

Some Terrible Letters From Scotland

By James Hogg

DEAR SIR,—As I knew you once, and think you will remember me,—I having wrought on your farm for some months with William Colins that summer that Burke was hanged,— I am going to write you on a great and trying misfortune that has befallen to myself, and hope you will publish it, before you leave London, for the benefit of all those concerned.

You must know that I have served the last three years with Mr Kemp, miller, of Troughlin; and my post was to drive two carts, sometimes with corn to Dalkeith market, and sometimes with flour-meal to all the bakers in Musselburgh and the towns round about. I did not like this very well; for I often thought to myself, if I should take that terrible Cholera Morbus, what was to become of me, as I had no home to go to, and nobody would let me within their door. This constant fright did me ill, for it gave my constitution a shake: and I noticed, whenever I looked in my little shaving-glass, that my face was grown shilpit¹ and white, and blue about the mouth; and I grew more frightened than ever.

Well, there was one day that I was at Musseiburgh with flour; and when I was there the burials were going by me as thick as droves of Highland cattle; and I thought I sometimes felt a saur as if the air had thickened around my face. It is all over with me now, thought I, for I have breathed the Cholera! But when I told this to Davison, the baker's man, he only laughed at me, which was very ungracious and cruel in him; for before I got home I felt myself manifestly affected, and knew not what to do.

When I came into the kitchen, there was none in it but Mary Douglas: she was my sweetheart like, and we had set-tied to be married. 'Mary, I am not well at all to-night,' said I, 'and I am afraid I am taking that deadly Cholera Morbus.'

'I hope in God that is not the case!' said Mary, letting the tongs fall out of her hand; 'but we are all in the Almighty's hands, and he may do with us as seemeth good in his sight.'

She had not well repeated this sweet, pious submission, before I fell a-retching most terribly, and the pains within were much the same as if you had thrust seven or eight red-hot pokers through my stomach. 'Mary, I am very ill,' said I, 'and I well know Mr Kemp will not let me abide here.'

'Nay, that he will not,' said she; 'for he has not dared to come in contact with you for weeks past: but, rather than you should be hurried off to an hospital, if you think you could walk to my mother's, I will go with you, and assist you.'

'Alas! I cannot walk a step at present,' said I; 'but the horses are both standing yoked in the carts at the stable-door, as I was unable to loose them.' In a few minutes she had me in a cart, and drove me to her mother's cot, where I was put to bed, and continued very ill. There was never any trouble in this world like it: to be roasted in a fire, or chipped all to pieces with a butcher's knife, is nothing to it. Mary soon had a doctor at me, who bled me terribly, as if I had been a bullock, and gave me great doses of something, which I suppose was laudanum; but neither of them did me any good: I grew worse and worse, and wished heartily that I were dead.

But now the rest of the adjoining cotters rose in a body, and insisted on turning me out. Is it not strange, Sir, that this most horrible of all pestilences should deprive others, not only of natural

¹ Pale.

feeling, but of reason? I could make no resistance although they had flung me over the dunghill, as they threatened to do; but the two women acted with great decision, and dared them to touch me or any one in their house. They needed not have been so frightened; for no one durst have touched me more than if I had been an adder or a snake. Mary, and her mother, old Margaret, did all that they could for me: they bathed the pit of my stomach with warm camomile, and rubbed my limbs and hands with hard cloths, shedding many tears over me; but the chillness of death had settled on my limbs and arms, and all the blood in my body had retreated to its conquered citadel; and a little before daylight I died.

For fear of burying me alive, and for fear of any violence being done to my body by the affrighted neighbours, the two women concealed my death; but poor Mary took the sheets, which had been bought for her bridal bed, and made them into dead-clothes for me; and in the afternoon the doctor arrived, and gave charges that I should be confined and buried without loss of time. At this order Mary wept abundantly, but there was no alternative; for the doctor ordered a coffin to be made with all expedition at the wright's, as he went by, and carried the news through the parish, that poor Andrew, the miller's man, had died of a most malignant Cholera.

