

F o gheas mi Pioba

Under the Spell of The Pipes

and
Some reminiscences of a piper's life, with
a complete Tutor for the
Highland Bagpipe

By
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Preface

It is not the intention to become an autobiographer that has prompted me to write this volume, but a genuine hope that I may be able to put on record some of the episodes which are enshrined by an ardent admirer of the Highland Bagpipe.

My earnest desire is to portray the beauties of the music of the pipes and the environment in which the instrument itself has been created and preserved. Any reference which may be made to myself I wish to be confined to the background so that I may enrich an ancient art by the elucidation of its power and grandeur.

As the pipes are a source of pleasure to the Highlander in peace, they are also a stronghold (so to speak) in times of war. They are cherished by the performer from the cradle to the grave and never fail to supply inspiration to the inheritors and possessors of a noble instrument.

Without the bagpipe and its music my life would have been robbed of its richest and dearest pastime. When the duties for the day are finished and the bagpipes have been played, I feel that I have not been slothful in the discharge of the daily obligations which I am bound to perform.

If you will bear with me gentle reader while I give an account of my wanderings in the Highlands and the making of a piper, I will then enter into a more minute description of the music of the pipes and the tuition of young pipers.

Every winding of my path will be cherished by Highlanders, pipers, and Scots abroad. It will bring back to their minds the pleasant memories of the dear old land of their birth.

Music is one of the greatest gifts bestowed on man by an all wise and loving Creator. It is a communication from the inmost soul to the outside world; it indicates the beauty which reigns within the human breast and brings us in ecstasy to the very gates of heaven.

John Grant

Edinburgh.

Chapter I

*How in the noon of night that pibroch thrills,
Savage and shrill! But with the breathe which fills
Their mountain pipe, so fill the mountaineers
With the fierce native daring which instils
The stirring memory of a thousand years.*

Byron.

[Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto the Third, XXVI.]

It was on a beautiful winter afternoon on the 28th of November 1896 that I left the city of Elgin for Gordon Castle, Fochabers, to get my first lesson in bagpipe music. The sun was just sinking in the western sky behind the hills and was bidding farewell to lofty Ben Aigen, whose giant peak overlooks the lowland landscape. I had a walk of about eleven miles through a rich agricultural area. The fields were bare, and here and there the ploughman pursued his daily toil. The lonely shepherd could be seen tending his flock and preparing the sheep for the nights repose before the darkness fell. By the time that I reached the bridge which crosses the river Spey the moon was high up in the heavens and shone forth with great brilliance. From the bridge looking upwards towards the hills along the valley of the Spey, the scene was enchanting. As the river wound its way towards the sea the silvery moonbeams shone down upon the waters, and the rippling current sparkled like diamonds. After surveying the beautiful scene for a few moments I pursued my journey to its close. Then I reached the arched entrance to the Castle of Gordon, the fair and extensive policies¹ of which lay silent in the moonlight, and the great trees which had grown for many generations around the ancient family seat threw their dark shadows on the green turf.

The piper's house was at the Lakeside, and there I arrived about six o'clock p.m. In the moonlight the lake shone like a great round mirror, and the two occupants thereof, a pair of beautiful white swans, swam about in their watery abode with a peaceful air of independence. In the olden days it is said that in the retinue of the Chief the piper held a dignified position. This was so at the Castle of Gordon, for the piper's house was no small apartment. It was composed of a very large circular room with three or four bedrooms, a kitchen, and other necessary conveniences. A door opened out into a small square piece of lawn facing the sun, and some small trees thickly covered with leaves, on drooping branches, adorned the south side of what one would be inclined to call a Castle in itself.

At last I stood before the door of this never-to-be-forgotten residence, and rang the bell. I was ushered into a small room in which I could see many signs of the profession of the occupant. A few moments passed, and the man appeared, who was afterwards destined to become my master in the art of imparting to me the mysteries of the music of the pipes. I then stood in the presence of the late Pipe Major Ronald MacKenzie, a born interpreter and teacher of pipe music. On his face he bore a congenial smile and asked what he could do for me. I felt rather uneasy as to my prospects of becoming a piper, but as I was very keen to begin, I told the master of that beloved instrument that I wished to learn to play the pipes.

¹ Enclosure of the fortress.

While I thus disclosed my secret desire to this great performer on the Highland bagpipe, I still remained standing; but as he could see that I had come from a distance, he bade me be seated. It was then arranged that I should make a start, and a course of lessons was arranged. I then took from my pocket a practice chanter and a tutor which I submitted for approval. To my surprise my master looked at the chanter somewhat disdainfully, and at the moment I could not for my life understand what could be wrong, as the instrument was practically new. This I found afterwards to be the most valuable lesson in my long course of study under a genuine lover and real master of Piob Mhor. At last he exchanged the frown which appeared upon his brow for a smile, and said, "This boy, I cannot dispute to be somewhat in the shape of a chanter, but if you wish to become a piper you may as well begin on 'a chanter'." He meant a good one, and told me to send to Peter Henderson, Glasgow for a good instrument.

I then played over the scale which I had seen in the tutor in order that he might judge what ability, or aptitude, I had towards becoming a fair performer. The instructor then requested me to close the book, which I never again opened in his presence, and showed me from the instrument itself the proper manner in which to finger the scale. I was then requested to practice this scale with great care and diligence because, as the scale is the root of all good piping, if it is performed with care and expression, then every tune will be attractive and pleasing to the ear. This, the first lesson finished, the master and pupil parted with a handshake and "good night," which was a forecast of many happy and instructive meetings.

My first meeting with the Piper to the House of Gordon made a great impression upon my mind for he played one or two tunes on the pipes before we parted. His performance was graced with that ease and perfection that alone becomes a piper in the real sense of the word. Stately in appearance, for he was all his life a soldier, light and graceful of steps and mien; there he paced the room with the ribbons of the pipes floating in the air behind him. The tunes which he played that evening rang in my ears for months after, and I longed to be able to play like him.

I left Gordon Castle that night the proudest man that ever put finger to chanter. More than once e'er I left the Castle Grounds I paused and looked back on [the] residence of that great performer on the great Highland Bagpipe. I felt in reality that this instrument and its music had created within me a new, a more beautiful life which would help to adorn my future existence with a passion that would always cling to me like "the golden dream of love."

It was now getting somewhat late in the night, and as I had a good walk of eleven miles in front of me, I retraced my steps homeward at a good round pace. Most of the road was heavily wooded, but the sky was still clear and the moon shone brightly so that I was not left in total darkness. All was quiet, save the cry of the solitary owl who was in turn answered by its mate. The hills in the upper parts of the Strath of Spey stood like giant sentinels looming in the distance, and as I passed along the road I gazed upon them with profound admiration.

One feels a little eerie on a lonely country road at the dead of night, more especially as I had to pass several places where in the olden days murders had been committed. [At] one place called the Feet Hill Wood, near Lhanbryde, there is to this day still to be seen a cairn which marks the spot where the local postman was murdered for the sum of fourpence. All sorts of forms and sounds were supposed to have been seen and heard by the passer by, but of all the nights that I passed those places, even in inky darkness, I saw no person worse than myself. I, therefore, arrived home between the hours of eleven and twelve at night feeling rather tired but with bright spirits and great hopes of one day, at least, becoming a fair performer on the national instrument.

Chapter II

So far as I am aware I cannot claim to belong to any race of pipers. My grandfather on my mother's side was a fiddler and played at weddings, I suppose, or other festivities which took place locally. One thing I can say with safety is that from earliest childhood I heard, at my mother's knee, the fine old Scottish songs, Highland airs, and Strathspeys and Reels sung with charm and sweetness, which must have laid the foundation of my love for music.

I was born on the 11th of August 1876; probably too young to be on the moors among the heather and grouse next day, but I was not very old when I was on the slopes of the hillside. The place of my birth was on the higher parts of the shire of Moray, and my native hills were adjacent to the Speyside moors.

Those hills meant far more to me than a bare bleak landscape. They were full of beauty and romance as they lay in silent grandeur either snowclad or covered with the purple heather blooming in the Summer sun.

Near my home there were three lochs on the top of three small plateaus, and there I spent many happy hours in my days of childhood. Quite close to one of the largest of these lochs was a smuggler's² residence. It consisted of a small hole dug into the side of a rising slope in the hillside which was carefully covered over with heather. How far it went under the ground I cannot tell, as I never was very curious to know; but that such a place existed at one time is beyond doubt. It was stated by the people who lived in the smuggler's lifetime that he threw his pot and worm³ into the loch to evade the excise officers capturing him. Many times we tried to run off the loch in order to find the hidden treasure, but our efforts proved unsuccessful. The loch was very deep and appeared to be fed by springs. Unless the working utensils for making the "mountain dew" have melted into a liquid I still believe that they are deposited there. In all probability if the loch could be dredged or the bottom dry up the articles mentioned would be found there. The fact that whisky was actually made there is proved by the following poem which still lives locally. There are several verses of which this is one: -

"Aye as the Tuesday's and Friday's came roon,
The Kertie was biggit wi' peats for the toon.
Wi' the keg in the he'rt an' Meg on the croon
Awa' tae Elgin gaed he."

Around these lochs the fairies were supposed [to] lurk, and play upon the fairy duns near by. The fairy elves were supposed to have lead young people away into their caverns and palaces, and for this purpose they made use of their music to attract their youthful listeners. When we had at any time been too long absent from home playing round these lochs I can remember hearing, on many occasions, the story that after we had exceeded a certain time playing by the water side that the fairies would come and take us away altogether. The fear of being kidnapped by those imaginative creatures never seemed to cause us, as children, much concern, for many an hour we spent at our favourite haunt.

The farms in the highlands, which were chiefly sheep runs with arable land included, lay far apart. There were no towns or villages near by; no picture houses or theatres to supply entertainments

²Bootlegger

³A copper pot and "worm" are tools used to make moonshine.

in order to beguile the time. Until I reached the age of seventeen I could wish for no finer entertainment or greater pleasure than to roam for hours among the heathery hills with their pure springs of crystal waters, so clear and refreshing. It is in such an atmosphere that the piper is at home with his tuneful pipe: discoursing the wild and plaintive notes which gladden the mountain solitudes.

Another favourite haunt was a green grassy spot on the hillside where there lay a great rocky boulder called "The Grey Stone," around which there still hangs an interesting story. This stone stands some six feet in height and would weigh about eight or ten tons. Local tradition, from one generation to another, has it that a notorious witch or fairy carried a stone of enormous magnitude from a great distance. It is related that her apron strings broke on the adjacent hillside and the stone broke into three parts. There she left one part, which is known as the "Kearlan Stone;" the second, which was the grey stone already mentioned, she left near my home; and the third she carried to a neighboring hill across the Corry⁴, and left it there to mark the place where she was supposed to have hidden a treasure of great value.

