

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

MY KIRK SESSION.

From "St. Cuthbert's."—Robt. E. Knowles.

He would need a brave and facile pen who would venture to portray the session of St. Cuthbert's church. For any kirk session is far from commonplace, let alone the session of such a church as mine. Kirk sessions are the bloom of Scottish character in particular and the crown and glory of mankind in general. Piety, sobriety, severity, these are the three outstanding graces which they illustrate supremely; but interlocked with these are many other gifts and virtues in varying degrees of culture.

In St. Cuthbert's the pride of eldership was chiefly vested in their wives and daughters.

"Ye mauna be over uplifted aboot yir father's office," was the oft-repeated admonition of the elder's wife to the elder's children, and the children were not slow to remark that her words were one part rebuke and ten parts pride. For to mothers and birns alike he appeared as one of God's kings and priests when he walked down the aisle with the vessels of the Lord.

Many of these men were poor, grandly and pathetically poor, but none were poor enough to appear at the sacramental board without his "blacks," radiant with the lustre of open love and sacred sacrifice. This I afterwards learned was their wives' doing, and wondrous in my eyes. Ah me! How many a decently apparelled husband, how many a white-robed child, has come forth out of great tribulation not their own! Indeed, uncounted multitudes there are who shall walk in white before the throne of God, whose robes the secret sacrifice of loving hearts hath whitened as no fuller of earth can whiten them.

My first meeting with the kirk session of St. Cuthbert's was an epoch-marking incident. Twenty-eight there were who sat about the session-room, every man but one an importation from Caledonia's rugged hills, Roxburgh's covenanting heroes, Wigtonshire's triumphant martyrs, Dumfriesshire and her Cameromerians, with their great namesake's lion heart; Ayrshire with her bloody memories of moor and moss-hags, of quarry and conventicle, of Laud and liberty—all these had filtered through and reappeared in these silent and stalwart men.

Of these eight and twenty faces at least one score had the cast of marble and the stamp of eternity upon them. I felt like a hillock nestling at the foot of lofty peaks, for I do make my oath that when you are begirt by men in whose veins there flows the blood of martyrs, who have been slowly nurtured upon such stately doctrines as are their daily food, who actually believe in God as a living participant in the affairs of time, whose metal pabulum has been Thomas Boston and Samuel Rutherford and Philip Doddridge, and who have used these worthies but as helps to climb that unpinnacle hill of the Eternal Word—when you get such men as these, multiplied a hundred fold by the stern consciousness of a religious trust, if you are not then among the Rockies of flesh and blood, I am as one who sees men like walking trees, ignorant of the true altitudes of human life.

But I was yet to learn, and learn by heart (the great medium of all real character), that many a fragrant flower may bloom in secret clefts of rockbound hills, frowning and forbidding though they be. For God loves to surprise us, especially in happy ways; and his is a sanguine sun.

It should now be stated that I began my ministry in St. Cuthbert's with the handicap of an Irish ancestry. How was I then to wear the hoddin gray? Or how was I to commingle myself with that his-

toric tide which I well knew the Scottish heart regarded as fed more than any other from the river that makes glad the city of God?

My every vein was already full to overflowing with Irish blood. My father was from Ballymena and my mother was from Cork, a solution which no chemistry could cure. I was inclined by nature and confirmed by practice towards a reasonable price in my ancestral land. But odds were against me. Even the mistress of my manse (whose judgment was wont to take counsel of her kindly heart), even she remonstrated when she first discovered my nativity, and has never since been altogether thankful, though she strives hard to be resigned.

"Why do you always flaunt your Irish origin?" she reasoned once. "If it is good stock, be modest about it; if not, the less said the better."

Then she remarked that she was no doubt prejudiced, for she had once witnessed the noble procession in New York on St. Patrick's day; and she added that they all seemed to have mouths like the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky and complexions like an asphalt pavement under repairs. My wit's power of detecting analogies was uncommonly acute.

When the session had been duly constituted, the minutes of the last meeting were read by the session clerk. It is probably quite within the mark to say that all ecclesiastical officialdom can produce no other dignity with the same stern grandeur as pertains to the clerk of a Scottish session. I have witnessed archbishops in their robes and with their mitres, and have marvelled at the gravity with which they clothed the most ponderous frivolities at their stately genuflections, at the swift shedding and winking of their bewildering milliners. I have seen General Booth resplendent in his flaming clericals. I have even looked on the bespangled Dowse, dazzling and bedazzled—but none of these has the majesty of poise, the aroma of responsibility, or the inexorable air of authority which mark the true-led session clerk.