The next morning very early, Johnie, the elder, came up with the coffin, his nose plugged with tobacco, and his mouth having a strong smell of whisky; and, in spite of all Mary's entreaties, nailed me in the coffin. Now, Sir, this was quite terrible; for all the while I had a sort of half-consciousness of what was going on, yet had not power to move a muscle of my whole frame. I was certain that my soul had not departed quite away, although my body was seized with this sudden torpor, and refused to act. It was a sort of dream, out of which I was struggling to awake, but could not; and I felt as if a fall on the floor, or a sudden jerk of any kind, would once more set my blood a-flowing, and restore animation. I heard my beloved Mary Douglas weeping and lamenting over me, and expressing a wish that, if it were not for the dreadfulness of the distemper, that she had shared my fate. I felt her putting the robes of death on me, and tying the napkin round my face; and, O, how my spirit longed to embrace and comfort her! I had great hopes that the joiner's hammer would awake me; but he only used it very slightly, and wrought with an inefficient screw-driver: yet I have an impression that if any human eye had then seen me, I should have been shivering; for the dread of being buried alive, and struggling to death in a deep grave below the mould, was awful in the extreme!

The wright was no sooner fairly gone, than Mary unscrewed the lid, and took it half off, letting it lie along the coffin on one side. O, how I wished that she would tumble me out on the floor, or dash a pail of water on me! but she did neither, and there I lay, still a sensitive corpse. I determined, however, to make one desperate effort, before they got me laid into the grave.

But between those who are bound together by the sacred ties of love, there is, I believe, a sort of electrical sympathy, even in a state of insensibility. At the still hour of midnight, as Mary and her mother were sitting reading a chapter of the New Testament, my beloved all at once uttered a piercing shriek,—her mother having fallen down motionless, and apparently lifeless. That heart-rending shriek awakened me from the sleep of death!—I sat up in the coffin, and the lid rattled on the floor. Was there ever such a scene in a cottage at midnight? I think never in this island. Mary shrieked again, and fainted, falling down motionless across her mother's feet. These shrieks, which were hardly earthly, brought in John Brunton and John Sword, who came rushing forward towards the women, to render them some assistance; but when they looked towards the bed, and saw me sitting in my winding-sheet, struggling in the coffin, they simultaneously uttered a howl of distraction and betook them to their heels. Brunton fainted, and fell over the threshold, where he lay groaning till trailed away by his neighbour.

My ankles and knees being tied together with tapes, and my wrists bound to my sides, which you know is the custom here, I could not for a while get them extricated, to remove the napkin from my face, and must have presented a very awful appearance to the two men. Debilitated as I was, I struggled on, and in my efforts overturned the coffin, and, falling down upon the floor, my face struck against the flags, which stunned me, and my nose gushed out blood abundantly. I was still utterly helpless; and when the two women began to recover, there was I lying wallowing and struggling in my bloody sheet. I wonder that my poor Mary did not lose her reason that night; and I am sure she would, had she not received supernatural strength of mind from Heaven. On recovering from her swoon, she ran out, and called at every door and window in the hamlet; but not one would enter the cottage of the plague. Before she got me divested of my stained grave-clothes and put to bed, her mother was writhing in the Cholera, her mild countenance changed into the appearance of withered clay, and her hands and feet as if they had been boiled. It is amazing that the people of London should mock at the fears of their brethren for this terrible and anomalous plague; for though it begins with the hues and horrors of death, it is far more frightful than death itself; and it is impossible for any family or community to be too much on their guard against its baleful influence. Old Margaret died at nine next morning; and what could I think but that I had been her murderer, having brought infection to her homely and healthy dwelling? and the calamity will hang as a weight on my heart for ever. She was put into my coffin, and hurried away to interment; and I had no doubt that she would come alive again below the earth;—but the supposition is too horrible to cherish!

For my part, as far as I can remember, I did not suffer any more pain, but then I felt as if I had been pounded in a mill,—powerless, selfish, and insensible. I could not have remembered aught of the funeral, had it not been that my Mary wept incessantly, and begged of the people that they would suffer the body of her parent to remain in the house for one night; but they would not listen to her, saying that they dared not disobey the general order, and even for her own sake it was necessary the body should be removed.