This is a short description of the real home of the pipes. Where the ravines are darkest and the mountains are highest, it is there that the shepherd's pipe sounds the sweetest. Though I was born and dwelt in a wilderness of moorland, nevertheless, I was accustomed to hear the bagpipe from earliest childhood. At a very early age I set my mind upon the chanter. My eldest brother [George] had a practice chanter long before I was able to blow it. He did not seem to have much affection for the instrument, and one day when I was old enough I hoped to possess it. My heart was so much set upon it that often did I ask for it long after it was out of his possession.

Time passed on, and at the age of seventeen [1893] I left the scenes of my youth. I exchanged my abode in the beautiful place where the heather grew in spring and bloomed purple in summer for city life.⁵ Then, for the first time, I realized that I was out into the world to face the great battle of life. I soon found out, at least, one of the most important secrets of success. I was all right during the day while work was to be done, but it was necessary to find a useful pastime for leisure hours. A person without a real hobby is like a ship without a rudder. It is not during the day when one is busy with its labours that one can go astray. It is in the evenings when temptations appear, and from them many would shrink if they could only find an attractive study.

I shall never regret the day that I made the pipes, piping, and pipe music my choice as a hobby. I am happy to say that I have lived to reap the fruits of a labour that has been crowned with far more success than I ever hoped for. There is no pleasure known to me that I can compare with an hour at the pipes. There is a tune on the pipes appropriate to every occasion of Highland life, and no other instrument in my mind can surpass them.

⁴A hollow area on a mountainside.

⁵John's father owned several houses on North Street in Elgin which he let to tenants; perhaps John took residence in one of the apartments.

Chapter III

Elgin's "Big Ben" chimed three o'clock as I took my departure en route for Gordon Castle. It was Saturday afternoon. The labours for the week were ended, and I turned my back on the city for the rest of the day. As I passed the old Cathedral those stately ruins towered far above the ordinary dwellings. I took the last glimpse of "Ladyhill," and then I quickened my pace as I turned eastward towards my destination. Elgin is a city of great antiquity, but it is not quite clear as to whether the early citizens ever had a town piper as was customary at one time long ago. It has had for many centuries, however, a fine old Cathedral, now in ruins. Elgin Cathedral was founded in 1224. It was burned by the "Wolf of Badenoch," Earl of Buchan, and son of King Robert II in 1390; restored in 1424, and plundered in 1568. "Ladyhill" (the oldest lady in the town), a conical shaped mound which rises some hundreds of feet into the air, stands far above the city. On the market days and on Sundays scores of people of all ages used to go there to breathe the pure air and view the surrounding district. When the old market green, which was close by, was in existence, hundreds of people gathered on this "old lady's" back. On the top of the hill is the ruins of an old Castle, one of the seats of Scottish royalty. An interesting story is told of the history of "Ladyhill." It is said that long ago some plague arose in the city, and as this was the part to which it was confined, the people heaped up earth upon the houses and buried them. It is also related that the passers-by could hear the rocking of the cradles and mothers singing to their children long afterwards. There may be little truth in this, but in my youth I have heard the tale. It is difficult to say whether it is a natural hill or a volcanic eminence of molten rock covered with verdure. There was some rumour of having it bored to see what would actually be found, but so far this has not yet been done. There is also a spiral monument of the "Duke of Gordon" on the top of the hill.

As I proceeded on my way at a speed of a little over four miles an hour, I passed all the familiar places by the wayside. I turned over in my mind many possibilities and hopes of my future in the piping world. In the eye of imagination I could see myself playing round some fine old Scottish castle, and hear "Jonnie (sic) Cope" re-echoed by surrounding hills. I was awakened from my reverie by the sound of the pipes, for I was now within an "arrow shot" of the gates of Gordon Castle. There were several good pipers among the gardeners, and I could hear "The Barren Rocks [of Ayden]" played to perfection. These young fellows were all taught by the Duke's piper, and it was a real treat to hear them play on the Great Pipe.

At last I arrived at the lakeside, and was ushered into the "piper's study." After the usual greating took place and any fresh intelligence from the city conveyed to my instructor, I produced my chanter, one of "Peter's" [Henderson] best, direct from Glasgow. The new instrument was minutely examined by "the master," and approved as satisfactory with the following benediction: "Well boy, if you don't become a piper, it won't be the fault of the chanter." With this done, I began to play over my first lesson for further approval. As we both played together, the scale sounded in my ear with exquisite charm which I shall never forget.

I had altogether three or four lessons on simple exercises when I was started to a tune. It was one I knew by ear: "The Highland Laddie," and after a week's practice I could play it fairly well.

Ronald MacKenzie was not a man who would make anything do. He was a thorough teacher. Unless the pupil played what he was asked, no more, no less, he never came twice to Gordon Castle.

Being taught by a “Master” himself,⁶ Ronald would have nothing but perfection in playing. He did not pay much attention to the description of music “written,” but he was very strict instrumentally. Every note had to be performed gracefully, and absolutely correct. I don’t think that he ever gave me one lesson on the names of the notes. It appeared to me that he took it for granted that there was no difficulty in memorising nine notes by name, and where they stood on the treble stave.

The one and only lesson I ever got from him on the theory of music (if it could be called so), was to copy for myself every tune I could play, and get hands on. I have already said that I only opened a Tutor once in his presence, and that was so. I had to copy out my first tune in an MS [i.e., manuscript] book, by his instruction. “This,” he said, “will enable you, bye and bye, to do and know all that you will require to know and do in the art of music writing.” This was a very short lesson in theory, but it was a “true” one indeed. It was not until I had copied hundreds of tunes, and covered hundreds of pages of MS; Piobaireachds, Marches, Strathspeys, Reels, Jigs, and Hornpipes, that I realized the value of that lesson. It was to it that I owe a complete knowledge of the theory of pipe music in every form from A to Z.

Ronald MacKenzie being one of the genuine “old school” did not lay down a book in front of his pupils, and allow them more or less to struggle on alone. He played with me every note, and thus instilled the real time and rhythm of each tune. He could read and write music in the staff notation, and he saw that his pupils could do the same so that their practice at home would be progressive.

He would not tolerate excessive gracing, or what we would call now-a-days “barrel organ,” or “jazz.” There were no “little finger” flourishes [i.e. a “birl”] every time low A came in with him. Every tune he played was well governed by taste and discretion as regards gracing. His style was neither too bare nor crowded with grace notes. Another thing which he was very much against was the changing of the good-old settings of tunes for new settings. Often have I heard him say, “Never change the setting of a tune which you play for any man. The good-old settings is ‘pipe music’; what is new, and taking for themselves, is cast aside as distasteful in a very short time.” This being a true musician’s advice, it proves that grace notes used to excess destroy fine melodies. Without the long plain notes here and there as they may occur, there is no beauty of expression.”

I could play some six or eight well-known tunes in a very short time without any difficulty, but when I came to those which were entirely strange to me, the pupil’s first stumbling block arose before me. There came a time where my real desire to become a piper was put to the test. Every young musician must reach a stage when they are to succeed or fail in their efforts to master their beloved instrument. Seeming difficulties must be got over, and if that is done there is no doubt but that success will be the reward. Well do I remember the tune which held me there. It shall be “nameless,” but long and often did I play it over in order to master it, and I must say that my teacher had great patience with me. I returned to that tune several times after I had memorised others, with great determination. It is still clear to my mind that one Saturday afternoon I went out to Gordon Castle and told the fine old man that I was going to give up the pipes. He listened to me and said, “What do you wish to give up the pipes for, boy? Let us play over this tune.” He played the tune over himself once or twice, and then we played it several times together. After we had finished he said, “What is wrong with that now?” I left the Castle with a new enthusiasm, and on the way home I could see the kindly encouragement which I received from my master. It struck me very forcibly that if he was pleased with my playing, why should I find fault with myself. It was only a case of memorizing the tune. It was, of course, a long and heavy one, but this brought back to my mind an incident in my school boy days, and like Bruce and

⁶His uncle, John Bàn MacKenzie.

Spider⁷ I did not try “very” often when I succeeded.

Forty years ago is a good long time back, but I recall that the incident I refer to regarding school days was when poetry was just then brought into use in school. It was as I could see afterwards a means of training the child to memorise. I could not at first see the sense of carrying in my head what I carried in a book on my back also at the same time. I had a long distance to walk to school, five miles out and five home again. What I tried to memorise of this hated poetry was stored in my “poetry accumulator” on my way to school. What I could not recite by memory to begin with was read from the book which was perched at the back of my slate in the desk before me. But above all, I never failed to say along with every boy and girl the verse for the day. Before very long I found that this saved me the trouble of straining my eyes and racking my brains on the way home from school. It was Gray’s “Elegy on a Country Churchyard⁸” and as I loved that beautiful piece so true to nature, by the end of the year I could say the whole poem from end to end with the greatest ease.

I can remember still with no small degree of pride, the examination day. As this was the first year that we had had poetry to memorise the “Dominic” was very anxious that we should do justice to his efforts as teacher. The examination day came, and for what[ever] reason I was placed far down the class was best known to the “master of arts.” I think I was last in the class but one, and I did not like it, I can assure you. One consolation I had was that the last person in the class was a little lass with beautiful curly hair and very rosy cheeks. She was neatly dressed, wore a tartan ribbon on her hair, and bore on her sweet little face an angelic smile. I did not know what “love” meant at that time, but all the same I could not say but that I had the tail of my eye on my fair companion in adversity all the same. Now the fun began. We were lined up on the floor in a semi-circle before H.M. Inspector of Schools: a very fine old man. Every boy and girl knew their place in the class the day before, and the verse of poetry which each one was to r[ecite] off was on the tips of their tongue. It was well rehearsed beforehand, and the “Dominic” viewed his class with no small degree of selfish pride. At last the Inspector asked the first, which was a girl, to begin. She started thus: “The curfew tools the knell of parting day.” “Very good,” he said, “that will do.” “Next,” said the Inspector, and he came right down to me. Of course, what could I say but “The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea.” “You go up to p[ass?] my little fellow, that is very good,” and to my surprise my fair companion followed me, for when the Inspector said “next” she said, “The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,” and finished the verse. I only wish the reader could have seen the “master’s” face. It was a sight for “sore eyes” indeed for the Inspector failed some twenty of the class.

