

# GRETNA GREEN MARRIAGES: THEIR HISTORY AND ROMANCE.

By "NORTHWARD HO!"



THE glamour of romance (such is, I think, the euphonious phraseology) is often found, when carefully examined, to be little more than a mere veneer which, whether by accident or design it is difficult to say, conceals or shades off something that may be either intrinsically vulgar or vicious. What a number of events, personages and places of so-called historic interest it might be possible to enumerate to which this dictum could, with much propriety, apply. I do not for a moment suggest that Gretna

coming man and wife in haste, repaired there with that object. This popular delusion must once and for all be dissipated. The belief that a certain brawny-armed melodious son of Vulcan performed the marriage ceremony has somehow obtained for many years. Even to-day that belief prevails; many persons associating the local smithy anvil with the hymeneal altar, over which there is, or was, supposed to preside no less a personage than "Robin Tamson" himself.

It would of course be incorrect to say that there never was a blacksmith or that there never was a smithy at Gretna Green. The village has indeed long been famous for both, though not in any matrimonial sense. Curiously enough on entering the hamlet quite recently in quest of information for this article, almost the first sound I heard was an uncommonly musical and bell-like *cling clang clong* that came from the local blacksmith's shop—that not unpleasant feature of many a wayside village. Casting a glance within, it was also not a little singular to observe that a huge ring was being welded into shape, which, though suggestive enough in a way of the sign and pledge of wedlock, proved to be nothing more matter-of-fact

and useful than the iron hoop of an ordinary cart or carriage wheel. It is the fact, nevertheless, that no Gretna Green marriages were ever performed by a blacksmith from the beginning of the institution, about the years 1747-1750, down to recent times. How and when the blacksmith fable originated it is of course impossible to say. It may have perhaps arisen in the minds of some fanciful individuals who, with matrimonial chains and fetters in view, and remembering the titular office of Vulcan which is to forge and cast the same, associated the village blacksmith with the marriage rite such as it was at Gretna nearly a century and a half ago, and thereby conferred upon that worthy something more than

A local habitation and a name.



THE OLD TOLL-HOUSE.

Green and its history belong to that category; but while the romance of this famous Border village, and of the institution that has in a way immortalised it, is wonderfully free from aught that might be considered opprobrious, yet tradition has somehow (in default of another more blameworthy cause) so—

Over-garnished the meadow with daisies,

(i.e., the flowers of fiction), that it is well worth while recounting the story and, if briefly, doing so with at least due regard to the real facts.

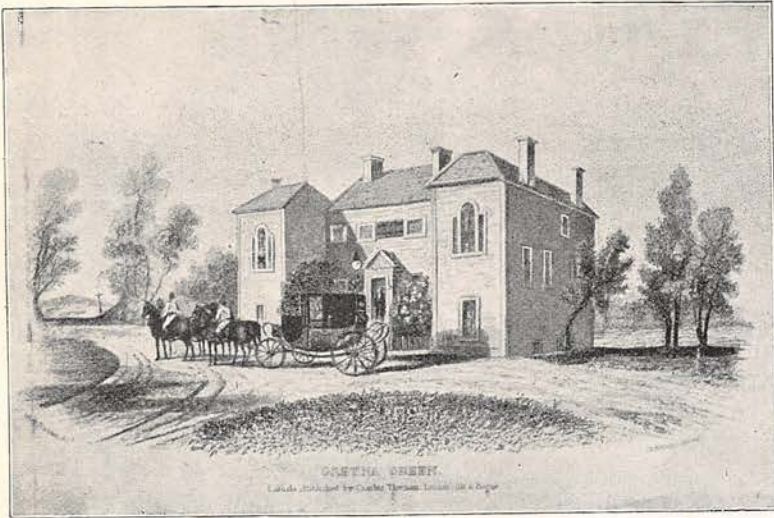
Perhaps the first and most important point to be noted in connection with Gretna Green and its matrimonial factory is that no blacksmith ever officiated at the function of wedlocking persons who, desirous of be-



The selection of the unpretentious village of Gretna or Graitney, as that haven for "haste-to-the-wedding" couples from the South is called, was probably due to the fact

(as all but natives of Scotland were termed), consummated on Scottish soil, were of frequent occurrence. But why should the fugitives fly farther than

was really necessary, since here at Gretna — where the river Sark formed, as it forms still, the dividing line between the two countries — their business could be just as well and legally accomplished as at Perth or Inverness, or even John o' Groats? The thing was preposterous and foolish in the extreme. Was there nobody at Gretna who could assist the runaways in their



GRETNA HALL IN ITS BEST DAYS.

