ that, gie him kelty” [*i.e.*, double, or two cups].

Very graphic, is it not! It reminds us of the prayer of one Jamie Hamilton, a celebrated poacher in the West country. As Jamie was reconnoitring a lonely situation one morning, his mind more set on hares than on prayers, a woman approached him from the only house in the immediate district and requested that he should “come owre and pray for auld Eppie, for she’s just deein’.”

“Ye ken weel enough that I can pray nane,” replied Jamie.

“But we haena time to rin for ony ither Jamie,” urged the woman, “Eppie’s just slippin’ awa’; and oh! it wad be an awfu’ like thing to lat the puir bodie dee without bein’ prayed for.”

“Weel, then,” said Jamie, “an I maun come, I maun come; but I’m sure I kenna right what to say.”

The occasion has ever so much to do with the making of the man. Approaching the bed, Jamie doffed his cap and proceeded:—“O Lord, Thou kens best Thy nainsel’ how the case stands atween Thee and auld Eppie; and sin’ Ye hae baith the heft and the blade in Yer nain hand, just guide the gully as best suits her guid and Yer nain glory. Amen.”

It was a poacher’s prayer in very truth, but a bishop could not have said more in as few words.

But it is easy to be expressive in Scotch, for it is peculiar to the native idiom that the simpler the language employed the effect is the greater. Think how this is manifested in the song and ballad literature of the country. In popular ballads like “Gil Morrice,” “Sir James the Rose,” “Barbara Allan,” and “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow”; in Jane Elliot’s song of “The Flowers of the Forest”; in Grizzel Baillie’s “Werena my heart licht I wad dee”; in Lady Lindsay’s “Auld Robin Gray”; in Lady Nairne’s “Land o’ the Leal”; in Burns’s “Auld Lang Syne”; in Tannahill’s “Gloomy Winter”; in Thom’s “Mitherless Bairn”; and in Smibert’s “Widow’s Lament.” I do not mean to say that the making of these songs and ballads was a simple matter; but the verbal material is in each case of the simplest character, and the effect such that the pieces are established in the common heart of Scotland. Burns did not go out of his way for either language or figures of speech to

describe Willie Wastle’s wife, yet see the graphic picture we have presented to us by a few strokes of the pen:—

“She has an e’e—she has but ane,
The cat has twa the very colour;
Five rusty teeth, forbye a stump,
A clapper-tongue wad deave a miller;
A whiskin’ beard about her mou’,
Her nose and chin they threaten ither—
Sic a wife as Willie has,
I wadna gie a button for her.

“She’s bow-houghed, she’s hein-shinn’d,
Ae limpin’ leg, a hand-breed shorter;
She’s twisted right, she’s twisted left
To balance fair in ilka quarter:
She has a hump upon her breast
The twin o’ that upon her shouther—
Sic a wife as Willie has,
I wadna gie a button for her.”

No idea there is strained. Every word is common. The same may be said of Hew Ainshe’s lyric poem in a different vein, “Dowie in the hint o’ Hairst,” which I make no apology for quoting in full:—

“It’s dowie in the hint o’ hairst.
At the wa’-gang o’ the swallow,
When the wind grows cauld, and the burns grow bauld,
An’ the wuds are hingin’ yellow;
But oh, it’s dowier far to see
The wa’-gang o’ her the heart gangs wi’,

The dead-set o’ a shinin’ e’e.
That darkens the weary warld on thee.

“There was meikle love atween us twa—
Oh, twa could ne’er be fonder;
And the thing on yird was never made,
That could ha’e gart us sunder.
But the way o’ Heaven’s aboon a’ ken,
And we maun bear what it likes to sen’—
It’s comfort, though, to weary men,
That the warst o’ this warld’s waes maun en’.

“There’s mony things that come and gae,
Just kent, and just forgotten;
And the flowers that busk a bonnie brae,
Gin anither year lie rotten,
But the last look o’ yon lovely e’e,
And the deein’ grip she ga’e to me,
They’re settled like eternitie—
Oh, Mary; gin I were wi’ thee.”

By these illustrations I have endeavoured to shew forth, to all whom it may concern, the verbal beauty, the graphic force, and the powers for the expression of pathos and humour there is in the vernacular speech of Scotland. Like our national emblem—the thistle—it is, of course, nothing in the mouth of an ass. But well spoken, it is charming alike to the ear and the intellect; and, for the reasons already urged in this paper, is worthy of more general esteem and more general cultivation than the current generation of Scotch folk seem disposed to award it. Lord Cockburn pronounced it