E’er I returned to Gordon Castle I had realized that when I could memorise so much poetry, which was at first strange, surely I could memorise pipe music also. A whole week elapsed before I returned for another lesson, and when I did go back I could play the “nameless” tune to some perfection. There is no playing from music at sight on the pipes. All tunes must be memorised. And a piper after twenty or more years playing has stored in his head hundreds of tunes never to be forgotten. There, is he not a more superior man in the art of music than any other to be found? While

⁷The legend of Robert the Bruce and the spider inside a cave is well known. Seeing the spider “try and try again” to spin a web, Bruce got up the courage to rise up once more against the English, which resulted in the Battle of Bannockburn.

⁸This famous poem contains 128 lines of iambic pentameter.

the members of a brass band have musical cards stuck upon some convenient place of their instrument when on the march, or placed on a music stand while in a band stand, it would look some what amusing to see a piper with a sheet of music stuck to his blowpipe, or attached to his nose, probably the most convenient place. This surely proves that a “piper” like the “Scotch Thistle,” is not a man to be “meddled wi’,” so far as musical ability and superiority are concerned.

Chapter IV

“Practice makes perfection,” and it was not for want of perseverance that kept me from becoming a piper. Twice a week, every Tuesday and Saturday, I had a lesson. Regular as the clock, I attended the Castle on the appointed days. Nothing was a barrier in my way. It was all the same to the young piper, sunshine or storm. I can remember one Saturday afternoon, in the month of December, on leaving home in a heavy rain in the hope of its clearing up. As the night fell, so fell the rain faster and heavier. I was very keen on a new tune, so I arrived at the Lakeside drenched with rain. I got my lesson, the previous one approved and started on my way home. It was still raining very heavily. Before I left the study, my teacher remarked that, “Your coat is already wet through, boy. Wait until I give you a cape. It will prevent the rain from getting through you altogether.” With this and a good “cudgel” in my hand I set out for home. Rain fell all the way, and it was pitch dark. I never set eyes on a living soul for nearly three hours, and I got home at last somewhat wet, as may well be imagined. In fact I had a very narrow escape, more than once, of being washed down the drains by the roadside.

On another occasion I started for Gordon Castle in the middle of January [1897]. It was Saturday, my usual day for real recreation, as well as having my pipe lesson. About four or five inches of snow had already fallen during the week, and when I left home it was snowing heavily. I waded through the heavy snow to Gordon Castle, got my lesson, and started for Craigellachie, which was another twelve miles’ walk, as happy as a lark in a summer morning. I had to walk through a heavily wooded district most of the way, but no one seemed to be so “daft on the pipes” as I, so I “whistled over the love o’t” and kept time to that tune till I reached the residence of my bother at the “Craig.” After I got a good cup of tea, and several slices of very tasty “brossy,” with a very small drop of “strong water,” for I was then “under the age,” I was able to sit up in bed, and play over all my new tunes. Next day being Sunday I walked over the “rock” and looked down upon “Craigellachie Bridge,” one of the loveliest sights in the country. Down below stood the village, or what was better known as the “Craig” itself. I caught sight of the hotel, which stood close to the station. It was a piercing cold day, and what added still more to my discomfort, the outside of my throat was as “dry” as the “rock” on which I stood. In fact I believe I could have “cracked” a match on it. As it was the Sabbath day these scattered thoughts and discomforts had little hope of cure. For one thing I did not smoke. I could not “crack” a match. Then, I was too young for “Glenlivet,” and finally, the hotel door was “steckit⁹” and made “siccar¹⁰” till Monday morning. I had then to get up next morning e’er the “knock” struck six, and walk to the city to start work by nine a.m.

During the long evenings of city life I had lots of time to practice. I think I played the chanter about three hours every night. We had a canary in the house. When I played he whistled, and in a very short time “a wireless orchestra” was not in it. In fact, ultimately, my feathered companion did with a

⁹closed

¹⁰secure

“wireless” cage and often sat and sang beside me.

February and March passed, and I made good progress. I was by this time on the length of playing a Strathspey and Reel. My master was pleased with me, and I was pleased with myself; for the last Saturday of March I got a “set” o’ pipes (a Kist o’ whistles). Then I was in my glory. I became a piper all at once. I walked through the glen to my favorite spot, Craigellachie, and many an unearthly “growl” I made those pipes send aloft “savage and shrill”! As I passed the small cottages by the road side, more than one person came out, rather “canny¹¹” to see who cometh. The sounds were “uncanny.” It was well past ten p.m., and I am sure that some of the residents were quite convinced that the “deil” himself had taen [i.e. taken] a trip from Kirkaldy to see what was doing among his “clansmen.”

Fear not gentle reader, for my future chances of becoming a “laird’s piper.” This was only a start. As the pipes and I became better acquainted with each other, the tunes were more artistic and attractive. Every person has to begin, and like the “prentice” of old, there was only one of two things I could do i.e., “make a spoon or spoil a horn¹².” I played the pipes so often between Fochabers and the Craig; and between Craigellachie and the city, that I became too well known.

I became acquainted with many people on those weekly routes that I had a very narrow escape of ever becoming a “Clerk.” It seemed as if I could live with one or other of my admirers for more than a week end, for they dearly loved a “spring” o’ the pipes. Many a tune did I play i’ the barn, and many a roof an’ rafter dirled, wi’ the sooch¹³ o’ the big drone.

I cherished very highly my first “set.” They were thirty years prior to my getting them, a fine set of pipes. The ivory was getting black, and the chanter worn, but they could still play “The de’il among the tailors.” Lady Gordon Gordon-Cumming of Altyre, Forres presented them to the Pluscarden Volunteers many years ago. I cleaned them up and thought the world of them, and many a happy day we had together. Many a mile I carried them, but not always without a murmur, because they enabled me to pass many a milestone with a light heart.

I joined the volunteer band in the month of May 1897, and played beside the Pipe Major as the youngest piper, on many occasions. It was the third V[olunteer] B[attalion] Seaforth Highlanders that I was attached to, and we wore the MacKenzie tartan. My career as a “young” piper, at least, had begun. I soon began to play at picnics, dances, and other entertainments. I was then by profession an apprentice law clerk, and the rules were as many as the regulations were strict. The day that I started my new occupation I had read those rules. They run thus: “I was not to bring any parcels, food, or people to the office; I was not to leave my three-legged stool unless it was absolutely necessary; I was only to leave the office when on duty, and above all, to work diligently.” For each and every one of the above offences which I happened to commit I was to be fined two shillings and sixpence sterling. I received the handsome sum of eight shillings and fourpence a month, or in round figures, five pounds

¹¹wary

¹²an old saying meaning “to thoroughly succeed at or to fail at completely”

¹³murmuring

per annum. A luxurious income, was it not? Of course, I got my “napper”¹⁴ filled wi’ the “law” over and above. It can be seen at a glance that four “false steps” at two and six each in the one month left me a bankrupt. I weighed the situation up with great care; but although the penalty was heavy and the chances of steering clear of being found out was very meager, this would not hinder me from running one single risk. It would only cost me one hundred and twenty pieces in copper for the first offence, and I would have had left two hundred and eighty similar coins for the month.

I told my companions, some six or seven young “legal aspirants,” what I was going to do on the following Saturday. It was to leave the office (if I could slip out unseen, and they could hold their tongues from wagging) at ten o’clock in the forenoon to play a Sunday School picnic through the town. I took my pipes to the office in the early morning, and as I entered the building, I looked “roon the big Kirk,” to see that my master did not catch me going in with my “contraband goods.” The way was clear, so I ascended the stairs unseen. I came down again at nine thirty without being caught, and was perched in the front seat of a wagonette beside the “free kirk minister,” who accompanied the young flock. At the appointed time the procession of vehicles set off for Lossiemouth. I got the surprise of my life when I returned to duty, and found that I passed our office playing “Bundle an’ go,” while my master looked out at the window without the slightest idea that the piper he had heard was one of his own staff out on “the quiet,” playing the bairns outside the city boundary. I congratulated myself on successfully evading the office “tax,” and for my own satisfaction that same afternoon I played “The deil’s awa’ wi’ the Exciseman” to some tune.

Being encouraged by success on my first attempt to disobey my master’s orders, what would hinder me to try the same again before the month was out? My absence on this second occasion was never found out by my employer, but I was heavily punished by my colleagues, and they rejoiced heartily because [of what] I had done [to] them previously when they attempted to initiate me into the mysteries of the clerical profession.

To let you know, when a young boy entered a law office first, he was tried, proved, and passed as eligible in the following manner:

One of the senior clerks asked me to go to the Sheriff Clerk’s for Process A against B. I was the “devil” at the time in question, for every new boy who entered the legal offices at that time was known by that title. I could not then understand why I should be so “titled” because I had no horns or outward marks which could liken me to ths evil spirit. But, there I stood like many more “devils” before me, in a very awkward position. I did not like to refuse to do bidding, but as luck would have it, I happened to say “yes, try it with someone else,” regarding the securing of this “Process,” and I got off. I admit I was new from “the heather.” I could not say that I was a young man “o’ pairts,”¹⁵ but I knew that I was not a “blockhead.” I would come in somewhere between these two categories. I had the mother wit to know that there could be no such “process,” or “plea in law” between this A. and B., as they were too closely related to each other. Before relating how I was “done” at my second piping trip, let me give you an example of how the “devil” who followed me was initiated into the “craft.” This poor “unfortunate” was a lad of small stature. He was rather short of breath at times, which prevented him from becoming a “Piper”; but otherwise he could (when he cared) wield the pen. Three worthy past masters prepared a “box” which contained an old seal, weighing about twenty-eight pounds, wrote a letter, and gave both to the little fellow with his instructions how he was to proceed. He was sent to

¹⁴head

¹⁵ lad o’ pairts: a promising boy, a talented youth.

New Mill foundry with his treasure, and on his arrival there he had to present his missive. “Oh, yes,” said the official who interviewed, “that is all right, everything is in order, but you must take this “casket” of yours to the chemist’s to get the contents analyzed by him first of all. With this his adviser wrote another missive, and sent him to a druggist at the very far end of the town, and “simple Samuel” sped on his way. His burden was very heavy and the day was warm, so he laid it carefully on the parapet of the bridge which crossed the Lossie. He took out his handkerchief to “dicht”¹⁶ the sweat from his brow, and as he did so, the weight of his burden combined with curiosity tempted him to open the missive. This let the “cat” out of the bag. He made up his mind that if he could not analyze the contents of his casket, at least he could give it an opportunity of melting; so he conveyed it to the bottom of the river, and made his way back to the office much more comfortable without it. On his return to the “seat of law” the three initiators seemed rather uneasy as to the fate of the “seal,” and asked this newly-passed apprentice clerk what had become of it. He told them where they would find it if they cared, and probably after all he had the best [of] it, because before it was “salved” from the river, they must have had to dive more than once in order to recover it.

