

Poetry.

THE BREEKS O' HODDEN GREY.

BY A. G. MURDOCH.

We clip the following verses from a modest little volume published in Glasgow, called "Lilla on the Doric Lyre." They are the production of a Scotch artisan, named Alexander Murdoch, living on the banks of the Clyde, for which famed river the poet has done so much. In the lyrics selected by us—"The Brecks o' Hodden Grey"—the author appears to have drawn his inspirations from the rich armory of facts and daily experiences, such massive and glowing imagery as the factory, the dock yard, the forge and the furnace afford; and the fidelity of the picture will be manifest to hundreds—nay, thousands—of his brother workmen in this land. As a literary effort the verses are grand, while the sentiment it embodies is alike truthful and life-like. The author has no cause to blush to hear his name mentioned in connexion with Scotland's greatest poet, Robert Burns.

No pompous sounds of idle words,
No cunning ring of rhyme,
Struck from some gorgeous lyre of dreams
To thrill the ears of Time,
Shall still our earnest hearts to-day.
Be ours the nobler pride
To champion the brows of toil
By honest sweat-drops dyed—
The million mass who with the sun
To daily toil arise;
Whose volum'd smoke and thunder sounds
Begrime and shake the skies.
The tinsel stamp of rank and wealth,
In God's eye, what are they?
Let's sing the honest men who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

These are the men of skill and craft,
And roughly moral worth,
Who melt and make, and build and break
The mighty things on earth;
Who stand the flaming forge before,
And on the shivering air
Let loose the flashing tiger—Steam—
From out his burning lair.
O, never to the vaulted heavens
Arose a grander song,
Than bare-armed labor smiting deep
His thunder-throated gong.
No triumphs born of blood we claim,
Be ours the nobler fray
Of manly toil—the men who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

Ho! strain your eyes and far behold
As in wild dreams of wine,
The steel-rib'd engine flash and leap
And roar along the line.
God! what impassioned power is this,
That, blotched with fire and grime,
Beats down the hills of labor,
And contests the flight of time?
And who are they who shape its course,
Through rock-embattled shires,
Who bind and build its ribs of steel,
And feed its throbbing fires,
Who loose its panting lungs of steam,
And urge and guide its way?
Who but the rough-spun men who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

Or in the ringing yards and docks
That line our noble Clyde,
Whose engin'd monarchs regally
A hundred oceans ride,
And bind the nations of the earth
In commerce's golden bands:
Giving to the people far apart
The grasp of hearts and hands.
See where she lies, the mighty ship,
All ready for the leap,
Hurrah! the wedge is struck away,
She-sweeps into the deep.
Heavens! how she strains the groaning chains
That grandly her nipweigh;
Now, shout ye for the men who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

Let genius, with her master voice,
In floods of stary song,
Enrich the soul with spoils of thought,
And trance the raptured throng;
But nobler music meets the ears,
And stirs the blood of men,
Where ringing hammers throb and dance,
Than roll of lyric pen;
And grander fire-gems leap to life,
Than all the vaulted stars,
When, crash the mighty steam-blow falls
And wolds the burning bars.
The golden-thoughted flash of brain,
Applaud it as you may,
Is chaff beside the men who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

Then, hushed for aye, be idle words,
Or fancied ring of rhyme,
Struck from the lofty lyre of dreams
To storm the ear of Time;
To kindred souls leave tawdry themes,
Be ours the nobler pride
To champion the brows of toil
By honest sweat-drops dyed—
The million mass who with the sun
To daily toil arise;
Whose volum'd smoke and thunder sound
Begrime and shake the skies.
The tinsel stamps of rank and wealth,
In God's eye, what are they?
But ring the air for those who wear
The brecks o' hodden grey.

Tales and Sketches.

THE BROKEN BRIDGE.

A THRILLING STORY.

I reached the little Welsh town of Abermaw one boisterous afternoon, in autumn at about four o'clock. Abermaw, as its name implies, is situated at the mouth of the river Maw, which here forms an estuary about half a mile broad. The town itself faces the open sea; the harbor lies about half a mile up the estuary; whilst between the town and the harbor was the outline of a huge bridge then in course of construction. Abermaw is a little bit of a place, consisting of a hotel, a few shops, a church, a chapel of ease, and half a dozen lodging houses, which are built on a platform of sand, the work of the sea and river in concert or in confidit. The old fishing village is perched upon the rocks above, tire upon tire, the lintelstone of one house looking down the chimney of the house below, and is reached by rude rocky steps, where the children of the village swarm up and down and yet rarely contrive to break their necks.