“the sweetest and most expressive of living languages;” and no unprejudiced reader of his *Memorials* will dispute the value of his opinion on the subject. He wrote excellent Doric himself, and made it the vehicle of his conversation in his family, and casually throughout the day, as long as he lived. Ho! for more such good old Scottish gentlemen! Ho! for another Jean, Duchess of Gordon, to teach our Scottish gentry how to speak naturally! That we had more men in our midst, with equal influence and education, and charged with the fine spirit of patriotism which animates Scotland’s ain “grand auld man”—Professor Blackie! It has been the fashion for English journalists with pretensions to wit, to animadvert by pen and pencil on what they regard as the idiosyncracies of Scottish speech and behaviour. *Punch* is a frequent offender in this way. I say *offender* advisedly, for no *Punch* artist, so far as I have seen—and I have scanned that journal from the first number to the last—ever drew a Scotsman in “his manner as he lived.” The originals of the pictures may have appeared in London Christmas pantomimes, but certainly nowhere else. Then the language which in their guileless innocence they expect will pass muster as Scotch, is a hash-up alike revolting to the ears of gods and men. We don’t expect very much from some folks, but surely even a London journalist should know that a Scotsman does not say “mon” when he means to say “man.” Charles Macklin put it that way, and the London journalist apparently can never get beyond Macklin. Don’t go to London for your Scotch, my reader! Listen to it as it may still be spoken at your granny’s ingleside. Familiarise yourself with it as it is to be found in its full vigour and

purity in the Waverley Novels; in Burns's Poems and Songs; in the "Noctes Ambrosianæ" of Professor Wilson; in Galt's Tales; in the writings of the Ettrick Shepherd; in the stories of George MacDonald, J. M. Barrie, and S. R. Crockett; in the pages of "Mansie Wauch," "Tammas Bodkin," and "Johnny Gibb." Don't learn English less; but again, I say, read, write, and speak Scotch more frequently. And, when doing so, remember you are not indulging in a mere vulgar corruption of good English, comparable with the barbarous dialects of Yorkshire and Devon, but in a true and distinct, a powerful and beautiful language of your own, "differing not merely from modern English in pronunciation, but in the possession of many beautiful words, which have ceased to be English, and in the use of inflexions unknown to literary and spoken English since the days of Piers Ploughman and Chaucer." "The Scotch," as the late Lord Jeffrey said, "is not to be considered as a provincial dialect—the vehicle only of rustic vulgarity and rude local humour. It is the language of a whole country, long an independent kingdom, and still separate in laws, character, and manners. It is by no means peculiar to the vulgar, but is the common speech of the whole nation in early life, and with many of its most exalted and accomplished individuals throughout their whole existence; and though it be true that, in later times, it has been in some measure laid aside by the more ambitious and aspiring of the present generation, it is still recollected even by them as the familiar language of their childhood, and of those who were the earliest objects of their love and veneration. It is connected in their imagination not only with that olden time which is uniformly conceived as more pure,

lofty, and simple than the present, but also with all the soft and bright colours of remembered childhood and domestic affection. All its phrases conjure up images of school-day innocence and sports, and friendships which have no pattern in succeeding years.”

CHAPTER II
CHARACTERISTICS OF SCOTCH HUMOUR

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Various writers have attempted to define Scotch humour, but it is a difficult task, and in all my reading of the subject I do not remember to have ever seen a very satisfactory analysis of the subtle quantity. The famous Sydney Smith did not admit that such an element obtained in our “puir cauld country.” “Their only idea of wit which prevails occasionally in the North,” said he, “and which, under the name of ‘wut,’ is so infinitely distressing to people of good taste, is laughing immoderately at stated intervals.” Further to this, the same sublime authority declared that it would require a surgical operation to get a joke well into a Scotch understanding. It has been presumed that the witty Canon was not serious in his remark; that it was a laboured effort of his to make a joke. This may be true; and the idea of a surgical operation was possibly suggested by feeling its necessity on himself in order to get his joke *out*. Be that as it may, but for the fact that the genial Charles Lamb, curiously, entertained a somewhat similar notion on the subject, the rude apothegm of the Rev. Sydney Smith would never have misguided even the most hopelessly opaque of his own countrymen. No humour in Scotch folk! No humour in Scotland! There is no country in the world that has produced so much of it. Of no other country under the sun can it be so truly said that humour is the common inheritance of the people. Much of the kind of humour that drives an Englishman into an ecstacy of delight, would, of

course, only tend to make a Scotsman sad; but that is no evidence that the Scotch are lacking in their perceptions of the humorous. It only shows that “some folks are no ill to please.” “The Cockney must have his puns and small jokes,” says Max O’Rell. “On the stage he delights in jigs, and to really please him the best of actors have to become rivals of the mountebanks at a fair. A hornpipe delights his heart. An actor who, for an hour together, pretends not to be able to keep on his hat, sends him into the seventh heaven of delight. Such performances make the Scotch smile—but with pity. The Scotsman has no wit of this sort. In the matter of wit he is an epicure, and only appreciates dainty food.” In so far as the above quotation applies to the denizens of the “North,” it is perfectly true. In such circumstances the Scotch will “laugh immoderately at stated intervals,” but the laughs will be like angels’ visits, “few and far between.”

Superficially regarded, Scotland is a hard-featured land; yet Scotch folk are essentially humorous. Do not go to the places of public amusement—to the theatres and music halls—particularly in the larger towns, where the populations are so mixed; do not go there to learn the Scottish taste and humour. This practice has led to the proverbial saying that “a Scotchman takes his amusement seriously.” In such places you may learn something of the English character and humour, but nothing of the Scotch. For an Englishman’s wit (he has little or no humour) being an acquired taste, comes out “on parade”—it is a gay thing —while Scotch folks’ humour being the common gift of Nature to all and sundry in the land, differing only in degree, slips out most frequently when and where least expected.