The minutes having been read and hermetically sealed, I addressed the elders briefly, referring to my great duties and my poor abilities, after which I invited them to general deliberation, and begged them to acquaint me with the mind and temper of the congregation, asking such advice as might be useful in entering upon my labors.

"We bid ye welcome, moderator," began the senior elder, by name Sandy Grant, "an' we'll do what in us lies to hand up yir hands; ye're no' oor servant, but our minister, and we're a' ready to do yir biddin', gin it's the will o' God. Ye're sittin' in a mighty seat, moderator. It was frae that chair that our first minister spak' till us in far ither days."

At this reference to the golden age, I saw a wave of tenderness break over the faces of the older men.

"Ay, I mind weel the night Doctor Grant sat among us for the first time, as ye're sittin' noo."

This time it was Ronald McGregor who had spoken, the love-light on whose face even seventy winters could not disguise.

"We'll never look upon his like again. Ye've mebbe watched the storm, sir, when it beat upon the shore. His style o' delivery was like the ragin' o' the waves. Ye see that buik, moderator, yir hame's restin' on the tap o't. Weel, he dune for sax o' them the while he was oor minister. We bocht the strongest bound o' them, but he banged them to tatters amazin' fast. A page at a skite. Times it was like the dritin' o' the leaves in the fall. He was graun' on the terrors o' the law. We haena been what's to say clean uplifted with the mighty truth o' the punishment o' the lost sin-

his mouth was closed in death," and Ronald sighed the sigh of the hungry heart. "Div ye no' mind the Doctor on the decrees, the simmer o' the cholera—div ye no' mind you, Ronald?" said Thomas Laidlaw, swept into the seething tide of reminiscence; but here the session clerk rose to a point of order.

"The members o' this court will address the moderator," he said sternly. "Moreover, we are here for business and not for history. We might well think shame of ourselves, glorifying the old when we should be welcoming the new. We're no to be aye dwellin' among the tombs" (this with a rise in feeling and a drop in language). "Besides, Doctor Grant was no' a common man, and it's no' becomin' to be comparin' common men along wi' the likes o' him."

So this, thought I, is the Scottish mode of paying compliments. I had always heard that their little tributes were more medicinal than confectionery.

Then followed a painful calm, for Scottish calms are stormy things.

It was Michael Blake who first resumed.

"Let us forget the things which are behind," he said; "if we only can," and there was a wealth of agony in his words, "and let us press forth into those things which are before. We greet you, moderator, as the messenger of peace, for we are all but sinful men and unworthy of the trust we hold. I hope you will preach to us the grace of God, for we have learned ourselves the terrors of the law."

WHY MEN DON'T MARRY.

I think we have given the unfortunate bachelor almost more than his share of blame on the non-marrying question. A good deal of the fault lies with the girls. They frighten the men off by foolish behavior and talk. When a young man in moderate circumstances hears a girl declare that she can't get on without a certain number of dresses, and that in order to be happy she must have this or that luxury, he says to himself: "Dear me, I can't afford all that; I'd better keep out of matrimony."

Halt the time the girl doesn't mean it, but she thinks it smart to talk that way. She also makes a mistake of being more proud of her showy accomplishments than her useful ones. The finer arts may catch a beau for her, but I very much doubt if they will ever catch a husband. There is a girl who always has something the matter with her—a headache, a cold; or she always feels so tired. You can't blame a man for not wanting to marry that kind of a girl. He knows the kind of wife she would make—a helpless invalid, whining and fretful.

And the untidy girl, as all know her. Sometimes she's pretty, and usually she is good-natured, but she drives more men away from matrimony than any other kind of a girl. A man may be attracted by her when he first meets her, but when he begins to think of her as his wife the prospect frightens him. He imagines the soverign home she would make and the discomfort he would live in, and so he retires into his bachelor shell and thinks single blessedness is good enough for him. There is one type of married woman who is largely to blame for much reluctance on the part of men to marry. She is the "nagger." When a bachelor sees a married man being nagged to death he makes up his mind to keep his head out of the noose. He has a lively contempt for the hen-pecked husband and does a great deal of talking about what he would do if he were in Jones' position; but deep down in his heart he knows perfectly well that he would be just as meek and down-trodden as Jones.