

THE MISER AND THE ELM.

BY JOHN M. WILSON.

There lived, during the reign of James I., in a small cottage at a little distance from the public road leading from Melrose, an old man, called Gilbert Perkins. At the back of the cottage, there was a small piece of ground in which grew an elm, which had attained, in a long course of years, to a great size. The house and plot of ground were held in feu from a neighbouring proprietor, who, in consideration of the poverty of the occupant, generally remitted him the few shillings of feu-duty. No person knew anything of the old man. His only mode of passing his time seemed to consist in sitting, for many hours together, at the foot of the old elm which shaded his cottage, apparently listening to the music of the rookery over his head, for the members of which fraternity he seemed to have a great affection.

His next neighbour was a feuar of the name of Andrew Garland, a wright, who, for a long time, had eyed the spacious elm in Gilbert's back yard with the eye of a Dædalus, measuring, no doubt, in his mind, how many brides' drawers or coffins might have been produced out of its stately trunk. He had often endeavoured to purchase it from Gilbert; and was surprised that a man accounted a miser should have rejected an offer of money for what was apparently of no use to him.

"I dinna want to disturb the craws, the only freends I hae on earth," was the only answer that was vouchsafed to the offer.

Andrew's attention was drawn more narrowly to this subject in consequence of a circumstance which took place some time afterwards. One morning, when up early at work, he was surprised to see Gibbie sprawling down from the elm by means of a ladder which he had brought from the cottage. As he descended, he looked suspiciously around him, as if afraid he should be discovered; and having satisfied himself that no person saw him, hobbled away into his house, dragging, with great difficulty, the ladder after him. Having watched him several mornings afterwards, Andrew discovered that he ascended the tree once every day at the same early hour—going through the same operation, without a change in any respect, even in the motion of his limbs, or the putting of one leg before another.

"Ye rise early, Gibbie," said Andrew to him one day.

"Do I?" answered Gibbie cautiously, eyeing his interrogator with intense curiosity and fear.

"There's nae apples on oor Scotch elms, Gibbie, are there—eh?"

"No; but there's sometimes craws," answered Gibbie, with increased terror, mixed with some satisfaction at his prompt reply.

"Do ye breakfast on the young rooks, or, as we ca' them, branchers, Gibbie?"

"No; but I gie them their breakfast sometimes," replied Gibbie; who saw that it was better to give a reason for his ascending the tree, than to deny what was clearly known.

"Ye had better tak care o' Jamie's act o' parliament," replied Andrew, with reference to a curious statute which had recently been passed in regard to rookeries.

"There's nae act o' Parliament can prevent me frae feedin' my ain birds," replied Gibbie, who knew nothing of the statute.

"The shirra may tell ye anither tale," said Andrew, as he went to resume the work he had left for the purpose of his interrogation.

The reference made by Andrew to an act of Parliament was strictly applicable to the subject of the conversation. In the first Parliament held by James, it was enacted, for the preservation of the corn, that "the proprietors of trees in kirkyards, orchards, and other places, shall, by every method in their power, prevent rooks or crows from bigging their nests thereon; and, if this cannot be accomplished, they shall at least take special care that the young rooks or branchers shall not be suffered to take wing, under the penalty that all trees upon which the nests are found at Baltane, and from which it can be established by good evidence that the young birds have escaped, shall be forfeited to the crown, and forthwith cut down and sold by warrant of the sheriff."

This strange statute was acted upon, soon after it was passed, with the greatest vigour; so much so that even the solitary elm of Gibbie, which had been proved "habit and repute" an old offender, in harbouring the outlawed birds, came under its sweeping range. It was distinctly proved that the nests had been allowed to be built, and that the young branchers had been allowed to take wing—the two tests of the contravention of the statute. Unknown to the proprietor, the stately elm was condemned by the sheriff, after being sat upon by an inquest; and, at an early hour one morning, Gibbie heard the axes of the men of the law resounding from the trunk of his favourite tree. Alarmed by the noise, he ran out half naked, and observed with consternation a crowd of people standing round the condemned elm, while two or three officers, with red necks on their coats, were superintending the work of its destruction.

"What are ye about, ye men o' the law?" ejaculated the miser, as he rushed forwards to seize the arm of one of the men engaged in using the axe. "What richt hae ye to meddle wi' my property?"

"It is forfeited to the crown, old man," said the sheriff-clerk, who stood aside.

"I'll redeem it, I'll redeem it, wi' three times its value," cried Gibbie, holding out money to the clerk.

"The time of redemption is past," answered the clerk. "It must now be sold, but not till it is cut down. You can bid for it along with the rest."

