

moral vexations might in the olden times, or now, lurk in the "Debatable Land" between the Esk and the Sark, whenever debtors or lovers, flying from the inexorable harassment of English statute, once crossed the middle of the Sark, they were instantly safe from pursuers beneath the ever-welcoming ægis of Scottish law.

Though Gretna had been a favorite haven of safety for absconding debtors from the middle of the seventeenth century, its first "irregular" marriage of which there is record did not occur until 1771, seventeen years subsequent to the passage of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke's hated English Marriage Act; but the circumstances of this affair were so interesting and so widely heralded that Gretna Green at once became Hymen's metropolis for hunted, haunted, runaway lovers. This first marriage was of John Edgar, St. Mary's parish, and Jean Scott of the parish of Hetherel, both of the adjoining English county of Cumberland. Tradition has it that the two, instead of coming by coach-and-four over the post-route from Carlisle, escaped their opposing relatives by boat across the Solway Firth. They were upset by storm and a fierce incoming tide, whose violence drowned one of their pursuers and caused the others to abandon the chase. The couple themselves barely escaped with their lives; and, bedraggled in brine and sand, they finally made their way on foot from the shoreside village of Brewhouses to Gretna, where they were married by Joseph Paisley, who for this sort of thing became the most notorious man of his time in Scotland, as well as the most execrated single individual known to the annals of English social anathema.

At this time, Gretna, perhaps a half mile from the Sark along the highway towards Glasgow, comprised not more than a half dozen houses. There were simply a few rude buildings clustered about an old thatched kirk and the olden farmstead of Meg's-hill. The farmstead was the laird of the land's residence. There were also the little manse behind the kirk and a vile little shop in which, the fellow Paisley—not a blacksmith as all Gretna literature has it—sold tea, tobacco and snuff as well as smuggled whiskey to the "muckle right sort." The exploiting of the Edgar-Scott marriage; Paisley's defiance of English and Scotch authorities, and his cunning in securing the highest Scottish legal advice, enabling him to settle the form of procedure according to law by attesting marriages simply as a witness, with the consequent establishing of the absolute legality of these marriages and the universal notoriety thus given, completed the essentials for acquainting every soul in England with the extraordinary opportunities offered for evading English law. Paisley became the self-constituted "Bishop of Gretna;" and the Maxwell residence was transformed into a commodious inn.

This hostelry proving inadequate for accommodation, Sir William Maxwell, the laird, built an entire village in the half mile distance between Gretna and the Sark, which he called Springfield, and which included two inns, the King's Arms and Maxwell Arms; and these by the beginning of the present century became the most noted posting establishments in the two kingdoms. From Paisley's marriage of the Cumberland couple in 1771 to the time of his death in 1814

it is computed that this "irregular" marriage traffic brought annually to Gretna and Springfield £20,000 in fees; expenses of those who pursued runaway English couples; outlay of barristers who visited the places to establish proof of marriage; other barristers who came for clients who hoped to find lack of proof; from the curious who were attracted by the extraordinary character of the place; and from the general recklessness and extravagance on every hand where marriage fees from runaway English common folk, gentry and nobility ranged from five to one hundred guineas, as they did, with any amount of the "yellow stuff" for hordes of "witnesses," handy-men and satraps who lived permanently at the inns, filled the rude cottages or swarmed like harpies about the then busy stableyards.

The present hereditary line of "Bishops of Gretna" was established just before the death of Joseph Paisley, who, a mass of fat and corruption, "went his ways" in 1814. He was a terrible drinker of Cognac, and his advancing age with his physical joys and afflictions compelled him to delegate his office to other and younger hands in the person of one David Laing, an Ulster Irish pack-peddler. His wife was Paisley's granddaughter; and, besides, he possessed so hard a character and fists that none disputed the legitimacy of the succession. He died in 1827. The third "Bishop" was his son, Simon Laing, who fattened upon the increasing traffic until 1856, when something of a check was given Gretna Green marriages by the passage of the act before alluded to requiring one of the contracting parties to have Scottish residence for twenty-one days immediately preceding marriage. This Simon Laing died in 1871. The fourth and present "Bishop of Gretna" is William Laing, her Majesty's postman at Springfield and Gretna, a little mite of an old man seventy-one years of age, weakened, shriveled and canny, uniting all the bibulous prowess of his predecessors with an appalling cunning of the lowest order; a tiny ogre in blue and red when on his official rounds as postman; a vicious and ruminative "Grandfather Smallweed," when "officiating" or mumbling over his oaken chest of records in his tiny, tumbledown cottage beside the impetuous Sark.