Now for my turn; this second attempt of mine to leave the office unobserved was to play a large picnic party up the “glen” to Aberlour. As before I took my beloved instrument into the Office in the early morning. I was careful to store it away in a “canny” way, so that it would be unobserved, even by my colleagues. I had, however, to leave the Office on duty for about a quarter of an hour, and when I came back every one (of seven young budding lawyers) was more intent on his work than was usual on a Saturday forenoon. I did feel within myself that there was something up (a calm forebodes a storm), but I said nothing, and thought no more about it. At eleven o’clock I took my pipe case from its place of hiding, and with best wishes on both sides I left the Office. At the Gordon Arms stabling the breaks were full, and several of the picnic officials were inquiring about the piper. I arrived on the scene, and was escorted to the foremost vehicle by the secretary of the picnic party. After a struggle I found myself, and the box containing the finest instrument in the world, sealed upon the “dicky.” It was a giddy height, but the driver said, “Ye better get out yer teuchters¹⁷ an’ lat the nags be joggin.” He was a true Scotsman, and dearly loved the pipes. It was not the first time I had seen this “man o’ the road,” and he again addressed me thus: “Gae us a sooch o’ yer drone, for a lively spring mak’s the auld mare run like a mairch hare, wi a gun at her lug¹⁸.” Then came the uncanny moment. I took from my “sleuchan”¹⁹ the key of the pipe box, and opened it up in the presence of a man who admired the instrument as much as I did myself; but what was in it? There to my surprise I found about two thousand manilla envelopes. My admirer exclaimed, on seeing the contents: “Hae a care o’ us laddie, ye’l hae some wark or ye fill a’ they tae her. Surely some ane has been playin’ the gowk on ye.”²⁰ It was

¹⁶wipe

¹⁷The term “teuchter” is a disparaging term used by Lowlanders to describe a Highlander “country bumpkin.” Apparently the driver is using the term here for Grant’s pipes.

¹⁸ear

¹⁹money pouch

²⁰“Have a care of us, laddie, you will have much work to do before you fill these (envelopes). Surely, someone has been playing a joke on you.”

enough to be “done” without such amusement being added to my already too-well nursed anger. There was no time to be lost. I had to get my pipes as quickly as possible, and while it occurred to me that the best way to repay the perpetrators of the deed was to scatter the packets of envelopes in the yard and, like the man with the seal, let the rascals go out and gather them up and fetch them back. On a hurried reflection I thought, after all, that it was only a trick, and a good one, too; so without a word I made for the Office and inquired for my pipes, left the envelopes and bade them all good-day with as cheerful an air as was possible under the circumstances. If I had left the envelopes in the cab liver’s yard I might have let more cats out of the bag than one, and would have run the risk of being out with my chums for future occasions. I got back to the “dicky” where upon the driver said, “Ye’d be we’el advised tae lock yer kist next time laddie. No nae ‘mouse’ aye tae lippen²¹ tae chance.”

Six or eight pairs of horses left en route for the foot of the loftiest leen²² in the North, for Aberlour lay under the shadow of Ben Rinnes. Many a “spring” did I play to the old fellow who drove us there before I came back, and more than once did I smell the strong “mountain dew.” We returned to the city after spending a glorious day among the hills, and the company danced merrily the “Reel o’ Hoolachan” over and over again.

Chapter V

I continued my studies at Gordon Castle, and attended my master twice a week regularly. In the month of June the Volunteers went into Camp at Fochabers, in the Castle grounds. For the first time I carried out the duties of a piper under military discipline. We arrived at Camp on Saturday afternoon and I was appointed, or rather told off, as “Orderly Piper” for next day, which was Sunday. I had to play “Reveille” first thing in the morning, and to the stirring strains of “Johnny Cope” I did my best to awaken the sleeping “troops.” Volunteers in those days were not so strictly tied down to true military discipline as the Militia or the regular army. They were Volunteers in the real sense of the word. What they did in the way of home defense was done voluntarily, and without remuneration. After playing for a considerable time I saw here and there a bare cranium, some of them bald altogether, and if I was to play until I wakened the whole Battalion, I might have been playing there ‘till we left camp, for I am sure there were some who never wakened from the day they went in ‘till we left camp. I had to play the “fall in” for church parade sometime about eleven a.m. It was a good thing that we were well back from the riverside, because I am sure had we been near enough to the Spey some of those gallant fellows would have fallen into its angry waters; they seemed so unsteady in their bearing.

The whole Battalion was formed up around the Chaplain, who offered up a prayer (that the Seaforth’s should defeat the Gordon and Cameron highlanders in the sham fight next day, and that our pipe band should be considered better than that of the Cameron Highlanders). Then we sang “Onward Christian Soldiers.” (Of course, we never moved, but remained at attention.) Immediately after, the collection was taken (for the funds of the pipe band). The sermon was on “having your lamps trimmed” (but as most of the “soldiers” were fast asleep it was all the same to them whether their lamp was out or in). After the sermon was over another Hymn was sung: “There is a happy land.” (It really was the happiest land that many of those weather-beaten warriors had been in for a long time, as it

²¹trust

²²meadow; grassy area

seemed to be a land flowing with milk and honey, they enjoyed their military pilgrimage so well.) Finally the benediction was pronounced, and the pipe band played “Up an’ warn them a’ Willie,” which ended this part of the day’s duties.

At one o’clock p.m. the bugle sounded forth the call for dinner (“Run for the cook house door, boys”). I had then to play the “meal pipes,” which consisted of “Broze and Butter” before, and “Banncock’s Barley Meal”²³ after the Battalion was fed. This was a time-honoured custom in Highland Regiments, and dinner was never complete without it. Finally my duties for the day ended when I played “Lights out.” The tune was “Soldier lie down on your wi’ pickle straw,”²⁴ and as this was Sunday night I had to play the tune alone; the rest of the band being off duty for the day.

The pipe band did not take part in any of the manoeuvres of the regiment, except to play the men out and in to the parade ground. We were kept busy with one thing or other; but most of our time was taken up with practice. Besides the usual duties as already described, the band had to play in the “Officer’s Mess.” The Officers usually dined at 7:40 p.m., and every evening after dinner the Pipe Major went into the mess and played a piobaireachd. After he finished he stopped behind the Commanding Officer, and after a “Gaelic toast” he played the company’s health. That done, eight of the best pipers, headed by the Pipe Major, played a march ‘round the table, and standing behind the Commanding Officer played a Strathspey and Reel, and drank to their health a second time. Two pipers were left to play “a Reel,” and we played more than one, which the Officers who wished to dance made good use of.

We had a sham fight. There were five Battalion’s under canvas known as the Highland Volunteer Brigade, which was made up of three Battalions of the Seaforth Highlanders, the Inverness Battalion of the Cameron Highlanders, and the Banffshire Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders: in all five thousand men. The Brigade was divided into two sides: The first and third Battalions of the Seaforths against the Camerons and Gordons, and the second Battalion Seaforths were left on garrison duty to guard the encampment. Our objective was to take possession of the Castle. The Camerons and Gordons were in possession, and the Seaforths were the attacking party. Each company of the Battalion had their pipers, and we were posted to our own Company, and the battle raged “loud and long.” It was indecisive, but well fought on either side. The Castle still remained intact when this conflict ended. Its walls were too “siccar” to be penetrated by blank fire, and there were the “Duke’s” men, well armed with gardening utensils, who protected the wine cellars. The casualties were very small on both sides. The stretcher bearers were lined up with each Company in order to carry off the wounded. When the order to charge was given, the pipers, two in number for our Company, struck up “Caber Feidh,” and

²³A song by Robert Burn’s, more accurately entitled “Bannock’s Bear Meal.” See <http://chrsouchon.free.fr/bannock.htm>

²⁴The Gaelic lullaby, “Cadail, Mo Ghaoil,” “Sleep, Darling, Sleep.”

“Sodger, lie doon on yer wee pickle straw,
It’s no’ very broad, and it’s no’ very braw
But, sodger, it’s better than naething at a’,
Sae sleep, sodger, sleep.”

the sound—pipers together with the yelling of frantic men—could be heard for miles around.

Our company remained unscathed with the exception of one man, who was my companion piper. During “the charge” we had to cross a “bog,” very deep and dirty. This march was full of deep holes filled with red mud, which rose from iron ore. Shoras Mòr, or Big Geordie, which was the unfortunate piper’s name, fell into the deepest part of the bog, and had to be “salved” by the Pioneers. He was covered with red mud from head to foot. He stood or rather lay in the “garb of old Gaul” in a bedraggled state. The “ironere”²⁵ made such a terrible mess of his hose, kilt, and tunic that they had all to be destroyed, as he sank into the bog very close to the neck. Mòr only attended this one parade for the ten days which we were in camp, and he never appeared again.

Many a tune did we play to entertain the visitors who came into the camp to see their friends and sweethearts. There was another battle, by the way, which took place one evening just before sunset, and but for the timely assistance of one of the “Duke’s men,” if not death itself, most certainly a broken leg would have been the result. Two Cameron Highlanders who had been so inspired with their own valour in the sham fight two days before, thought that they would have another “fecht” or rather a game with two young swans who swam about playfully in the lake. The valiant “kilties” had not gone far with their “antics” when the two old swans declared “war” upon the intruders. At first the two heroes of the “heather hills” took this watery attack as a huge joke; but alas! Too soon to their dismay did they find that they were now in the midst of “The Battle of the Swans.” The male swan was a powerful fellow. His wings had broken a leg before then, and it soon became apparent that before long there was a chance of the offenders returning to camp with a broken leg under each arm, if that could be done. One of “His Graces” men, seeing the onslaught, arrived in time with a heavy wooden plank and kept back the enraged birds, while the two “soldiers” took to their heels towards the camp.

The most important event of the week was the General’s Inspection. It took place on the Friday prior to our departure from camp. There were five thousand men on parade all told. The day was all that could be expected, and the sun shone on this military scene with great brilliance. Brigadier General Murray was the inspecting officer. He was a great Highlander, and he gave orders that the pipers in the massed formation was to play the march past under the command of Pipe Major Ronald MacKenzie. That day our band was highly honoured. I played, one of a hundred pipers and drummers. The Brigadier General took up his position on horseback in front of our Pipe Major, who had two pipe bands on either side of him. As the battalions came to the “Salute” and marched past, it was a glorious sight, and never did the pipes sound so sweet in my ear. On the Saturday at noon we left camp to the notes of “Bundle and go.” We arrived in Elgin shortly after with the complete band. We got a rousing welcome from the citizens as we came home from the “war,” and each and all returned to their respective homes, but the pipes did not remain silent.

