

WAKEMAN'S WANDERINGS.

GRETN, SCOTLAND, Sept. 7, 1893.—Tramping in many portions of every shire of Scotland, where I have not found beauty or grandeur in scenery, there has always been winsome antiquarian, historic or personal interest. Only one spot has proven repulsive, squalid and forlorn to such degree that its very beggarliness is startling, its venality ferocious and its miserable folk and history so uncanny and infamous that place, folk and history are weirdly fascinating alone from their woebegone, vicious and outrageous character. Such a place, such a folk and such a history remain in the ancient noted, and still notorious, Scottish court of Hymen, Gretna Green.

In what may be termed the scandalous romantic literature of Britain no other place has occupied such scandalous and even world-wide notoriety. It has for nearly 150 years trailed through every form of romance and story; infested every manner of newspaper travesty; burdened much of popular ballad and rhyme; obtruded itself into noble as well as lowly society; stalked across the stage in tragedy and comedy; engaged the pen of as great a poet and satirist as Tom Hood in his well-known elegy to David Laing, the closing lines of which are.

Had I command, thou should'st have
gone thy ways
In chaise and pair—and lain in Pere la
Chaise!—

and it has even entered without reverence the presence of grave chancellors to pursue its course of dishonor and disquiet in the highest courts of the three kingdoms. In fact, in the entire English-speaking world the name of Gretna Green and the notion of Gretna Green marriages are as familiar to all classes as is the commonest nursery rhyme.

Yet you will not find a score of people either in America or in Britain who can tell you, any more than they can give the origin of the commonest nursery rhyme, what originally really made the place famous or infamous, the conditions continuing its notoriety, whether these conditions have been removed, or whether Gretna Green itself is a real place with geographical limitations, or an interesting myth growing out of the vagaries and witticisms of marital literature. Illustrative of this was the indignant assertion made to me a short time since by a most eminent clergyman of Glasgow that Gretna Green marriages were abolished by law a half century ago, and that probably not a hundred couples were ever married at Gretna as alleged by popular tradition! On the contrary, nearer 10,000 couples have been married at Gretna Green. Gretna Green marriages of the olden sort, with very slight modification, are constantly being "solemnized" at the present time; and, as I shall show, I hold a certificate of marriage of my own, issued by the present "Bishop of Gretna," William Laing, postman.

No single clear and concise account can be found in the books comprising the conditions and incidents leading to the establishment of the ancient notorious marriage Mecca of Gretna. Its origin primarily was due to the rigors of English marital law about the middle of the eighteenth century. Ancient English laws held that marriage was legal by civil contract in the presence of

two witnesses, rendering the services of the priest merely a matter of sentiment or religion. Decisions under this law, influenced by powerful ecclesiasticism, led to serious legal entanglements. A civil contract marriage was valid—to a degree. In the matter of descent of real property to the offspring of such marriage, it was held to be invalid. Rebellion against the inexorability of the clerical influence in the courts, rather than the law itself, resulted in the clandestine marriages celebrated by unprincipled clerics in orders, known as "Fleet marriages," and their consequent scandals, a century and a quarter ago in London. To end this was passed the English Marriage Act of Lord-Chancellor Hardwicke, in 1754. This prohibited all clandestine and so-called "irregular" or civil-contract marriages, and made it compulsory on all English subjects, except Quakers and Jews, to be married according to the rites of the Church of England.

So unjust a measure was certain to meet with evasion. Opportunity for this was found in the necessarily unchangeable rule in the English courts that marriage validly performed in the country in which it had been contracted must be held valid for all purposes in England. Rebellious spirits and secretly panting hearts naturally turned towards the nearest country offering relief. This one was Scotland. At the time of the Reformation Scotland as well as England refused to accept the provision of the Council of Trent which rendered the solemnization of marriage by a priest necessary. Scotland's ancient marriage law was the same as that of ancient England. From time immemorial all that has been requisite for a valid marriage in Scotland has been an interchange of real and actual consent, constituting at the time given an undeniable intention and determination to enter the relation of husband and wife, with either incontestible written evidences of that fact, or evidences of witnesses before whom the same is declared. This was ancient Scottish law. It was Scottish law when Gretna began to acquire notoriety as a marriage resort for runaway English couples. And it is Scottish law to-day.

There has never been in Scotland, nor is there today, any bar to this form of marriage save that of public sentiment. The people of Scotland, including a large proportion of the clergy, ever sturdily withstood the enactment of laws by the Scottish parliament which might annul this form of marriage or tend to cloud heirship under it. Strictest conditions of registration have always been imposed; and Scottish law has always prescribed certain ceremonials for celebration of regular marriages, such as the publication of banns and the officiating by a clergyman. But the "irregular" marriage by witnessed civil contract has never been successfully assailed, and has never been subject to but one slight modification. Through deference to English appeals for a check upon the "Gretna" and "Coldstream" marriages of English people—for the border village of Coldstream in Berwickshire once possessed almost as unenviable a reputation as Gretna—in 1856, by permission of Scottish representatives, an act was passed by the British parliament imposing the condition upon Scottish civil contract marriages that one

of the contracting parties shall have been a resident of Scotland for a period of twenty-one days immediately preceding such marriage.

In other words, any civil contract marriage in Scotland for hundreds of years has been and now is a valid one; the requisites for marriage at Gretna to-day are precisely the same as they always were, with the exception of subsequent registration and the trifling condition of brief residence of one of the contracting parties; and within the past twenty-three years the present "Bishop of Gretna" has married between 900 and 1,000 couples, chiefly runaway English men and women, or nearly one-tenth of the entire number so married at Gretna Green since its first "scandalous" marriage of record. It is almost as much resorted to at present for "irregular" marriage ceremony as it was a hundred years ago, though the fine color and great clamor of the old coaching days, when the old Carlisle and Glasgow road resounded with ringing hoofs and the shouts of pursued and pursuers, are eliminated by the railways; and every mail to Gretna brings "Bishop" Laing letters of eager inquiry, one of which is truly copied, barring the signature in the following:

Keighley, England, Aug. 20, 1893.

DEAR SIR:

Could you kindly inform me what length of residence is necessary in Scotland for parties going to be married by you at Gretna? Does it require both bride and bridegroom to be a certain length in Scotland or only the bride?

Do you require any certificate as to the residence in Scotland? If so from whom should it be? From the minister, solicitor or register? What time of day do you require parties to be there for marriage? Are you to be readily found and on any day? Do you marry Sunday? What is your fee? The parties I write for are respectable people, but not able to pay a high fee—say from one to two pounds. An early reply will very much oblige.

P. S.—If we come you will know me by my carrying a stick with a carved ivory head. Also by a bit of green in my hat-band. It is possible the bride may not have hardly anything on, as she will have to cut stick to participate. How will we know you?

Gretna was originally chosen as an objective point of safety for both flying debtors and runaway couples from England solely on account of its favorable location. The great olden coach roads of England, still its finest highways—the eastern one coming north through Leeds, York, Boroughbridge, Catterick and ancient Bowes, the scene of Dickens' Dotheboys Hall in "Nicholas Nickleby," and thence over dreary Stanemoor, and the western one leading from Liverpool through Lancashire and the northwest. English shires—joined at the city of Carlisle. From Carlisle the single broad stone highway passed over the Esk and Sark rivers, between which lay the historic "Debatable Land," into Scotland. It should be borne in mind that the distance from Carlisle to Gretna, just beyond the Sark, is only about twelve miles; that Gretna was the first coach relay station north of Carlisle; that the Sark stream was the unquestioned boundary line between England and Scotland; and that whatever legal or