

RANDOM READINGS.

BY ARTHUR MURSELL.

AN Englishman who has been pretty rigidly accustomed to respect and keep the Sabbath will never find out what a heathen he has been till he has spent a Sunday or two in an orthodox Christian home in Scotland. He will generally consider that abstinence from secular business, the substitution of a little quiet rest in place of more active recreation, together with a tolerably punctual attendance on public worship, sufficiently mark out the day in its surface features from the other six days in the week. He will, probably be also more select and particular in his private reading and meditation, endeavouring to make these to harmonise with the associations of the day. Should he be a minister or a worker in the Sabbath-school, his public duties will, of course, claim his attention, and absorb a good deal of his thoughts at home. But the due discharge of these engagements will not only not deter him from merry social intercourse, but will even make such intercourse the more enjoyable, natural, and congenial. But let him go to Scotland for a Sunday or two, and he will be taught due respect for the decalogue, and will be almost inclined to ask himself how many of the ten commandments he has violated.

Our neighbours in the North are proverbially hospitable; and I am sure it is not intended as an abuse of their hospitality if I describe my experience of, and express my thoughts about a Scottish Sabbath.

My own engagements did not admit of a very punctilious conformity with the national rule of retiring early on Saturday night; but by no means short of actual discourtesy was it possible to avoid the fleshly mortification of rising at seven o'clock on a November morning. At that hour to a second, as indicated by its first shrill stroke upon an eight-day clock, commenced a most uncerthly and relentless danging on a dreadful gong, which filled the spacious house with dismal echoes, and banished all the visions of my morning dreams. Tom Hood has said, with a punning pungency which comes very much home to me and to my sympathies—

“The man that's fond precociously of stirring
Must be a spoon.”

If this be the test I certainly am far from being a spoon, for if there is one time more than another at which I appreciate the tenacity of blankets it is at about seven o'clock on a November morning. In Glasgow it is not daylight till ten in the month of November, even admitting that there is any daylight visible during the whole twenty-four hours. The temptation is to cram the bedclothes into your ears, and cry with the dramatist, “Silence that dreadful bell,” but you know that in another half-hour it will sound again, and you will be expected to be ready for the morning worship. The anguish plunge must e'en be taken, and as you stand shivering in the middle of the floor, your teeth chattering in your jaws as you look for a match to strike a light to dress by, you will probably hear the jovial voice of your host pausing between two verses of the 23rd Psalm, Scotch version, to ask you if you will have a shower-bath; you try to say “No, thank you,” as sweetly as possible, with a grim scowl at the bare suggestion, and proceed to make your yawning toilet. While you are kneeling at the bedside, engaged in those orisons by which the morning should be ever ushered in, the crashing of the gong once more intercepts devotion, a shuffling of feet outside, and in a minute more the sound of singing voices. You enter the drawing-room covered with confusion, and file between two rows of servants, each holding a psalm-book, and pretending to sing. The host, with all traces of his natural expression banished from his face, and no sign of his ordinary manner in his tones of voice, is “lining out” a psalm, and slowly singing it to a dragging, tuneless wail, which is in close keeping with the November fog and drizzle outside, and when the singing is done a chapter is read, and oftentimes some comments are also read from the manual of devotion from which the reading is taken. This done, a prayer, seldom extending over less than a quarter of an hour, is offered, and then you are greeted with a formal air, and your apologies are received for having been late. A glorious breakfast soon appears, and you are beginning to congratulate yourself on having got up so early, as you see the “Napier's patent” coffee-pot bubbling and boiling on the table with its spirit-lamp like a flame of real devotion licking it to its heat. Tempting jams and ellies, and the marmalade of the incomparable “Keiller of

Dundee” flank the “Finnan haddies,” and the “baps,” the “cookies,” and the “scones.” O, you miserable Southerners don't understand these things, but they are “a caution,” I can tell you. You rub your hands together, and begin to pick up your spirits; but a glance at your host, the jolliest fellow under the sun generally, brings a wet blanket over you again, and you mutter a few commonplace as you sit down to table, and subside. You are just about to hand the jelly to the young lady by your side, and try to revive the merry little flirtation of the previous evening, but her bright face has caught the prevalent depression, and you are once more repulsed. You pass the toast with a solemn visage, when the host shrivels you up with a stony glare, and then repeats a grace of fully five minutes length, winding up with a confession of sin and a plea for pardon. Breakfast is then discussed, but with little appetite, and thanks are returned again at full length. In my case a public service claimed my attention at eleven o'clock, at a church fully four miles away. It was cold and wet, and I proposed a cab. I was reminded it was the Sabbath, and that if I had needed a cab, arrangements should have been made at a livery stable the day before; in default of this precaution I must walk; and walk I did accordingly, with a sprained ankle and a bad cold. Service is supposed to close in the morning about a quarter before one, and begin again in the afternoon at three, and as my second service was three miles away, another walk through rain and mud awaited me. The beadle, however, befriended me to the extent of a biscuit and a cup of tea. And here let me say a word about Scotch beades and precursors. The old-fashioned Scottish beadle (or beddle as it is oftentimes pronounced) is a character in his way. An old beadle was once asked if he could recommend any suitable person for a similar position at a neighbouring church. He shook his head, and said gravely, “Weel, nae, I canna mind the uoo o' ony body who could tak it; if it had been a precursor or a minister that ye were wantin', I could hae telled ye o' a dozen.” The beadle is the minister's manager, and keep him up to the mark. It is as good as a play to see the beadle come into the vestry, and take the Bible and books up into the pulpit, and then come back to fetch the minister, as though he were a slight appendage he had forgotten. The first time I ever preached in a Scotch pulpit, it took me ten minutes to prevail upon the beadle to let me go into the pulpit without a gown, and I really think it was the means of breaking up the old man's constitution, that a man had actually preached in his kirk without the canonical white “bibbs.” The precursor upon this occasion was introduced to me by this said beadle, and in very broad Scotch he asked me if I would allow them to commence the morning service with a particular hymn, as they wanted to sing a special tune to it. “O certainly,” I said, “I dare say it will do.” And I was going to leave him to put it down upon the list without looking at it; but happening to glance at the selected hymn, I found that it began, “Saviour, breathe an evening blessing.” It occupied several minutes to convince him that this was hardly suitable to commence a morning service with, and I sent him to his desk in anything but a good temper.

Well, I had to walk to my afternoon service, and by the time it was over, the seven miles and the double service, began to tell its tale. But I had another service for the evening, and I began to feel that I must have a cab, or breakdown. I went to a stable near at hand, and spoke to a man who was tending some horses, and preferred my request. “We dinna send out cabs upon the Sawbath,” was his answer. The proprietor was not to be found, and it was not till I got the aid of a ministerial friend, who came in his M.B. waistcoat, and white tie, to state the case, and to prove that it was “a work of necessity and mercy,” that “cabby,” who smelt very strongly of Glenlivet, was prevailed upon, for double fare, to drive me to my evening engagement.

Before this, however, a repast had to be taken which was to do duty for dinner, and I was ravenously ready for it. It consisted, however, simply of beef-tea, with no solid meat, and was prefaced and succeeded by the customary protracted graces. On returning after evening service, thoroughly knocked up, singing, reading, and prayer, had once more to be repeated, supper following, flanked by the two inevitable long graces.

Such is a Scottish Sabbath orthodoxly spent. If, in detailing its main features, I have seemed to deprecate devotion, I have not meant to do so; but I certainly have meant to deprecate form. It is impossible not to admire the tenacity with which our Scottish neighbours cling to these customs by which