Chapter VI

The piping season lasts from July to September, and although I was in reality too young to compete, I thought there was no harm in beginning early to try my hand as a competitor at the Highland Games. I made the best of my time as regards preparation. Every weekend saw me on the banks of the Spey near Craigellachie at practice. There I spent my summer holidays, and many a tune did I play on a green spot on the river banks. I played at Glenrinnnes, Rothes, Garmouth, and Elgin with more or less success, all within a year of my first lesson. The pipe band always played at the local battle Shows,

²⁵iron ore

and for the first time I played at Elgin's annual "gathering" of thoroughbreds in the month of July. There were present many well fed farmers and sauncy wives, and one had to beware of "invitations," for refreshments in those days were cheap, and the pipers were always offered a "dram." It is all very well to play the pipes at a "fair" but in doing so one must be sobre. Then there is always to be remembered the Scotch proverb, "as foo as a piper," but to be "as foo as a fiddler," puts the tin hat on the "droothy"²⁶ musicians. When a piper gets "foo" you may be sure that that only applies to "hersel." The pipes never get foo.

This brings to memory the story of the fiddler who had been playing at a country wedding, and on his way home he had to cross the ferry. The water was very rough and before getting clear of [the] boat the fiddler fell into the water, fiddle and all. He was "foo," but this wetting outside brought him somewhat to his senses. On scrambling ashore he sat down upon the river bank and attended to his stringed companion. With no small degree of compassion he spoke to the old fiddle thus: "Weel! Weel! Ye hae often seen me foo, but ye never saw us baith foo afore."

To return to the show ground, everyone admired the pipes, and we had a very heavy day's playing. The very animals seemed highly delighted with the music, more especially the horses. Horses are very fond of pipe music. I have known of a horse that could only be worked by one man (it's master) and on playing the practice [chanter] in the stable beside it, the animal turned right about in its stall and stood as quiet as a lamb with its nose on my shoulder. We played at this cattle show until about five o'clock p.m., when we took our departure from the field, with many followers, as we played "Will ye no come back again."

The first sports I ever played at was Garmouth games. Garmouth is a small village near the mouth of the river Spey. It was at one time, in the olden days, famed for shipbuilding. The day on which the games are held is always recognized as the holiday for the district and some hundreds of people gathered there to see the principal events. There were competitions for piping and dancing. The winning pipers had to play for the dancers, and we also played for the dance which followed the games. A large square platform was laid down upon the field, and all who cared could dance to their heart's content. The Brass band from Elgin played there during the day, and I drove home with them and played most of the way to keep them lively. I had a prize in my pocket, which was more than most competitors possessed, so I was highly satisfied with the day's outing.

Roths is a beautiful little village nestling at the foot of the high hills in the glen. Whisky distilling is the chief occupation, with some fine farms and surrounding sheep runs. There is a rhyme still to the fore in the district which runs thus:

"Dipple, Dundurcas, Dandaleith and Dalvey
Are the four bonniest haughs in the doon run o' Spey."

Away in the distance stands Ben Rinnes, and its companion hill Ben Aigen. Here again the local weather forecast is still to be found in verse:

"A mist on Ben Rinnes may clear awa'
But a mist on Ben Aigen we're sure d'a fa'"

²⁶dry

This forecast hardly ever fails to prove right especially in the winter time when the snow comes.

The games day at this quiet spot is the holiday of the season. Many hardy stalwart men gather in to see the ancient amusements, and of course their lasses come also. The chief events are running, jumping, throwing the hammer, tossing the caber, wrestling, piping and dancing. Each event was keenly contested, and unless one is “good” at their work, or rather favourite pastime, there is little use of competing. The main feature of the gathering is the dance which follows. It is all very well to play, dance, run, or jump for a prize, but no pleasure can compare wi’ a “hoolachan.”²⁷ There and then one can swap lassies an’ birl. “Yae hae yer arm roon the lass ye admire is nae a thing tae loose sicht o’.” The weather was glorious, and at its close I slept among those giant hills till next day, when I returned to the city with something for my pains.

Glenrinnies is entirely a Highland Glen, if ever there was one to be found in Scotland. It is rugged, bare and bleak in winter; but when snowclad, the scene is grandeur at its zenith. In summer, no Highlander could wish for a more beautiful and romantic spot. The Ben overlooks the Haughs o’ Cromdale” where the battle was fought long, long ago, and here let [me] quote a verse of the fine old song: -

“I met a man wi’ tartan trews
I speer’d at him what was the news
Says he, The English army rues
The day they cam’ tae Cromdale.”

Ben Rinnes stands 2,759 feet above the level of the sea. To stand upon this majestic peak and view the surrounding country is a sight which enchants the soul. Far away in the distance stands Ben Achie, and in reality one wishes that they were “where the Gaudie rins.”²⁸ It is said that on a clear day the city of Aberdeen can be seen with a good glass, and with two “glasses” it might be difficult to say what an “eagle” eye might see, for at the foot o’ the Ben there stands more than the “still” o’ Glenlivet, where the “real MacKay” can be had.

In this unfrequented spot, the Highlanders meet to beguile the time. They gather to the sound of their native music; the skirl o’ the pipes. Here in the land o’ cakes,²⁹ with braw lads and bonnie lasses, one can see Highland life at its best. Many speak in their native tongue, the Gaelic, and as many wear the tartan, wi’ a sprig o’ white heather in their bonnet, and a warm heart beating below the plaid. To hear the lads sing that auld Heilin’ sang” -

Come under my plaide, the nicht’s gaun tae fa’
Come in frae the cauld blast, the drift an’ the snaw,
Come under my plaide, and sit doon beside me,

²⁷reel

²⁸Folk song “O gin I were where the Gadie rins” See [http:// www.contemplator.com / scotland/gadierin.html](http://www.contemplator.com/scotland/gadierin.html)

²⁹A description of Scotland from Robert Burns’ poem ‘On the Late Captain Grose’s Peregrinations Thro’ Scotland’: “Hear, Land o’ Cakes and brither Scots.” See <http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/LandoCakesThe.504.shtml>

There's room in't dear lassie, believe me for twa'.

would lift one far above the cares of life, which proves that the riches and grandeur of city life cannot compare "wi' hielan courtship."

When the feats of strength are over and the prizes are presented, here again dancing is resorted to with some spirit. To their native dance, "the reel," they put the last effort of strength to the test. As the piper plays up the "strathspey," the old man of eighty years lifts his frail body and does his bit. It is not until he is worn out with fatigue that he sets himself down upon the heath-clad turf to rest, and e'er he sits long, he is at it again. At the end of the day's enjoyments he could be heard to exclaim, "They heilan' springs are nae canny³⁰, when it comes tae auld bones an' stiff joints, but ane canna miss the 'reel'; man its gran' tae be ane o' the four, tae gae thro' t, an' get yer airm roon a braw young lass, an' get a glint o' her sparklin' e'e."

I was proud to play to those braw lads and lasses. Yes! Even to the old people, whose spirits made them once more young as they endeavoured to dance as in the days of their early youth. It was really with a sad heart that I left the Ben and its Highland people, for I never spent a more enjoyable day in my life. I took with me a memento of the day, which I still possess, and as I view it, I gaze on that scene with a charm which carries me far beyond the city "kin."

The next outing which took place with our pipe band was the Grantown battle show. It took place in the month of August. Twelve pipers and four drummers left Elgin by early morning train, and after playing in the train most of the way we arrived once more amongst the Highland hills about eleven o'clock in the forenoon. We played from the station to the show-ground, and as we did so a heavy thundery shower overtook us. As we passed one of the summer visitor's houses, a lady came out and invited us to come into the dining room till the cloud broke. She even offered us some refreshments, of which some partook, and e'er we parted we played her a march, strathspey, and reel around the door. We then played into the field where the show was held, and after we had finished playing a man rather happy of mood came up to the Pipe Major and said that was "The Barren Rocks" which we played. "You know I am in the Salvation Army. I was sure I was right." It was "A hundred pipers" which we had just played, but no one wished to spoil the fun, and the man was allowed to congratulate himself on having such a good ear for music. To tell the truth, this person was not in the Salvation Army at all. He was just having a good holiday, and his spirits were a little above "proof." The people of Grantown were very fond of the pipes, and we had a very hard day's playing. We had played eight or ten times before midday. At one o'clock we had luncheon in the large marquee. There was no scarcity of meats of every kind, together with puddings, jellies, and fruit. We did justice to them all, and drank the health of the proprietors of the show with Highland honours. We were kept on the move all the afternoon, playing from time to time those stirring tunes, with plenty of Strathspeys and Reels.

During one short interval we had a great entertainment, which was very much enjoyed, especially by the younger members of the band. It was the driving competition. Many people take an interest in this event, because there is no other turn out so pleasing to the eye of a farmer as a nice pony and a smart gig. This competition was open to ladies as well as gentlemen, and there was one lady entrant there. Let me describe her to the reader, and if I fail to attain my object, it will not be my fault. To begin with, the gig would pass, but for a good wash, with the axles lubricated. As the wheels went round one would think that they listened to a bird charmer, of a very savage kind. The pipe band was out of it altogether. Every turn of the wheels introduced a new warbling of a kind, but the driver sat

³⁰Safe, free from risk.

undisturbed. The horse was once grey, but for want of grooming and a good feed of corn, it was rather difficult to fix on the exact colour. The ribs were so pronounced that barrel-hoops seemed to be the nearest approach to the material which supported what skin was left upon the animal, and indeed one man remarked that “she wid be nane the war o’ haein’ a knot o’ the horse’s tail tae keep the collar on.” The occupant of the vehicle was once young, but then that is many years ago, and being dressed as became her rank in those days, she was a “don.”³¹ In fact, I had my eye on her myself, but I was then too young, to settle that part of it. She disappeared from the race course during the time that we played our next selection. I lost sight of her and have never seen her since.