The further shore of the estuary was a triangular spit of sand, across which was a track that joined the high-road at a point where it commenced to mount the shoulder of a wave-beaten cliff on the fence of which it was terraced, for on the further or southern side of the estuary, the sea washed up to the very base of the rocks that formed the rugged fringe of this iron bound coast. There was a ferry from the Abermaw side to the spit of sand, and thence by a detour of several miles you could make your way along the southern bank of the river to the town of Dolbadarn. As the crow flies Dolbadarn was not more than seven miles distant from Abermaw, but it could not be reached by any practicable track, in less than from ten to eleven miles, for the river took a wide sweep to the north, and, in addition to the detour thus caused, the first bridge where the road crossed the river was at a point a good way wide of Dolbadarn, so that altogether the distance was lengthened to that above mentioned. On the other hand, if you crossed the ferry, and made your way across the sand to the highway, the distance was much the same, and its latter route was, of course, only practicable to foot-passengers.

Although I had reached Abermaw in the guise of a free and independent pedestrian, yet my liberty was of a restricted nature. My wife and children had gone by the regular coach route to Dolbadarn, and I had crossed the mountain by a wild foot track, promising to join them that night at Dolbadarn in time for dinner, for I had intended to take the coach at Abermaw, which would have brought me to the end of my journey in good time. This coach, however, I had missed by just five minutes. My walk that day had been a long one, and I was rather fagged, and should probably have hired a conveyance for the remainder of the distance; but the manner of the landlord of the hotel was so abrupt, and I thought offensive, in answer to my inquiries, that I resolved, come what might, he should not be a sixpence richer for me.

I walked on till I came to a little public house at the further end of the town, close to the rough quay that bordered the estuary and turned in there for a glass of beer and a crust of bread and cheese, as well as for the purpose of making a few inquiries as to my route.

"Well, indeed," said Evan Rowlands, the landlord, "there's no possible way to get to Dolbadarn to-night, not unless you take a car from Mr. Jones's."

"I shan't have a car from Mr. Jones," I said, "Can't I hire one anywhere else?"

Evan shook her head; there was no horse or car in Abermaw, except the horses and car owned by Mr. Jones.

"Very well, then," I said I would walk.

"Not possible," said Evan; "it's more than ten miles."

"I wouldn't mind the distance, only I've walked five-and-twenty miles already."

"Dear me!" said Evan; "you're very strong!"

"Can't I get a part of the way," I suggested.

Evan put his head out of the door. "No!" he cried; "the tide has just turned; it is running down very strong."

"Then there is nothing for it but walking," I said; "I must go around by Llanfair Bridge." But I didn't like the idea of this ten miles walk through the mist and gathering gloom.

"Stop!" said Evan. "Why shouldn't you go over the bridge—the railway bridge?"

"Is the bridge passable, then? Can you get across?"

"Oh dear, yes. The gentlemen from the railway come over very often and to-day Hugh Pugh and David Morris did come over from the Dolbrith Quarry."

"And what distance will that save me?"

"Four or five miles; yes, sure."

"And the bridge is quite safe?"

"Oh, it is very strong and safe indeed; or how should Hugh Pugh and David Morris come over, and the railway gentlemen, too; yes, sure."

"And the railway people won't object to my going over?"

"They've all knocked off work for the day, and there won't be a soul near the bridge but yourself."

"Then, of course, I'll go over it."

But I found that there were certain difficulties in the way. The railway bridge crossed the estuary at a point about a quarter of a mile from the little inn that formed the extremity of the town, at a spot where its channel was narrowed to a distance of about three quarters of a mile. The unfinished bridge was constructed of piles firmly driven into the bed of the river, from which rose huge piers of timber to the height of about forty feet. Along these were massive barks, destined to support the platform of the bridge, whilst each pier was strengthened and supported its neighbor by an arrangement of cross beams and ties.