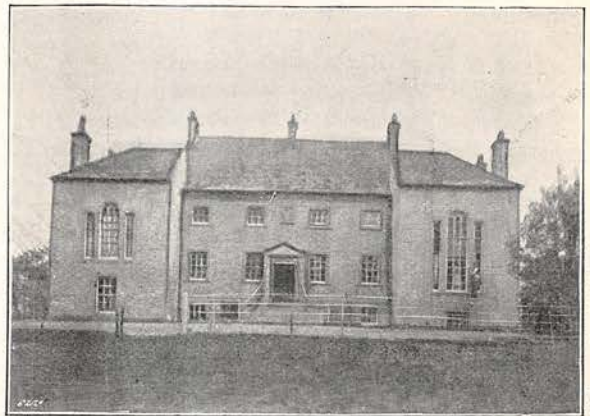
that it was the first place across the Scottish border, on the highway, where not only some rest and refreshment could be obtained, but where—and chiefly—the guarantee (such as it was) was assured that on a certain simple form or ceremony having been gone through any fugitive couple could, by the payment of a fee, be made man and wife. This guarantee was of course unnecessary for Scottish matrimonial candidates who, according to a pretty prevalent custom of their country, had, if they chose, only "jointly and severally to declare" before competent witnesses that they desired to be united in order to be quite legally wedded. Consequently the Gretna Green marriages were almost exclusively confined to parties from south of the Border, although a few weddings of Scottish couples were also performed there from time to time. But in the latter cases it was perhaps more because of the romance of the thing than for anything else. So far as can be known with any certainty it was some time between 1747 and 1750 that the Dumfriesshire village of Graitney was discovered to be a really serviceable point or stage in the progress of the journey northwards into Scottish territory of those who hurried from the South with all possible speed to obtain the matrimonial licence. Before that time runaway marriages of "foreigners"

plight and save them further anxiety by "welding twain hearts and lives in an harmonious unity" right off and on the spot? Of course there was. There is at least always one wise man in every village, no matter how sequestered it is from the rest of the world. Even Gretna Green, outlandish as it was 150 years ago, had its philosopher, though the philosophy which Joseph Paisley possessed was unquestionably of a *slee* and worldly kind. Observing so much matrimonial traffic rush past his own door, Paisley bethought him that the tide of business might be stayed and the fortunes of the place—his own fortune being therein included—mended not a little. Here, thought Joseph, is a crowd of honest folks post-chasing north as fast as their broken-winded horses, belaboured by swearing drivers, can carry them, with palpitating hearts in their breasts and (what is of more consequence to Graitney) with braw clinking guineas in their purses. Why should this merry crowd sweat and palpitate and hurry past *my* door? Why indeed! And so it came about that Paisley took upon himself the function and authority of the high priest of Hymen for such belated individuals who, but for his kindly intercession, might have gone farther inland than Gretna Green, unpicturesque place as it was, and fared worse. As the first man, therefore,



who founded the Gretna Green matrimonial agency Joseph Paisley has become a historical character—of a sort. According to all accounts he was a very eccentric individual, with but few of those moral attributes usually associated with the priesthood, though he was, it is said, possessed of some of their contrary vices, if hard swearing and deep drinking may be so considered. In spite of these blemishes however, and notwithstanding the excitements of his questionable if not contraband occupation, Paisley lived to see a brisk competition spring up in and around Gretna (the adjoining village of Springfield is also notorious as the scene of many similar marriages) in the peculiar line of business he was the first to adopt. He died a very old man in the year 1814, having left the succession of his share in the concern to the husband of a grand-daughter, a man who rejoiced in the famous Border name of Elliot. By this person and by another individual named David Lang—also notorious in the annals of Gretna Green—the marriage traffic was chiefly though separately carried on for a good many years after Paisley died. Their rivalry not unnaturally had the advantage, at least to the candidates for matrimony, in a lowering of the fees—which Paisley had maintained at a pretty high figure—though this only lasted for a short time, when the founder's principle was again acted upon: "Fleece your sheep while ye haud them, and fleece them weel!" And this reference gives me the opportunity of exploding another myth in connection with the story of Gretna Green. It has often been said that fabulous sums of money in the shape of fees were paid by runaway couples to those who, like Paisley, Elliot, Lang and Co., aided and abetted them in becoming husband and wife according to the fashion of the place. It is quite true that as large a sum as £100 more than once changed hands when the ceremony of marriage had been gone through, and from that amount it has varied down to half-a-guinea, or even to the price of a glass of whisky. (It is on record that such a liquid fee has actually been paid.) The fees exacted by the performing priests varied according to the pecuniary circumstances of the contracting parties and the urgency with which the business was desired to be despatched. For what was an extra ten guineas or so to the poor trembling wretches who would gladly give that sum if