At six o’clock we played “The Haughs O’ Cromdale” to the town, with some hundreds of people with us. We stopped at the “Black Bull” hotel, where tea was ordered for the pipe band. On entering the room the younger members of the band observed that the tea was rather plain. The hotel lasses were numerous, for that day at least, and more than “one” of the pipers had a “doo” under his plaidie. We told those fair mountain maidens that pipers never sat down to plain tea. They asked us what we wanted. “Cold roast beef” was the reply, and immediately, it was placed upon the table. We had a royal meal, we paid nothing, and no questions were asked. A special tune was played at the hotel door before we parted, and we could see those “daft” lasses having a good reel to themselves as we played the quick-time.

The station was about a mile and a half distant, and we played there at a brisk pace in order to catch our train. At last we said good-bye to the Highland hills, and those warm-hearted people whom we had entertained that day with so much pleasure. We arrived home at “that sma’ hour ayont the twal,”³² and slept soundly, as we dreamed those dreams which carried us back to scenes departed, but not forgotten.

Elgin Highland games finished the season, and the pipe band was again present. There were the usual competitions, which were all well-contested. Our duty was to play the pipes at intervals, but of course there was a piping competition, in which we were all interested, both open and local. Three of the members of the band got prizes in the local competition for bagpipe playing which was considered satisfactory, and thus closed our band performances for the year. The Pipe Major said good-bye to all the pipers for the time being, and warned us not to allow the bag to get “dry,” as if each one did not get the prize he wished; next year might bring better luck, and his words were offered to deaf ears.

CHAPTER VII

With winter, again came the long dark evenings, and I resorted to my studies once more. I returned to Gordon Castle for the purpose of adding to my collection of tunes which I already played. Being now well on my way to become what I thought to be a piper, I was congratulating myself on being able to devote most of the winter to getting up a goodly number of Strathspeys and Reels. Besides our many engagements to play in the pipe band, I always attended Gordon Castle twice weekly, and I made good use of the time both in getting up new tunes and hard practice. About the month of October, almost a year after I had started, I can remember being at my lesson on a Saturday afternoon,

³¹Important person

³² “That small hour passed midnight.” A quote from the thirty-first stanza of Robert Burns’ poem “Death and Dr. Hornbrook.”

when my teacher said, "Now boy, you can play a few tunes on the pipes such as Marches, Strathspeys and Reels, but you will never be a piper until you can play piobaireachd." I want you to start the great music this winter, and now I will play you 'The Earl of Seaforth,' so that you may pick up the melody." I was very much delighted to hear this, as I had often heard my teacher play the "Classical Music" of the pipes, and I longed to be able to play even one of those beautiful pieces. I started there and then, and I got Angus MacKay's book of piobaireachd to copy out the tune. I can hear "The Earl of Seaforth's Salute" yet in the ear of imagination, as Ronald MacKenzie played it. He imparted it to me on the chanter and the pipes with the greatest patience, and when I attempted to play it upon the pipes, he always encouraged me. He would say, "That is very good, boy; I can see you at Oban and Inverness in a very short time."

"Now," said this great lover of the pipes and piobaireachd, "I am going to play "Seaforth's Salute" tonight at the Castle and you will come down with me and hear it played there. You will also see how to play the pipes in the Castle of the Chief, and someday you may be able to do so yourself." About eight p.m. we both left the Lakeside for the Castle. The night was very dark, but otherwise pleasant, and we had to grope our way amongst the trees and shrubs. We arrived at the Castle, which was well-lighted, and entered the piper's room, which was a very comfortable one. We had not been long there when I could see that there were to be more than two in this apartment. Shortly after we had the room lit up, the head keeper and head salmon fisher came in together with three or four more admirers of the pipes.

I only got one lesson from my teacher in deportment, or how to carry the pipes when playing, and I shall now tell you how I got it. Most people who know anything about the Highlands and Highland customs must know that where a piper is kept, he is dressed like the "laird" himself. Now, Ronald was going to dress for duty in one of the finest Highland dresses that ever a piper stood in. He addressed the company thus, for by now there were six or eight in the room. "This is one of my pupils, and while I dress he will play you a tune on my pipes." He produced the Castle pipes, I blew them up, they were tuned by the piper himself, and with some embarrassment, I played one of my best Marches, as I was requested. I observed that the "Duke's piper" dressed with unusual rapidity, and it dawned upon my mind that he had some reason for this hurried dressing. I played the March several times over, and then stopped and laid the pipes carefully on the table. I was very glad to be allowed to stop playing, because I was not accustomed to play to strangers, and I thought that my performance had ended for the evening. As soon as the piper got his kilt, hose, and shoes on, he caught hold of the pipes and said, "Now boy! I will let you see how you played as near as I can reproduce your style of marching." He blew up the pipes, played the same tune that I had just finished, and with a most grotesque swagger he paced the room several times. Everyone in the room laughed until they could laugh no longer; indeed the gamekeeper's eyes ran with tears as if he had had a fit of weeping. The reader may well picture me, how I sat with a face like nothing else, and blushing like a full-blown crimson rose. At last the laughter subsided, and in fact my teacher stopped playing because he could play no longer for laughing. "That is exactly as you played, boy" said the master, and again he blew up the pipes and played the same tune several times. He stopped, and again addressed me: "That is how to play the pipes. You take them and play again and let me see how well you can do it." Again I took the pipes and tried to the best of my ability to imitate, in turn, my master. I took the "hump" off my back, squared my shoulders, put out my chest, and played a new tune. As soon as I thought that I had regained favour in my teacher's mind I again laid the national instrument upon the table, for I was fully aware that this lesson would bear fruit. To my surprise my performance was approved; I must have made some improvement, because my teacher said, "These men have had their laugh at your first attempt, but let any who may wish try to beat your last performance." Of course, none but himself could play the pipes and the challenge really meant

very little for me. The gauntlet was laid upon the table, but no one could by any means pick it up. Nothing else remained to be done but to sup together, spend an hour of perfect friendship, and part in peace.

As I made my way that night to the city I went home with two new lessons: one in the classical music of the pipes, and another on how to play them. For many months to come I was by no means idle; in piobaireachd I had a great task in front of me, and also a great source of joyful pleasure. Time fled very quickly with one thing or other, and with that came Christmas, the festive season. On the closing day of the year I found my way to the hills once more. I left the city with my pipes in my hand, as happy as a “millionaire”; sped through the Glen of Rothes, and steamed into Dandaleith station to spend the remains of the last day of the year. After getting some tea I repaired to a distillery in the Glen, and there we brought in the new year. I was by no means in charge for the night, but only a visitor. The duties to be carried out, however, were many, and about eleven p.m. we all went to work. First we stoked the fires, which was harder work by a long way than playing the pipes. We were all as black as a chimney sweep at this job, but of course we looked in to see if the still was running at intervals, then turned the malt, and back to the still again. It was a glorious sight to see the clear “crystal” running, through a glass of course, and at times we wished if only the “glass” would rise. The night was fine; no snow on the ground, and at last twelve rung out the old year, which was laid aside in the storehouse of our memories with a deep sigh. Before the clock rung in the new year we were all delighted to see that the “glass” had risen; that being so, and all other things were going well, we pledged each other’s health, with a “lang may yer lum reek,”³³ but very sorry to part with the “stoup.”³⁴ The whole glen was as quiet as one could have heard a pin fall a mile away, and through this stillness did we broadcast the “skirl o’ the pipes.” The hills themselves re-echoed the “Reel o’ houlachan,” and my four black companions danced till they were sore with laughter and fatigue. Of all the new years that ever I took in, even “mid the pleasures o’ palaces, an’ castles themselves,” I have never equaled that night. The spirits which we brewed were blended with the real Highland music, and as the Reel grew quicker in its speed, so the vapour from the still seemed to quick with increased rapidity into stills or vats. I forget now how often we took in the new year that morning, it is so long ago, but at six a.m. we left the premises to the strains of the pipes, and it was well nigh six the following day e’er I laid my head upon the pillow.

If you will permit me, dear reader, when I am upon this Highland scene, I shall tell you a story of the power and influence of the pipes; because they lead the performer into many a queer place for a happy and two-fold purpose, which is that of entertainment and being entertained. I was very friendly with the Brewer, and a young Excise Officer at this Distillery in the “Strath,” and I often visited there just to play a “spring” on the pipes. I usually played to my young friends first, and when that was done and I had sampled the “dewdrops,” I passed on to play a favourite tune to the Brewer. The second performance was always the best, for the pipes were by this time going well, this being confirmed by the pleasant smile which appeared upon my patron’s face. Of course, my young friend (to whom I had already played a considerable number of tunes), was still lingering near with his ear round the corner of his abode, listening eagerly to the second part of the programme. After I finished, the brewer always took me into his office, but I had first to make a declaration of how much “[no text]” I had stored in my “duty free warehouse.” Of course I was very young in those days, so that I had to be careful, and

³³“Long may your chimney smoke”: an expression of wishes for one’s prosperity.

³⁴Cask of whiskey

so was my patron. He never gave me more than “fifteen drops” from a steady hand, and if my throat had been a mile long, I might still be enjoying the fine old “mixture” with all its charms.

When I returned to duty in the city far below these mountainous regions, I happened to relate to my chums my experiences among the hills, and they immediately demanded that I should bring them a sample of this “mixture.” I could not promise, but said that I would do my best to meet their wishes. It was not long after, when to their surprise, one Monday morning, I stepped in with a “small phial” containing a quart and a half of “seven year” old. Of course at that time this small quantity was only worth about five shillings, but it was pretty strong. Shortly after I arrived I “watered” all the dry youths in the room, and to our astonishment one had got “two drops” too much. He became somewhat merry, which was contrary to rule, so we had to fasten him securely in a small adjacent room, with old ledgers against the door to keep him from wandering. Finally he was smuggled to the railway station and labeled for “home” where he remained for two days before he appeared again.

When one looks back onto the past, these were, after all, only the happy hours of early manhood. There were neither cares nor responsibilities in those days, and all went well. The pipes were easily carried from place to place. They were always a useful companion, both for the performer and the listener alike, who never failed to find enjoyment from listening to the magic notes as they rose from the chanter, to float away upon the mountain breezes.

Before the year was very old I was called upon by the Volunteer Instructor of the glen of Pluscarden to go and play at a volunteer dance in the country. It was held upon a Friday night, and we drove from the city, a distance of four or five miles, through a very heavy snow storm. On arriving at the scene of merriment the young people began to assemble, but the snow fell very heavily, and there was no sign of the two fiddlers appearing who were to be the greater part of the playing of music for the dancing. In fact, they were both storm steed, so that they did not arrive that night. There was nothing for it but to make use of the pipes, and well do I remember to this day that I played every dance, which included Lancers, Quadrilles, Country Dances, Reels, Waltzes, and Schottisches up to the middle of the night when a man appeared with a melodeon. Even then there was more life in the pipes than the other instrument, and always they would call for the pipes. Surely this is proof that the pipes can supply music to any and every dance. They are the beloved instrument of the Highland people, and they never tire of them. Everyone present admitted that the pipes were an instrument hard to beat for dance music, and I got a rousing cheer e'er we parted for playing so long on end, as without the pipes some one would have had to hum the tune on a comb and paper, or go home through snow laden roads with a heavy heart.