When I reached the bank of the river with my guide, Evan Rowlands, I found that there was a considerable hiatus between the shore and the nearest pier, about a hundred yards. Evan, however, was prepared with a plan for reaching it. A friend of his was the master of the little sloop, the Ann Jones, which was lying in the tiny brook above. He and his mate was now on board her, and they had got their little dingy with them. Evan would borrow the boat, and drop down with the stream, and deposit me at the foot of the nearest pier.

"But why not ferry me right over the river?" I asked.

"Not possible," said Evan. There were shallows and quicksands at the other side which at this time of the tide were very dangerous.

So we made our way along the road which overlooks the estuary, till we came to the little harbor. Evan had no difficulty in borrowing the dingy, and we were soon afloat, shooting quickly down the stream.

It was almost dark now, for although the sun was not yet down, the storm that was gathering upon the horizon obscured his light. Great volumes of cloud and vapor were driving up before the wind, which howled intermittently, as blast succeeded blast, and died away again. The wind and tide in opposition made the water pretty rough, and our boat danced up and down in a very lively way. Presently the black skeleton of the bridge loomed up as though the mist, and Evan dexterously brought up his boat in the little eddy that was formed by the abutments of the pier, and then he called to me to jump from the stern of the dingy on to a cross-piece that formed a sort of platform a foot or so from the water's edge.

I jumped, and landed safely on the balk, and then I found that my way upwards was by climbing the nearest pier, across which were nailed rough, irregular staves, which constituted what is called a workman's ladder. I had no intention of undertaking any acrobatic feats, and the idea of climbing up to that giddy height by such rough, unreliable supports, was distrustful enough. I wouldn't try it, I would go back in the boat to dry land once more. But the boat had spun away in the tide, and was now far out of earshot, or indeed eyesight either. There I stood, then, in the midst of a rushing raging sea, upon a balk of timber embracing a huge black pier, the head of which was lost in the gloom and mist overhead. I couldn't stay here; I must get across the bridge at all hazards, and my only way was upwards.

Up I went slowly, step by step, testing each frail splintered staff ere I trusted my weight upon it. More than one broke away in my hands, and fell into the sea below. But when I reached the top, I thought, then all this danger was over. I should find a firm secure platform—a rail, or at least a rope for the hand.

When I came to the top of the pier, I saw stretched out before me a beam, suspended, as it seemed, in mid-air, a narrow beam—more like a rope, it seemed to me, stretched over the wild abyss of raging waves, that, and nothing else. There were footprints in the narrow ridge of timber. It was not more than two feet wide at the broadest, and the sight of them gave me courage. Men had passed over here before me; I would pass too. And so, without giving myself a moment to think, I stepped; and the moment when letting go with my hands, I stood upon that topmost round of the ladder, and balanced myself for an instant, as I placed my foot upon the plank, that moment in which I seemed to quiver, and sway to and fro, high up on this giddy perch, beyond the ken of any human eye, that moment of dizzy terror, of strange whirling thoughts, of instincts to cast myself headlong into the sea, was in sensation as any ordinary week of placid being; and yet it came and went like any other moment, and I stood erect, upon the beam, and began my perilous way.

I heard the wind far off, bellowing among the breakers on the bar; I heard it screeching and howling over the flats. I felt a moment's calm, the strange, unnatural hush, and then the rush and leap of the storm, as it hurled by me. Dashing the salt spray into my eyes, it came, seizing all the loose corners of my apparel, and cracking them like whips-lashes, carrying away my feeble breath in its wild course, but leaving me, yes, thank God, leaving me still balanced on my plank.

The gusts had cleared the mists for a space, and I could see before me, though indistinctly enough, but I could see that there was only another length of unprotected balk; beyond that was a broad, safe platform of timber, stretched from pier to pier. Oh! to feel that platform safe under my feet! I traversed the balk almost at a run. I must reach safety

before there came another gust of that fierce wind.

I heard it coming now, but I was almost home, for that rough, unsheltered platform, on this rude night, seemed like a home to me. I was stepping firmly and quickly along. Suddenly a chasm seemed to open under my feet, a horrible chasm. The beam on which I stood came suddenly to an end. For some eight feet of it had been cut away, and there was nothing to help me over this dreadful gap. Without wings it was impossible to pass.