This answer in some degree pacified Gibbie, who sat down on a stone alongside of the tree, shivering with cold, and eyeing, with intense agony, the operations of the men.

The tree was cut down and exposed to public roup. The auctioneer entered it at half a merk. The sum was immediately offered by Gibbie, who looked wistfully round, as if imploring his neighbours not to bid against him.

"A shillin mair," cried Andrew Garland, with a voice which shook Gibbie to the soul.

"An' a saxpence abune that," cried Gibbie, with an expression of grief.

"Anither saxpence," rejoined Andrew.

"An' ane mair to that," cried Gibbie, with great perturbation. "Shame! shame! to bid against a man wantin his ain." And he groaned deeply, lowering his head to his knees, and lifting it again, apparently in great agony.

Andrew, however, continued to bid; and Gibbie, after waiting till the hammer was about to fall, bade against him, until, by their alternate additions, the sum bid was twice the value of the elm. At this stage, Andrew went round to the clerk and whispered something in his ear, which produced a look of great curiosity at Gibbie, whose state of mental agitation was now such that he had rolled off his seat, and lay on the ground clutching the grass and groaning bitterly. The bidding went on; Andrew kept up his bodes, and Gibbie followed him with groans and imprecations. Five merks had now been bid, and Andrew's spirit was not in any degree subdued. The crowd were filled with amazement—the scene was in the last degree strange—the attitude of Gibbie, and the serious countenance of Andrew, the looks of the clerk, and the whispers of the people, all conspired to lend it an extraordinary interest.

The scene continued. The bidding, which had now lasted for an hour, was in no degree abated. Ten merks—fifteen merks—twenty merks—thirty merks, were successively attained. The affair had now assumed a most serious aspect. Some people thought Andrew mad; others attributed his conduct to spite against Gibbie; and some thought it was a scheme between Andrew and the clerk to rouse the feelings of the old miser for the purpose of producing amusement. But everything bore so serious an aspect that the interest still continued to increase. The sufferings, in the meantime, of Gibbie, were indescribable. Convulsive shakings took possession of him, and every successive bode produced a paroxysm; nature became exhausted; and having called out with an unnatural voice "Fifty-one merks!" he uttered a scream and expired.

The crowd collected round the old man, as he lay dead on the ground. Andrew Garland felt he had proceeded too far. He had rendered himself guilty of the death of a fellow creature; and an explanation was demanded on the spot. He told them honestly the whole state of the case: that he suspected the tree to contain a sum of money—that the clerk had humoured the excessive bidding to see what effect it would produce on the miser—and that he had had no object to gratify beyond mere amusement. The people were satisfied, and the tree was searched. In a hole in the side of the trunk was found a leather bag, containing £300 Scots. The last bode having been given by Gibbie, the tree and its pose belonged to his heir; who afterwards came forward and claimed the prize.

THE PLEASURES OF TRUE RELIGION.—The pleasures that accrues to a man from religion is such that it is in nobody's power, but only in his that has it; so that he that has the property may be also sure of the perpetuity. And tell me so of any outward enjoyment that man is capable of. We are generally at the mercy of men's rapine, avarice, and violence, whether we shall be happy or no; for if I build my felicity upon my estate or reputation, I am happy as long as the tyrant or the railer will give me leave to be so. But when my concernment takes up no more room or compass than myself, then, so long as I know where to exist, I know also where to be happy; for I know I may be so in my own breast, in the court of my own conscience; where, if I can but prevail with myself to be innocent, I need bribe neither judge nor officer to be pronounced so. The pleasure of the religious man is an easy and a portable pleasure; such an one as he carries about in his bosom, without alarming either the eye or the envy of the world. A man putting all his pleasures into this one is like a traveller putting all his goods into one jewel—the value is the same, and the convenience greater.—*Dr. South.*

SUNDAY AMUSEMENTS.—In an old magazine, printed about the year 1789, the writer, speaking of persons whose constant habit it was to resort to the various tea-gardens near London, on Sunday, calculates them to amount to two hundred thousand. Of these, he considers, not one would go away without having spent half a crown; and, consequently, the sum of twenty-five

thousand pounds would have been spent, during the day, by this number of persons. Twenty-five thousand pounds, multiplied by the number of Sundays in a year, gives, as the annual consumption of that day of rest, the immense sum of one million three hundred thousand pounds. The writer also takes upon himself to calculate the returning situation of these persons, as follows—Sober, sixty thousand; in high glee, ninety thousand; drunkish, thirty thousand; staggering tipsy, ten thousand; muzzy, fifteen thousand; dead-drunk, five thousand; total, two hundred thousand.

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Halifax, Feb. 28, 1838.

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ROBERT H. SKIMMINGS.

Halifax, Dec. 23, 1837.

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