

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE VILLAGE SMIDDY.

By Peter Bruce.

Many years ago before the demon of machinery had hustled the old-fashioned, easy-going nailer out of existence, there stood at one end of the straggling Scotch village of Glenalla a smith's shop, and at the other a humble smiddy. Though the occupants of both made a living by hammering and fashioning iron for various purposes, they could not be said to stand on the same trading or even social level. The smiddy was never spoken of as the smith's shop nor was the smith's shop ever spoken of as the smiddy. The interior of both was of a sooty hue. But there the resemblance began and ended. The smith's shop was large almost to spaciousness. It had a high wide door like a French portecochere facing the street, quite big enough to admit a couple of horses abreast with a cart behind them. There were two or three anvils in the shop, with a noble array of hammers, pincers, punches, and files lying about, a vice bench, and other appliances required by the village Vulcan in the prosecution of his business. On the walls were fixed staples for tying up horses when being shod or waiting to be shod. Here and there lay a plough coultter, a disabled pitchfork, a wheel with a broken rim, and other dilapidated implements of husbandry needing repairs. For Smith Macfarlane and his two assistants were busy men. They shod nearly all the horses in the parish. The repaired everything in metal from reaping hooks to harrows. What with a couple of men hammering on the anvils, the stamping of the horses, and the roar of the furnace, there was not much opportunity for gossiping.

The smiddy at the other end of the village was an establishment of a much humbler character. It was occupied by Sandy Tamson, whose main stand-by in life was the manufacture of nails. Unlike the tenant of the smith's shop, who was always spoken of as Smith Macfarlane, Sandy Tamson was known simply as the nailer. Besides forging nails for tradesmen in the district, Sandy supplied the village shoemakers with tacks for arming the boot soles of the villagers. He earned occasional coppers by fashioning arrow heads for schoolboys desirous of emulating the deeds of Robin Hood and Little John, though they bent their bows against much smaller game than the merry outlaws of Sherwood Forest. The guidwives of the village, when about to make sheep's head kail, brought him the woolly pates which he singed for an obolus. In a cramped back-yard stood a small grindstone, on which the nailer gave a fresh lease of life to butchers' cleavers, domestic hatchets, dinner and even pocket knives for a bronze consideration. For a humble babwie he would oblige a mischievous boy by filing a touch-hole in a rusty key, and so convert it into a pistol. It would be absurd to say that Sandy Tamson made a fortune in his humble factory. But he brought up a large family in a respectable way, and gave all a good start in life.

The accommodation in the smiddy was limited. The place was little more than a dingy vault under the nailer's dwelling-house. A narrow door opening on the street, and another leading to the backyard aforesaid were the sole ventilators. They were always open, and thus provided both light and air, as well as a passage for the escape of smoke. At night the light from the glowing fire and the sparks from the little anvil gave the nailer and his visitors all the light they required; for Sandy, unlike Smith Macfarlane, had many visitors, especially in the evenings. Their gossip did not

interfere much with his work, for Sandy easily got in a word and even the edge of an argument while blowing the bellows and heating his nailrod.

The nailer was a blue-eyed, genial and grizzled fellow about forty-five; well informed on general subjects, fond of an argument, able, as a rule, to hold his own, and took a lively interest in the affairs of the parish and the nation. For the convenience of those who looked in at the smiddy he had raised at the end of the long hearth facing the fire a wooden bench to accommodate three or four visitors. This privileged perch was usually occupied by favorites of Sandy, men, as a rule, who held the nailer's opinions, and were able and ready to support him in argument.

Singular companies at times gathered round the smiddy hearth. Here might be seen, though rarely, James Duncan, a well-to-do tradesman and dounce elder. When he was spoken about he was always referred to as Jamie Duncan, but when spoken to he was addressed either as James or as Maister Duncan. He was not very popular, especially with young folk, for at the weekly prayer meetings, when leading the prayers, he had a habit of opening his eyes at unexpected moments, and frequently found the young people engaged in anything but devotion at exercises. Jamie used to blame a nervous affection for the wanderings of his optics on such occasions; but as he had never been known to consult a doctor about his eyes little credence was given to his excuse.