only to "dish" those who were riding post-haste after them to prevent their marriage? But no fee beyond the substantial sum of £100 (not £100 Scots, of course, but that sum in cash sterling) was ever known to have been paid at Gretna. Even in the case of the abduction by Edward Wakefield of the wealthy heiress, Miss Turner (for she was only fifteen years of age at the time), it has been said that a very ordinary fee was charged, possibly because the officiating priest had such qualms of conscience in marrying one so young that he dared not charge more. A common fee however was five guineas. This sum an ordinary runaway couple were supposed to be quite able to pay, since they apparently could afford the luxury of a post-chaise with its generally smart concomitants, driven oftentimes many and many a weary mile from the South, and therefore at considerable expense. On the authority of a Mr. McDiarmid, who visited Gretna Green in 1824, a certain clergyman from England besought the services of the priest of Hymen (Elliot) and was charged a fee of thirty guineas! This exorbitant sum the cleric declined to hand over; indeed, it was more than he had in his possession. Elliot however agreed to perform the ceremony (query—couldn't the clergyman marry himself?) on condition that £10 should be paid at once, and that a promissory-note be granted for the balance of the fee. To these condi-



GRETNA HALL AT THE PRESENT DAY.

tions the clergyman actually assented; the marriage was duly performed, and it is recorded that the promissory-note was "regularly negotiated through a Carlisle bank, and as regularly retired at the time of maturity." Truly, the clergyman's was a



hapless case, to be himself so heavily taxed when he could marry others for such a petty fee as would not cover the cost of a new pair of bands! Probably the experience served him right. But what a miserable predicament to be in, in all conscience! That there was no regulation fee charged by the priests was admitted by one of their number many years ago when the subject of irregular or Gretna Green marriages was discussed before a Select Committee of the House of Commons—an inquiry that led to the passing of Lord Brougham's Act, which practically put a stop to the old system. On being questioned as to what were the fees for officiating, the *irreverend* priest replied, "I have no fixed fees. I supply cloth to suit my customers." But while this answer would seem to imply that in the case of an aristocratic customer an aristocratic fee would be demanded, and *vice versa*, nothing like "romantic" sums of money ever changed hands, though, as already stated, as much as £100 has actually been paid for the privilege of being married *à la mode* at Gretna. The form of marriage was, for such a large sum of money, absurdly simple. I quote from a native of Gretna who, as a boy,

witnessed in the most literal sense one of those ceremonies. He says: "The ceremony was as simple as it could be. The



THE "QUEEN'S HEAD" INN, SPRINGFIELD, NEAR GRETNA.

(Where marriages *à la mode* were also celebrated.)

parties were asked to stand up, and to the question, 'Are you both unmarried persons?' they both answered affirmatively. The bridegroom was asked if he had a ring, but as neither he nor the bride had such an adornment, Mr. — generously took from his hand one, which I took to be a curtain ring, and loaned it to the parties for the occasion. The bridegroom as directed put it on the bride's finger, but as it would have easily held two, I fancy it must have dropped off, as no more was heard of it. Having joined hands, as is usual, he put to each of them separately the question, 'Do you take this woman whom you hold by the right hand to be your lawfully wedded wife?' and 'Do you take this man,' etc. Both replied very audibly 'Yes,' whereupon he repeated solemnly these words, 'Before God and these witnesses I declare you married persons, and whom God hath joined let not man put asunder.' The certificate (a copy of which is here shown) was then signed, and on payment of fees the marriage was over."

