

Reminiscences of the Calton, Glasgow.

BY LACHLAN M'GOWN, SAPIANEE, ONT.
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It was the time for renewing old friendships and forming new. Country lads and lassies came by the thousands. The lads "sturdy chieftains," dressed in their best; no coats, but heavy moleskin sleeved waistcoats, front of substantial, bright-colored tweed, buttoned low down and high enough to show the spotless linen, relieved by a sprig of heather in the lapel, a tartan tie round his neck, and a broad bonnet of the Kilmarnock order on his head, his feet heavily shod with tackety shoes, and in his hand a whip, the lash tied with a bright ribbon; rough and ready at fight or frolic, his form straight as a ramrod, strong as an ox, and gentle as a lamb; to the ignorant seemingly an uncultivated boor, but once know him, and you will find that he can sing like a mavis, dance light as a feather, and, with a grace natural to him, make love to his bonnie lassie in gentle words worthy of Chesterfield, and proceeding from a mouth a duchess might be proud to kiss. And the lassies were just like country girls everywhere, brimful of fun, curiosity and love. Our city folk were often amused with the exuberance of conduct in Jocky and Jenny as they marched arm in arm, taking shows and buying fairings, but it was unsafe to poke fun at Jock.

With country lads and lassies and town folk alike, there was but one purpose, and that to see the shows on the green. That meant everything in the expression "gaun doon to the fair." And once there, what a sight and noise; the musical din was tremendous; every imaginable instrument was heard, including the bagpipe, and every one seemed to play a different tune. Waterloo flies, or swings, and merry-go-rounds were plentiful, chiefly patronized by the young people. Every spare corner was occupied by sweetie stands, barrows with ice cream, lemonade, and shooting for nuts, "Cheap Johns," and a host of other similar attractions; and not among the least, the cheap dancing booths with their flaming inscriptions, "penny reels during the fair," which were patronized chiefly by our country friends. On the west side of the ground, and extending from the bridge to the foot of the Saint-Market, were closely grouped a motley crowd of vans or side shows, with wonderful collections of wax figures, dwarfs and learned pigs, giants and snake charmers, and every attraction of the kind familiar to sight-seers to-day. There was a peculiar feature in all, (I wonder if it is part of the modern show); they were all directly under royal authority, as the legend set in gold leaf and vermillion informed the legions of Glasgow. And the mild-mannered, grandly-dressed gentleman who stood on the front inviting the ladies and gentlemen to walk up and see the greatest curiosity in the world, and whom our youth and country friends believed to be a nobleman or duke, at least, in disguise, or down on his luck, as the crowd passed in, never failed to remind them "that this great show had been exhibited before the queen, and the members of the Royal family, and all the other crowned heads in Europe, and was now just before leaving for America, open for a few days to the nobility and gentry of the City of Glasgow, and all for the small sum of one penny."

But the great feature of the fair, and where the crowds were gathered most, was on the east side of the ground where stood a number of large wooden booths, some of them able to hold a large number of people. Conspicuous

among them would be Wombwell's menagerie, a very creditable exhibition, a circus or two (one sure to be Cook's); and considering that the price of admittance was generally one penny, they would have been no discredit to the best performance in any of the high priced institutions in America; and last but not most important of all, three or four temples dedicated to the worship of "Thalia and Melpomene," or better known as "penny gaffs." Most of them were huge affairs, that must have been a risky investment for the proprietor, as they only remained a week or two before and after the fair week, and they were not unsubstantial structures. Among them, and considered the best, was Miller's show. David Prince Miller was a man of uncommon energy, good character, and quite an enthusiast in what he considered a pure and honest calling. He was very unfortunate; he built several shows on the green, some of them of much higher order than a "penny gaff." Old Henry Alexander, of the Theatre Royal in Dunlop street, said he had no right to interfere with his vested claim to the higher drama, so poor Miller was always at law with Alex., and worse than all, his expensive erections were burnt. With pluck deserving of a better fate, he rebuilt with always the same result. I believe he died very poor. Then there was Chambers', Cadogan's and Calvert's shows, with other names I forget now. They were all alike in appearance, and in the character of the performance outside and in, and it is with pleasure I can affirm that, though the performance at these "penny gaffs" was not often of a very high order of merit, it was very seldom degrading, and certainly superior in morals to the sensationalism, misnamed dramatic representation, which now disgraces the American minor stage. Rob Roy, the Lady of Lyons, Don Cesar de Bazou, Guy Mannering, Dumb Man of Manchester, and similar plays, were the usual representations, and finished up with a roaring farce. All were generally well received by the audience. As for the performers, though the greater number were about equal to the mediocrity and kept their hold on public favor, by an exaggerated style, or with some popular catch phrase well brought in, there were a few who possessed histrionic ability of a very high order, and had few to excel them, even among the stars of the profession, and though the surroundings seemed to be unfavorable to the growth of excellence, many a star has had reason to be proud that he once shone before the approving nod of the gods in a "penny gaff." I remember Webster, who was unquestionably at that time, with the exception of Makey, the original Baillie, the best delineator of the Baillie, and Dandy Dimout who had appeared before the footlights. There was Will Parry of Calvert's, a host in himself in general utility work, always a favorite, whether in a "penny gaff," or a theatre with three tiers. And there were others whom I am unable to name, but known to the youth and manhood long ago, in name and worth, "familiar in our own mouths as household words."

(To be continued)

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