

**THE QUEER FOLK OF  
FIFE; TALES FROM  
THE KINGDOM**

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The queer folk of Fife; tales from the Kingdom by David Pryde

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**DAVID PRYDE**

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# *The Queer Folk of Fife:*

*Tales from the Kingdom*

BY

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## CONTENTS.

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	PAGE
THE BREACH OF PROMISE, . . . . .	9
HER DEAD SELF, . . . . .	33
GOD'S OWN SCHOLAR, . . . . .	52
THE GENTLEMAN TRAMP, . . . . .	84
THE ONE FATAL MISTAKE, . . . . .	123
A ROMANCE OF THE HARVEST FIELD, . . . . .	167
THE BOY HERETIC, . . . . .	198
HOW THE DEACON BECAME AN ABSTAINER, . . . . .	240



## INTRODUCTION.

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FIFTY years ago, the little burgh-town of Sandyriggs was a sleepy place. The inhabitants led, what they themselves called, "an easy-asy life." So little stir was there in the life of the small shopkeeper or tradesman, that he might be said to "vegetate." He grew and flourished where he had been born, and among his own schoolmates and his parents' cronies, who still called him by the fond familiar name of his boyhood, "Johnny," or "Jamie," or "Robby," as the case might be. His place of business was part of his home; and during the day he oscillated comfortably between the front shop and the back parlour. There was little competition, and very little anxiety about his trade. His customers were his friends, and he could rely implicitly on their support. It happened, therefore, that even in what he called his busiest time, he had many intervals of leisure during which he was at a loss what to do.

Of a similar complexion was the life of the small farmers who abounded in the neighbourhood. The farmer, or "gudeman," as he was called, toiled, it is true, in the fields by the side



of his own servants; but he had little of the endless anxiety of the husbandmen of the present time. In those halcyon days of Protection, he was the especial care of the Lords and Commons of Great Britain and Ireland. They were his guardian angels. What did it matter to him though the drought burned up his turnips, and the drenching rains blackened his barley? The prices rose at once to guard him against loss. Consequently, after his day's "darg," and when he had exchanged his muddy boots for slippers, and taken his "four hours" of tea and buttered scones, he could sit down, snuff-box in hand and free from care, and take his ease by the side of the blazing kitchen fire. Thus the peasantry, like the townsfolk, had their intervals of leisure, during which they were open for any entertainment that might come before them.

Now, the important question came to be, How were these intervals of leisure to be filled up? There were no daily papers, few magazines, and few books to satisfy their craving for knowledge. Their minds were, therefore, obliged to feed upon the gossip of the country side; and so it came about that the gift of story-telling was cultivated, and that there were men and women who were recognised as the chroniclers of the district. These were the public entertainers, and were constantly called upon to use their gifts, especially for the delight of the young.

Two of these chroniclers, a couple of the name of Steedman, I chanced to know. Better samples of "auld-farrant Scotch bodies" could not be imagined. In no other habitat than a quaint burgh like Sandyriggs could they have grown up. For many years they had "gathered gear" in a grocer's "shoppie," and had then retired on a competence. They now lived in a cottage, crooked, grey, and time-worn like themselves. A favourite niece waited upon them, for they preferred, after the patriarchal fashion, to be served by their own kith and kin, and not by the *fren'd*. Their religion, too, was of the olden type. They were Original Seceders, would not enter an Established Church, travelled miles to attend a Dissenting Chapel, believed every iota of the Bible and the Confession of Faith, kept the Sabbath strictly, abhorred novels as "parcels o' lees," and looked upon food that had not been consecrated by a long grace as absolute poison. Yet their religion, straight-laced though it might be called, did for them what more fashionable religions sometimes fail to do for their adherents. It made them far more cheerful, and far more appreciative of the blessings of life. The snow of winter was on their head, but the warmth of summer was in their heart. A brighter, *cantier*, and cosier pair could not be seen. They delighted in all their surroundings: their work, their religious exercises, their pipe of

tobacco, and their nightly glass of toddy. They were particularly fond of recalling the scenes and incidents of the Past, and as I was an appreciative listener, I was always a welcome guest, and in fact was invited to drop in upon them as often as I could.

As I write, the old couple are before me, one on each side of the hearth—he, in a brown suit with a cloth cap covering his grey hair, and with a most intelligent countenance—she, a tidy little body, with clean-cut features and with coloured ribbons in her cap—he, recalling with unction some bygone event—she, interpolating occasionally to add some little detail to complete the narrative—and both radiant with pleasure, as if the light of other days were warming their hearts and brightening their faces.

“What a blessing,” he would say, “is a good memory—one of the most precious gifts of God.”

After the fashion of old people, they often repeated the stories which they had told me on former occasions; but I did not object, as I was thus enabled to realise them more thoroughly.

Some of the scenes and incidents which I acquired in this way, I now proceed to give as truthfully and clearly as I can.