While Paisley enjoyed the distinction of having established the Gretna institution, and Elliot and Lang, in their day, the prestige of having succeeded him in spreading its fame throughout the country, there were other priests of a later period to whom belonged the honour (such as it was) of presiding at the hymeneal altar when the institution had attained its highest point of success and renown.

"Dandy Douglas," so called from his superior airs and dress, was one of these officials, but John Murray, a stonemason, and John Linton, who had previously been a



WILLIE LANG.

(The last of the Gretna Green priests, now living, aged 85.)



valet to Sir James Graham of Netherby, far outstripped him in respect of priestly prestige and importance. And of all those thus officially connected with the Gretna Green romance from first to last, the two last-named individuals are by far the most outstanding and best remembered. While Murray carried on a roaring trade with the humbler candidates for matrimony at the toll-house close to the river Sark, and existing to this day, Linton did a "swell"

business at Gretna Hall, then a famous hostelry. Here all the better-class marriages were performed, mine host himself undertaking the duty of minister and sending the couples off with his best blessing. It was considered a no mean honour to have been "buckled-to" by John Linton, who, in his sphere, was a kind of mock-heroic Archbishop of Canterbury for such aristocratic run-aways as were pleased to find in Gretna Hall a delightful substitute for a fashionable London church where "high" and correct marriages were wont to be celebrated. Gretna Hall still stands, a fine old building, but greatly modernised within and without. It is now the private residence of Dr. H. F. and Mrs. Smith, to whose kindness I am indebted for the view of the house as recently photographed. I am also enabled to show a view of the Hall as it stood in the "good old days of sixty years ago," when Gretna marriages were

performed *galore* and there was not a whisper of their irregularity. And this brings me to say a word or two as to the legislative enactment that in the year 1849 robbed Gretna Green of its glory. Prior to that date so many marriages had been made at Gretna that a cry was raised against them, and an inquiry, with all the authority Westminster could give it, was instituted. I have already alluded to one of the witnesses called to give evidence on the subject,

I mean John Linton, whose pawky reference to the fees created much amusement in the Committee. Many other witnesses spoke, some for and others against the institution, and it is interesting to remember that it had many influential friends, among them Lord Aberdeen, who thought it a pity to put it down. The Bill was introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Campbell and was supported by Lord Brougham and at once became law. Its chief and



**KINGDOM OF SCOTLAND,**

COUNTY OF DUMFRIES,

**PARISH OF GRETNA.**

These are to Certify, to all whom they may concern: That

Thomas Jones from the Parish of  
Wylam in the County of Durham  
and Sarah Watkins  
from the Parish of Burslem-on-Stoke  
in the County of Durham

being now both here present, and having declared to me that they are Single Persons, have now been Married after the manner of the Laws of Scotland:

As witness our hands at Gretna, this Twenty fifth  
Day of December 1819

signed Andrew Elliot  
Gretna

Witnesses, { X Stephen Slough, Postboy.  
X Walter Parlane, Stableman.

CHAS. THURMAN AND SONS, GREAT PRINTERS, CARLISLE

A GRETNA GREEN MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.

indeed only clause enacted that "a residence of six weeks in Scotland was necessary before a marriage can be valid," thus practically taking the bread out of the mouths of those who had lived by the business at Gretna Green and elsewhere.

In conclusion, what an interesting record the Gretna marriage registers, even such of them as are still extant, afford us of the fascination which the altars erected there had for all classes of the people. For

upwards of a hundred years the place and its priests attracted people of all sorts and conditions, and from far and near. The last of the priests—old Willie Lang—still survives. There were noble families represented by the dozen. The law was represented by no less a dignitary than the famous Lord Chancellor Erskine himself who, as is well known, married Sarah Buck according to the Gretna Green ceremonial. Army men seem to have had a special liking for “a run to Gretna,” while the navy could not have had a worthier name on the list

than that of Lord Cochrane who, when Earl of Dundonald, eloped “over the Border and awa’” with Miss Barnes. The church too contributed its quota of candidates, and I have already referred to the unfortunate experience of one of its representatives at the Gretna altar. Of course it by no means follows that these irregular marriages afterwards turned out unhappy. Possibly in some cases they did so, but in other instances the contract no doubt proved to be fortunate and felicitous for both parties.



THE LAST COTTAGES IN GRETN GREEN.