The old moss grown Gretna kirk is still standing, surrounded by crumbling headstones of Gretna "Bishops" and other worthies, at the northern end of the long, dreary street. The King's Arms and the Maxwell Arms, midway to the Sark, are ruinous and decayed, and remain but filthy dens where drunken hinds and brawling tramps hold common orgie. The straggling street is overgrown with rank grass and weeds. Old women with bloodless faces and barbaric bairns with dirty faces leer and hoot at you as you pass. Down at the edge of the brae forming the last vestige of Scottish land beside the Sark, in the third cottage from the stream, live William Laing and his half imbecile old wife; the latter now deaf for more than forty years and with a pinched white face, whiter than the trembling white frills of her "mutch" cap upon her poor, palsied head.

There is just one room in this stone cottage, and that not twelve feet square. The street door is at the side of the house front. Behind this is a recess and a bed. A back door opens upon a little

walled kail-yard. Opposite the bed is a wide fireplace where food is cooked upon and against a peat fire as in ancient times. Opening upon the street is one window, wide and low. Underneath this stands a deal table, and beneath the table is a stout oaken, iron-bound chest. This contains the records of nearly ten thousand Gretna marriages. These are worth more than their weight in gold. The old man hugs the delusion that he will sometime get their weight in gold. He never permits man or woman to set eyes upon these records, save for gold, and then only in a fever of fright lest harm shall come to these hoarded silent witnesses, or from suspicion that some plot against him for their possession is in progress. I accomplished my own purpose of inspection only after many visits; after yielding to his many direct demands for drink; and after downright bribery. Then, by impugning his high office, railing at his assumption of semi-priestly powers, and contemptuously denying that marriages were now being performed by him, I so stung his episcopal dignity that he produced the registers of the nearly one thousand couples he had himself married and also excitedly proffered, if there was "siller ahint it," to illustrate the ceremonial then and there, with myself for the bridegroom and his teetering, old guidwife, Elizabeth Laing, as bride.

The old man, half wild with liquor and indignation, slapped his horn-bowed spectacles upon his nose, grasped a soiled Bible with one hand from the table, and with the other clutched his poor old spouse from her chair and whirled her upon her feet before him.

"Stan' oop! Stan' oop t'gither!" he almost shouted. "Clap hands t'gither;" was his next command. We joined hands and the little old ogre proceeded.

"Ar' ye a single mon? Ye anser aye, ye ken." I answered aye.

"Ar' ye a single wumman? 'Spak oop, noo!" he yelled at the trembling yet pitifully smiling old guidwife beside me. Ye anser aye?"

She gurgled and cackled assent.

"D'ye ken ony reason why ye shudna tak this wuman t' be yer lawfu' weeded wife? Ye gie in t' that, ye ken," he said impatiently, and I answered, "No."

"D'ye ken," this to his wife, "ony reason why ye shudna tak this mon t' be yer lawfu' weeded mon? Spak oop, noo, ye auld boho! Gie in t' that!"

She gurgled and cackled again.

"Ye baith gie in t' a' o' that!"

We both assented.

"Then," said the old wretch savagely and triumphantly, "ye've bund yersels mon an' wife afore thae wutnesses an'," he added in an ugly undertone, as he seated himself from habit at the table to fill out our certificate of marriage, "th' deil take baith o' ye!"

This is what I got as evidence of the grotesque ceremony:

KINGDOM OF SCOTLAND,  
COUNTY OF DUMFRIES,  
PARISH OF GRETN A.

THESE ARE TO CERTIFY, to All Whom They May Concern: That Edgar L. Wakeman, from the City and County of New York, U. S., and Elizabeth Laing from the Parish of Gretna in the County of Dumfries, being now both here present, and having declared to me that they are both Single Persons, have now