Another elder who now and again put in an appearance at the smiddy, was Willie Webster. Unlike Jamie, he never opened his eyes when praying from the exordium to the "Amen," and spoke with a heavy deliberation in marked contrast to the jerky and winking style of Jamie. Willie belonged to the Frees, Jamie to the U.P.'s, while Sandy was a staunch supporter of the Auld Kirk. The elders, however, seldom patronized the smiddy. They found by conversation too often developed into rough criticism of ministers and sermons, and even of elders, especially by Sandy himself, whose Erastian notions and excuses for erring human nature were not palatable to either James or Willie.

Sandy, though a sober man himself, did not see anything very wrong in a church-gower and good Christian drinking more of the national beverage at times than was good for him. As he used to say, "A man can surely tak' a hearty dram at an orra time and yet be fit to han round the wine at the Sacrament." Sometimes, when in an argumentative mood, he went a good deal further, and maintained that religion was not worth a button if it could not wink at human failings of a more serious kind than dram-drinking. In these latitudinarian opinions he was warmly supported by the village cooper, who had fought with Lord Nelson at Trafalgar, and would have very much astonished his family if he had come home sober on a Saturday night. The cooper indeed had very much broader views on all religious subjects than the nailer. When driven into a corner he had a formula at hand which at times confused his opponents. "If," he would say, "God made the world I wad like t' ken wha made God?" There was indeed a wonderful number of broad views got an airing in the dingy smiddy.

Watty Johnstone was a frequent visitor. He beat the big drum in the village band. That was all he knew of music, but he was always welcome at the smiddy chiefly because, though an excellent draughts player, he was usually beaten by the nailer. The latter could boast that he had once met the redoubtable Herd Laddie, and had drawn the game,

and when the subject of draughts was under discussion, as it often was—for Sandy kept a damboard on the premises—he seldom failed to re-tell the particulars of that memorable encounter.

"Ah!" he would say, "you should have seen the Herd Laddie when I made the move that forced him either to lose the game or draw it."

"That's a' very weel," the drummer would say, "but you took guid care never to play the Herd Laddie again."

"That's true," Sandy would good-naturedly reply; "I never could have beaten him, that's certain, and the draw was guid enough for me."

Old Donald Morrison, who united in his own person the offices of sexton, bellman and minister's man or beadle, was a frequent visitor, but he did not add much to the gaiety of the company. His duties as grave-digger and as an adjunct to the Auld Kirk brought him much in contact with the serious side of life, and his conversation generally turned upon gruesome topics. He was fond of telling stories of resurrectionists whom he had scared when just about to carry off corpses from the graves. To tell the truth, when most of these razzas took place Donald was sound asleep in bed.

"That's a' verra weel, Donald," the drummer would say, "but tell us the story about the gravedigger who was tied in a sack by the resurrectionist and flung into an empty grave." As Donald was well known to be the hero of that adventure he was glad to change the theme.

Ghosts and people buried alive were also favorite themes with the old sexton. He had now and again to visit the church-yard at night and alone, and as no one could contradict his stories they were listened to in silence or with sceptical coughs.

Many more interesting village types frequented the village smiddy. There was the old veteran who had fought with Sir John Moore at Corrunna, and his next door neighbor, who had been half-blinded at Quatre Bras. There was the weaver who had just finished his web, the watchmaker who wound up the steeple clock and the labourer who made poaching his principal business, the shoemaker who did not always stick to his last, the stickit lawyer vainly sent by his friends in Edinburgh to wean him from John Barleycorn. These, together with the nailer and the smiddy itself, have long since passed out of existence. There is no longer the same type of character to be seen in the parish. If any such are to the fore they are not to be found discussing the affairs of the parish round a smiddy fire.

THE COLOR OF SEALS.

Little seals are snow-white at first—the better to hide on the white ice on which they are born. Only their eyes and the tips of their noses are black, and at the first alarm they close their eyes and lie very still, so that it is almost impossible to see them. Even when you stand over them, they look like the rough lumps of snow ice. If they have time, they even hide the black tips of their noses in their white fur coats; and if you appear suddenly, they simply close their eyes, and the black nose tip looks like a stray pebble, or a tiny bit of bark left by the uneasy winds that sweep over the ice floes. As they grow larger and begin to fish for themselves, the gradually turn dark and sleek like their mothers.—Long's Northern Trails."

There is only one key to success, and that is perseverance. Let nothing daunt you, and if really in earnest and resolved to conquer, you must win.