Chapter VIII

The real love of piping and pipe music had by this time taken a very strong hold upon my mind. Piobaireachd, the classical music of the pipes as the finest music I had ever heard, for to me it was the very thing I longed for. The Gathering with its stirring notes; the Battle tune so fierce and suggestive of war; the Warning with its important message; the March or Challenge to fight; the Salute so pleasant to the ear of the Chieftain; the Welcome to the stranger; the Farewell to parting of friends and relatives; and finally the Lament with its sad and doleful theme. All these different forms of tunes took possession of my imagination in such a way that nothing but being a piper in the real sense of the word would satisfy me. I underwent a special course of lessons on piobaireachd, and in a very short time, besides memorizing my first tune in “Ceol Mòr,” I was well on my way with two or three others.

I had also competition in my mind, and I practiced hard at the lighter music for the coming games season. By this time I had fully made up my mind to go to the Scots Guard and join the pipe band of that regiment, as Ronald MacKenzie had found more than one piper for the Commanding Officer of the second battalion. The piping fever was upon me and I had hours of practice on end all through the summer months, when in July once again came the local Highland games.

There was to be no local competition, which was a special feature of the gathering, and was very much looked forward to by pipers in the district. The games committee was approached upon the subject and we were notified that if sufficient money was raised in the city to provide prizes, a local competition for piping would be included in the list of events. A sum of at least two guineas had to be found, and the adjutant of the 3rd V.B.S.H. was approached to begin with. The matter was explained to him, who subscribed the required sum out of his own pocket, on condition that the competition would be confined to the volunteer pipers; dress and carriage being taken into account. The Colonel of the regiment was consulted who doubled the first-mentioned sum. A crusade 'round all the other officers resulted in the raising a sum of over twenty pounds, and much to the delight of all those concerned our chances of a competition were secured. The next hitch was judges. The open competitions were being judged by Pipe Major Ronald MacKenzie, but as he taught the band, he could not act as judge. The difficulty was got over in a very simple manner by asking the three successful pipers in the open competitions to judge the band.

The competition was announced to all members of the band in good time in order to give them an opportunity to prepare. At last the day of reckoning came, but not without due preparation, and there was a total of thirty-two pipers to compete. I for one, was very much excited long before the time arrived, and the night before, I can remember, was passed in sleepless anxiety. When morning came I was up with the lark, and played my pipes for some hours beforehand. I got dressed early in the day, with all my belts and ornaments shining like diamonds, and my pipes going like silver bells. Although somewhat uneasy of mind on account of my age, and the chances of a prize, yet I had some confidence; a kind of faint hope that I would not be left out of the list of successful competitors. Just before going to the field of play, while sitting in an inn in the city having something to eat, a friendly hand was placed upon my shoulder. I looked at the man who was a stranger to me, and he said, "You stick in young fellow, you'll be first today." I felt so embarrassed that I remained for some time speechless. At last I said "I am afraid you are making a mistake." "Alright," said he, "I'll take you on ten shillings that you will be first." I thought this was not a bad speculation, and took his hand upon it. I told my friend that if I did not get a prize I was sure of ten shillings for my pains, so we left for the scene of action. I could not conceive how this stranger had such an interest in me, and finally I made up my mind that whatever way the issue went, when it came to my claiming my ten shillings as being unsuccessful, I would rather disappear than accept it.

I was all nerves even until the moment of my going up before the judges, and then I stood in their presence shaking like the leaf of a tree. On putting up my pipes to see if they were in tune before going on the stage, I stopped my big drone purposely to see if my tenor drones were in unison. One of the judges put his hand upon my shoulder and said, "Your big drone has stopped," and I set it a going. That was enough for me, the pipes were going perfect; I stepped upon the platform as steady as a rock, played "Highland Rory," and waited the result. As I wandered round the enclosure I had overheard the names of more than one mentioned as a prospective first, and when I stood upon the stage amid a thundering cheer with the red flag in my hand, I could only think that it surely was a dream. Just then my admirer came up; shook me by the hand and claimed his victory. He would only have a dram as he said, "ower the heads o't," and refused the money to which he was justly entitled to; bade me "good-bye," and to this day I don't even know his name.

I then received, as my first real prize, a gold medal, being the championship award of a band of thirty-two pipers, and I had not been playing the pipes three years. This led me further on my way with a desire to make piping my profession, for all this concerns the making of a piper. "Self praise is no praise at all," but this victory put a new badge in my crest; success created within me a deeper desire for the cultivation of an ancient art, and this was the means of leading to higher ideals. That I might be able to understand and further the revival and cultivation of an ancient music, was the dream of my life, whatever it might cost me in the way of perseverance.

In the month of August I went to Invergordon for a fortnight to visit some friends there. During my stay by the seaside the second battalion Seaforth Highlanders was having a recruiting tour round the Highlands, and I met them there. Ronald MacKenzie's son was the Pipe Major, and I was greatly taken with the pipers. I was still in the mind of going to London to join the Guard band when my holiday was over. While there I enjoyed the scenery. It was all in favour of the pipes and piping. I had many a long walk through the beautiful woods adjoining Novar railway station. One of the finest Highland scenes I ever saw was near the "Black Rock of Novar." The country round was well-wooded, and the Black Rock itself is a very dangerous place. A stream runs through between two precipitous rocky surfaces, with a space of only four or five feet apart. The water can be heard far below, but it is absolutely impossible to see it. It must have taken centuries to cut this solid rock with the flowing stream, and it is at places such as those where one can see the real beauties of the Highlands; but above all the wonderful things which nature itself carries into effect. We had the pipes with us because they added to the reality of our wild and rugged surroundings. It is said that a dog fell down this narrow deep cavity, and that it could be heard howling as it sank into the awful abyss, striking first the one side of the rock and then the other in its descent. The animal was never seen or heard of again. One can imagine what it would mean if a person happened to slip their footing in such a place. If one fell down between those Black Rocks, it would be a dark and perilous journey. Alas! No more to return to see the light of day.

We returned to Invergordon by rail after spending a happy day amongst the fair woods of Novar. The following day we went out into the bay near the "Souters of Cromarty," in a small rowing boat. The day was calm; the water was as smooth as glass, and the pipes sounded with marked effect. After rowing a considerable distance down the bay, we returned home somewhat late at night, with many onlookers as we disembarked from our craft. The villagers had heard the pipes out in the bay, and as the evening was fine, they gathered there to enjoy the music of their native instrument. I was so much delighted with this sail that next day my friend and I went a fishing. We took provisions with us, for we intended going out about two miles from the shore, and had no intention of returning before three or four hours had elapsed. The water was quite quiet, and after we had reached a good spot for fishing we prepared our line and hooks with bait. They were lowered into the water, and we had caught several fish of a fine white clean colour; I forget for the moment what my friend called them. Our catch was in all likelihood to be a good one judging from our start, so we were kept busy getting the fish off the hooks, and re-baiting again.

We were so intently engrossed in our amusement that we failed to observe a dark cloud of a very ominous nature which had gathered in the West and completely obscured the sun. All at once the sea broke into a terrible swell, the clouds darkened, and the wind rose to a hurricane. Immediately we realized our danger, the tackle was hauled aboard, and we took to the oars. My friend was a man of about sixty years of age, but an experienced boatman. He saw that I was no use at sea and put me to the bow of the boat, there to sit like a ton of lead, at the same time taking possession of both oars. As we rose and fell with the mountainous waves, the spray dashed right over the boat. The darkness above

and below brought the memories of earliest life before my mind like a flash of lightening. As we mounted the summit of each wave, to descend before another overtook us, I fully made up my mind that we would go down for the last time. It was not the fear of death that troubled me altogether, for my friend gave me wise council. "You sit where you are for the sake of your life," he said. "I have seen the likes o' this before my lad"; but as I looked at the old man, straining every muscle in his body to pull ashore, I was very uneasy. He had to pull the boat alone against a hurricane, and what grieved me most was the fact that I sat motionless, in the very face of imminent death.

Our friends on shore got alarmed about us, and came in search of our whereabouts. The heroic boatman was well known, and dearly beloved by all in the village, and when the boat was observed to be in distress a crowd had quickly gathered on the pier. With unwearied labours my companion pulled within a very short distance of land, whereupon we could see a boat being manned with great speed. "They are too late," remarked the fine old fellow, "I think I can manage the rest of the voyage yet, auld wi' a' that I am." At last we were landed on the pier in safety, under the "steam" of one trusty boatman. If there was one, there were twenty who grasped the old man's hand, and congratulated him on the strength on his arm. The incident which I have just related happened some twenty years ago, and one is apt to forget past dangers; but I really never expected to play on the pipe again, so one may imagine how thankful I was to get out of our watery abode.

To illustrate the power of the pipes let me here give an account of an experience which I had before I left the Highland village. I was playing the pipes to a few friends one evening just at sunset, and I had played a number of marches, strathspeys, and reels. In order to complete a real piping programme, I played a Lament. It was a very solemn doleful Theme; a tune which I have always admired, and one to which, as a young player, I could give some expression. As I passed an old man who had come up to the place where I was playing, I noticed that he was weeping bitterly. I stopped and asked my friend what was wrong with the old man. "Ah!" said he "it's the Lament." I struck into the lighter music again rather than move the old man to further tears, and the company broke up for the night. To my surprise, as I played next day, this old admirer of the classical music appeared on the scene again. He sat down upon a rustic summer seat to listen; as I played a march at the time all was normal. It occurred to me that I would like to satisfy myself if the pipes could in reality move a man to tears, so I played the same Lament. I had not played many bars when I could see the tears rolling down his weather-beaten cheeks, in great drops. This satisfied me beyond all doubt that I was responsible for those sad tears. I stopped the pipes, laid them down upon the green grass, and sat down beside my listener. He said, "Oh! That Lament, only tears can give vent to my feelings, it is so grand." He did not cry because he did not like the pipes or the piobaireachd. It was because the plaintive notes of the Lament touched his heart's most tender chords, and in exquisite grandeur, tapped the fount of tears.