All hope left me. I knew that to retrace my steps was impossible to me. Even if I reached the end from which I started, I should be no better off than here, and hopelessness of the position weakened my every nerve. Once more I heard the wind rising and hurrying along toward me. I would cling to life as long as I could. I knelt down on the wet slippery balk, clasped it with my arms, sat astrid it. The gust came up, fierce and strong, passed over me once more, once more spared me.

But I felt I could not survive another such attack; I should be blown away like a leaf. And yet there was no hope of escape, none. It was only a question of moments how long, with suffering limbs, I could cling to the rough beam; then a plunge into darkness.

Still I had time to think. What were my thoughts? A helpless sense of cruelty, of the horrible unfeelingness and malignity of this hurtling wind, of these raging waters. A sad mortification, too, and a sense of injustice, that I should lose my life for nothing; a pleasant ramble turned to such an evil end. Of the past I thought nothing; it was nothing to me now, a tale that was told; that was all. Of the future, nothing either, except a dim and awful wonder. But plainly, vividly before my eyes I saw the figure of my wife, sitting at work by the fire, waiting and watching for me, for me who never would come. That was the bitterness of it.

And yet whilst I was not conscious of a certain vague sense of the ludicrous—of scorn of myself, that I should let us be stuck up astrid a beam, like some lad at play, a sport for the buffetings of the elements. With this, too, an unspeakable rage; a kind of crushed defiance, a revolt against the doom which was imminent, a revolt which felt itself hopeless and useless from its beginning.

Whilst all this storm of conflicting thoughts was whirling through my brain, the turmoil outside was diminishing. The wind had hushed for a while, and across my face there came for a moment a sort of ruddy glow, the last beams of the sun setting rapidly into the sea. The vapors divided for a moment only, then the clouds encompassed me once more, the glow died away, the awful gloomy gray of night began to gather in upon me like a net.

Should I drop into the sea? Even on the quietest, most resigned death bed, the loss of light is the most disquieting trouble to the departing soul. Light! more light! is the last cry of the spirit in extremity. And now it seems as though nature had determined to spare me no pang of all the gathering horrors of my doom. Darkness and despair were settling down upon my soul.

Then came the storm once more with a rush of gathered rain, a howl, a shout, a roar of triumph, as the shrill wind trumpeted past, precursor of a more furious blast. I could bear no more. A sapless, nerveless form I was, swept from the beam like a withered leaf from a branch, and I fell, catching at some cross-beams as I fell, but losing my hold in a moment and dropping helpless down.

Once more consciousness returned. A vague silvery light was diffused about me, above were stars shining, huge barks of timber glimmered overhead. I was stretched upon a bed of wet sand, lying on my back, looking up into the sky.

I was not dead then. No! Was I maimed, crushed? I drew up one limb after another, fearing lest a sudden shout of agony should betray some grievous hurt. But no! I was sound in limb; and as I raised myself and looked about, I felt that, except for dizziness and a wonderful ringing that was ceaselessly going on in my head, I was unharmed. And I was saved? That was as might happen.

When I rose and stood upon my feet, I looked around me, and found that I had fallen upon a little island, a narrow spit of sand that had formed in the eddy, caused by the pile of the bridge. On each side of it ran a strong and rapid current.

All this I saw by the light of the moon, something bright, something obscured, as she parted her way among the fast driving clouds.

Distantly across the waters shone the lights of the little town. It had its gas lamps, which sparkled brilliantly in the night; and from out of the black rocks which showed against the sky-line, here and there the soft light of a candle in a cottage window gleamed like a fairy lamp.

On the other side of the estuary there were no lights; but the straining eye might discern the gloom of high hills that seemed, indeed, only like darksome chasms in the sky; but as I watched I saw a tiny light that was gliding among the rocks. Now seen, now lost. I followed it with longing eyes; and listening intently I heard the chatter of horses' hoofs, and the murmur of wheels rising and falling, as the road wound in and out among the rocks further or nearer. It was some carriage roll-

ing rapidly towards home—towards my home, and here was I a castaway.