As my holiday in the west was nearing its close, I received a letter from my teacher requesting me to call at Gordon Castle immediately on my return to town. I left Invergordon in the afternoon of the third Saturday in August, and made my way to Gordon Castle upon the Monday evening. My teacher awaited my arrival, and as I entered the "piper's study" he rose and shook hands with me. His first salutation was, "Yes! And where have you been? Away among your lady friends, I suppose." "Oh!" I said, "I had just been to Invergordon for a holiday." "That's all right boy," said my teacher, "but now you are likely to be required somewhere else." What this meant I had not the slightest idea, but I was not much older when my mind was put at rest. Ronald MacKenzie was not a man given to frivolity, or fond of teasing one, although he sometimes did speak in a jocular way. "Well boy," said he, "the last

time we met you had practically made up your mind to go to the pipe band of the second Scots Guards. Do you still intend doing so, or would you rather become piper to a private gentleman? If you go to the Scots Guards you will be serving your country as a soldier, but probably the other situation which has just cropped up would suit your temperament better. I have just had a letter from Captain W. H. Drummond-Moray, of Abercairny, asking if I knew of a suitable young man who would become his piper. Abercairny is a fine place, near Crieff, with a historic mansion house, and to play round it every morning and evening would suit you admirably. What do you say to that? We will have your lesson first, and you go home and think the matter over and let me [know] by tomorrow's post. If you decide to go there you will require to be able to play a piobaireachd every night, except Sunday, and a March, Strathspey and Reel, so that we must take time by the forelock."

I got my lesson past, bade my teacher good night, and thought the matter well over in my mind on the way home. Having "slept over it" as the good old saying goes, and that very soundly, I got up very early next morning and wrote to Gordon Castle stating that I had fully made up my mind that I would accept the invitation.

Being satisfied himself that I was a suitable person for the post in question, my teacher replied to the letter which he had held in abeyance for some days. His reply was to the effect that he had been successful in finding a piper for Abercairny. Another letter was received at Gordon Castle asking for particulars of the character, appearance, and number of piobaireachds, marches, strathspeys, and reels which I could play. On my return to Gordon Castle for further instruction I took with me reference to my character, a photograph (in the kilt of course with my beloved instrument in my arm) and a detailed list of the tunes which I played. All these my teacher examined and sent them on to Abercairny for approval. In a few days we received a letter back stating that I appeared to be suitable, and everything regarding age, height, and appearance was very satisfactory. I was later advised of my duties, and that I had to wear the kilt every day and no other dress. I was to take up duties in the third week in October, and as the bargain was now sealed I made the best of my time at preparations in music prior to my departure from home for the first time. I had two months to go and my teacher took great pains with me in getting up as many piobaireachdan as I could memorize. He also went over a number of fresh tunes so I could pick up the airs and get them off by heart at my leisure. I was also well coached up in the duties of a piper at Highland residence: no part of the daily performance was omitted, and I rehearsed it all several times at the lakeside, so that I might be efficient in every way. One thing my teacher was very particular about warning me of was to be above all, temperate. "Another thing of greater importance in your daily duties," said he, "is that you must be most careful, always, regarding the manner in which you play the pipes. You must hold your head erect, your shoulders well back; your chest out in order to be able to blow freely, and have a pleasant smile upon your face. There is no dignity in playing the pipes unless you adhere to these rules, and always march in a stately spirited manner."

This was my closing lesson prior to my departure, so I said good-bye to my teacher, and prepared for my long wished for, and interesting duties as a piper in reality.

Chapter IX

The sun rose brightly from behind the high hills, and shone down the "glen" upon the bare fields and green fir trees, which waved slightly in the cool autumn breeze. It was on a Saturday morning

towards the end of October in 1898³⁵ that I said farewell to my native Highland home. I took a last glimpse of the city as the train steamed out of the Highland Railway Station, and then seated myself in the corner of the carriage. I fell into a deep reverie as to what my future was to be in my new situation, and was only conscious that I had left home in reality when I reached Forres Station, for there the railway porter called out "change here for Perth."

Forres is a beautiful little place, well-wooded, with picturesque surroundings. It has a Hydro and several nice hotels. The Highland railway runs through the finest mountain scenery in Scotland. The first station of any importance is Grantown-on-Spey, the home of the Clan Grant, and, in recent years a great holiday resort. Several fine houses have been built there for summer visitors, and from June till September there is a continual coming and going of holiday seekers. Grantown is surrounded by very high hills, framed by airy breezes, and the valley below is watered by the river Spey. Leaving Grantown, the next town is Kingussie, still on the banks of the Spey, and it also is a fashionable Highland health resort. Weavers of the kilt (many of them, at least) will be aware that Kingussie was the home of Highland Sporrans making. There lived there then Mr. MacFarlane, who was one of the finest sporrans makers in the length and breadth of Scotland. He had many military contracts, and his sporrans for private Highland dress were worn by Highlanders all over the world.

Continuing my journey Southward the railway comes to Dalnaspidal which is entirely moorland; and in the vicinity is a shooting lodge, the property of His Grace the Duke of Atholl. The railway climbs continually from Forres until it reaches this summit, where there is a meteorological station at an altitude of 1450 feet above the sea level. There is no more mountainous place in all Scotland than this part, for in the distance, the Cairngorms and the continuation of the Grampians can be seen towering into the sky to a great height. The Cairngorms rise to an altitude of 4084 feet above the sea level, and in some parts of the higher Grampian chain the snow lies on the hills all the year 'round. The Cairngorms are of great interest to all genuine Highlanders, because there the real "Cairngorm" stone is found, which is so often inset in silver brooches, dirks, and skean dhuis. It is said that these stones are mostly found in the clear moonlight. Good specimens are very rare, and valuable. They are known as the "Scotch diamond," and throw off a beautiful yellow lustre in the bright sunshine, or in the night light.

Blair Atholl is a fine little village, near which stand Blair Castle, the residence of the Duke of Atholl, and further on toward Perth is Dunkeld, and Murthly. There is a fine old Seat here called Murthly Castle, on the river Tay, which consists of an ancient keep and a commodious modern addition.

After a very short run I arrived in Perth, between two and three p.m., and changed for Crieff. The surrounding country was very pretty, and in the passing I could get a glimpse of Scone Palace, the Seat of the Earl of Mansfield, which occupies the site of an Abbey founded in 1114, and was destroyed in 1559. Old Scone, now a decayed hamlet, was the capital of the Kingdom of the Picts, and was for many years the place where the Scottish Kings were crowned. The coronation stone, or "Stone of Destiny," was removed by Edward I in 1296 to Westminster Abbey, where it still lies.

At last I arrived at Abercairny Station, and on alighting from the train I was met by a small pony trap, and driven to Abercairny House. It was a magnificent mansion forming a square, with a very high tower at one of the wings, and surrounded by beautiful green shrubbery. After having tea I was

³⁵Grant wrote 1899, but that has to be incorrect, based upon the dating of events in the rest of this autobiography.

conducted to the business room, where I saw my master, Captain W. H. Drummond-Moray.³⁶ He was courteous and dignified in manner, and inquired of I had had a good journey. Then he asked if I would play at dinner that evening, and as I replied in the affirmative, I retired to get my pipes in order for my first appearance as a piper in reality. I had about two hours to prepare, and as I was well-schooled by my teacher, I had no small degree of confidence in my first performance. Dinner was served at eight o'clock, and about nine I found myself in the staircase of a large gallery striking up my pipes prior to entering the spacious dining room. I could see as I got into the corridor that there was no small audience a little further along watching the new piper play for the first time. I played a march round the dining room table, and in the long gallery I played "The Glen is Mine," followed by a strathspey and reel. I finished up without any mishap, for my pipes were going well, and I was satisfied with myself as regards my first performance. Next morning being Sunday I had to go to church, in the kilt of course, and then spent the rest of the day very quietly.

On Monday morning at nine o'clock I got outside and played round the house three times, and of course "Johnnie Cope" was the tune. It was a fine day, and again success favoured me in giving a good rendering of the tune, so I was fully convinced that I was not a failure. I had passed all the tests in playing, and the following day was sent into Crieff with the coachman in the pony cart to the tailor with a web of tartan to get a new kilt made with three coats and vests. One coat was for morning wear, one for the evening, and the third for walking out with and going to church. The tartan was Murray of Tullibardine, which was a bright red ground with black stripes. On getting measured I got back from town again, and entered in earnest on my new duties. The family pipes were very old. They were made of black ebony and mounted with a metal not unlike gold in colour. The mounts were beaten into tiny hollows like fish scales, and very heavily gold-plated. They were believed to have been made in Inverness, but at what date it seemed to be somewhat uncertain. The ribbons worn were the family colours, plain blue for one and pure white for the other. These were very neatly sewn on, above a white and blue cord which joined the drones, and as such ribbons were uncommon on the pipes they looked very nice. It is usually tartan ribbons with cords and tassels to match, which are worn on the bagpipes.

The house pipes were afterwards replaced by a set of MacDougall's of Breadalbane, which were sent to Peter Henderson, Glasgow to [be] repaired and overhauled. The other set were detached from the bag, carefully cleaned and consigned to the Charter Room for preservation.

Shortly after I took up duties, Captain and the Hon. Mrs. Drummond-Moray left Abercairny for a short period. During that time I had sufficient leisure to see 'round the policies and pay a visit to Crieff, which was only about three or four miles distant. Crieff is a great holiday resort with a Hydro; and in the vicinity is Drummond Castle, the family seat of the Earl of Aucaster, where a piper was kept. In this short absence of my master from home I made good use of my time at pipe practice. I had quite a number of piobaireachds partly memorized before I left Gordon Castle, and I played them over and over again in order to be able to play them perfectly on my master's return. Piobaireachd is quite different to memorize from marches, strathspeys and reels, as some of them are four pages in length of full music size. It takes a great deal of practice and concentration to be able to play such long pieces with confidence and fine effect. A piper must be able to play fresh tunes every night for at least three weeks or a month on end, and this was my object in view. That is to say, if a piper plays twenty-five piobaireachdan, he carries in his head, or memory, about seventy-five twelve stave pages of music, or thereby. This is a fair beginning for a young piper together with some hundreds of marches, strathspeys

³⁶Captain William Augustus Stirling-Home-Drummond-Moray (1852-1929). See <http://www.thepeerage.com/p5230.htm#i52298>.

and reels, which have also to be got off by memory. It is not quite so easy a matter to play so many tunes and give good renderings without some thought and work, because a piper's duties lay him open to responsibilities regarding efficiency, as well as other duties which may be allotted to him.

By this time I was very happy in my new situation, and I made it a special point to be able to fulfill my duties with credit to myself and my master as well.