I shouted, but my voice seemed lost in the great space. The wind carried it up the river, blew it away into stifled fragments. It was useless to cry. No one would hear me. How long should I have to live? Was there any chance that I might yet escape? I could not swim; the channel on either side was, therefore, an unpassable barrier. Even had I been an excellent swimmer, I doubt if, in my enfeebled state, I could have won the further bank of the channel where the current was running the least swiftly. How long would my island remain uncovered by the sea?

Six or eight feet above my head, tangled masses of sea-weed hanging in the interstices of the tide. The ebb had commenced an hour before I started from Abermaw. Allowing an hour for my subsequent adventures, the ebb would still have three hours to run; then another three hours' flood would elapse before the tide would once more reach me. I remembered that I had a flask of metal in my pocket which still contained a dram of brandy, and that I had a few fragments of biscuit in my pocket, remaining of some that my wife had packed up for my use a couple of days before. I drank the brandy and munched the biscuits, and felt again hopeful. Six hours! Why, in that time help might come. Death was no longer imminent.

But I was entirely wrong. The strong south-westerly gale had piled up the waters about the mouth of the estuary, so that the ebb was checked, and the flood increased, and the tide ran out only some three hours. I must have been longer lying on the sand too, than I had calculated, for, as I watched the waters hurrying down on each side of me, I noticed that the current seemed to slacken all of a sudden; then it stopped, so that a fragment of bleached wood that was floating downward came to a rest, then moved slowly once more upwards. The tide had turned.

In a very short time the vast expanse of water before me, that had just now seemed a broad river outlet, scored and marked with sand banks, assumed the appearance of an agitated sea. Short waves hurried along; their white crests gleaming in the moonlight; they came in serried lines, tier over tier, the hoarse roar of the advancing tide reverberated in the air, mangling in my brain with the strange rattle as of bells that never ceased to jingle therein.

How remorseless they seemed, those waves, hurrying up, like hounds who view their prey! And yet it was a solemn scene; and what there was of dignity and grandeur in the sight half reconciled me to the thought that my life would be swallowed up ere long in these advancing battalions of serried waves; for now the bitterness of death was past; its terrors had vanished; I felt a profound sadness—that was all.

How far could I climb up the slimy, slippery posts and buttresses, that seemed to mock me with their lying proffers of safety? A couple of cross-beams or ties which bound together the lower ends of the piers afforded at the intersection a sort of angular resting place, where I could for a time, perhaps, find a refuge from the waves. This was far below high-water mark, so that to reach it would only give me a short respite from my final agony; but, for all that I determined to attempt it. As soon as the water covered the little island on which I stood, I would try to climb this slippery beam, that rose from the sand, in which it was partly buried, at an angle of about five degrees.

With the tide rose the wind; with the wind came rain and fog. The moon, blurred and indistinct, shone faintly for a while, and then vanished altogether; her diffused light still made everything darkly visible. Soon the waves were dashing at my feet, the sand a pulp of death. Now was the time to make my last effort for a little more life. But I found that I had overrated my own powers, I crawled a few feet up the slippery timber; then I fell back. Again I tried, and again; but it was of no use. Strength does not come of eager desire to be strong. All that I could do was to clasp my arms round the beam and stand upright, awaiting the coming of the waters.

The water rose not gradually, but in pulses. Smaller waves came and went, and left no change of level; but every now and then some heavier, fiercer billow would come in with a devouring sweep, covering me with its foam and spray, receding again, but at each recession leaving a greater depth of swaying, life-like water. These attacks, like buffets from the hands of some skilled boxer, left me weaker at every blow. And it was so treacherous, too, the water. It would draw away for a time, leaving me free almost to my knees; and then, as if driven by some sudden impulse, it would gather itself up and return in a "soothing" swathe of water, that would swallow me up from head to foot.

The end was fast coming now. I had ceased to feel anything. Only a dogged determination to stick to life to the last kept me clinging to my beam.

But what was that sound? A long and piercing scream, a roar, and a rattle, and a rattle—it was an engine.

An engine coming along the completed part of the bridge, shrieking and screaming and dashing out great wafts of white steam into the stormy air. The sound gave me fresh life and vigor. Human creatures was within reach, at all events. If I could make them hear me, I might yet be saved.