Our cottage stood in the middle of a long row of labourers' houses, all of the same description; and the day after the funeral of old Margaret, there were three people in the cottage next to ours seized with the distemper, and one of them died. It went through every one of the cottages in that direction, but all those in the other end of the row escaped. On the Monday of the following week my poor Mary fell down in it, having, like myself and her mother, been seized with it in its worst form; and in a little time her visage and proportions were so completely changed, that I could not believe they were those of my beloved. I for a long time foolishly imagined that she was removed from me, and a demon had taken her place; but reason at length resumed her sway and convinced me of my error. There was no one to wait on or assist Mary but me, and I was so feeble I could not do her justice: I did all that I was able, however; and the doctor gave me hopes that she would recover. She soon grew so ill, and her pangs, writhings, and contortions, became so terrible, that I wished her dead:—yes, I prayed that death would come and release her! but it was from a conviction that she would revive again, and that I should be able to wake her from the sleep of death. I did not conceive my own revival as any thing supernatural, but that which might occur to every one who was suddenly cut off by the plague of Cholera; and I prayed that my dear woman would die. She remained quite sensible; and, taking my hand, she squeezed it and said, 'Do you really wish me dead, Andrew?' I could make no reply; but she continued to hold my hand, and added, 'Then you will not need to wish for it long. O Lord, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven!'

She repeated this last sentence in a whisper, and spoke no more, for the icy chillness had by this time reached the region of the heart; and she expired as in a drowsy slumber. Having no doubts of her revival I did not give the alarm of her death, but continued my exertions to restore animation. When the doctor arrived he was wroth with me, and laughed me to scorn, ordering the body to be directly laid out by matrons, preparatory for the funeral; and that night he sent two hired nurses for the purpose. They performed their task; but I would in no wise suffer the body to be coffined after what had happened to myself, until I saw the farthest. I watched her night and day, continuing my efforts to the annoyance of my neighbours until the third day, and then they would allow it no longer; but, despite all my entreaties, they took my beloved from me, nailed her in the coffin, and buried her; and now I am deprived of all I loved and valued in this world, and my existence is a burden I cannot bear, as I must always consider myself accessory to the deaths of those two valuable women.

The worst thing of all to suffer is the dreadful apprehension that they would come alive again below the earth, which I cannot get quit of; and though I tried to watch Mary's grave, I was so feeble and far-spent, that I could not but always fall asleep on it. There being funerals coming every day, when the people saw me lying on the grave with my spade beside me, they thought I had gone quite deranged, and, pitying me, they, half by force, took me away; but no one offered me an asylum in his house, for they called me the man that was dead and risen again, and shunned me as a being scarcely of this earth.

Still the thought that Mary would come alive haunts me,— a terror which has probably been engendered within me by the circumstances attending my own singular resuscitation. And even so late as the second night after her decease, as I was watching over her with prayers and tears, I heard a slight gurgling in her throat, as if she had been going to speak: there was also, I thought, a movement about the breast, and one of the veins of the neck started three or four times. How my heart leaped for joy as I breathed my warm breath into her cold lips! but movement there was no more. And now, Sir, if you publish this letter, let it be with an admonition for people to be on their guard when their friends are suddenly cut off by this most frightful of all diseases, for it is no joke to be buried alive.

I have likewise heard it stated, that one boy fell a-kicking the coffin on his way to the grave, who is still living and lifelike, and that a girl, as the doctors were cutting her up, threw herself off the table. I cannot vouch for the truth of these singular and cruel incidents, although I heard them related as facts; but with regard to my own case there can be no dispute.

It does a great deal of ill to the constitution to be too frightened for this scourge of God; but temerity is madness, and caution prudence: for this may be depended on, that it is as infectious as fire. But then, when fire is set to the mountain, it is only such parts of its surface as are covered with decayed garbage that is combustible, while over the green and healthy parts of the mountain the flame has no power; and any other reasoning than this is worse than insanity.

For my part, I have been very hardly used, there having been few harder cases than my own. In Lothian every one shunned me; and the constables stopped me on the road, and would not even suffer me to leave the county,—the terror of infection is so great. So dreadful are the impressions of fear on some minds, that it has caused a number of people both in Scotland and England to hang themselves, or otherwise deprive themselves of life, as the only sure way of escaping its agonies.

Finding myself without a home and without employment, I made my escape over the tops of the Lammermuirs, keeping out of sight of any public road, and by that means escaped into Teviotdale, where I changed my name to Ker, and am now working at day-labour in the town of

Roxburgh, and on the farms around; and though my name was Clapperton when I wrought with you, I must now sign myself your humble servant,

ANDREW KER.

The next is in some degree different, though likewise narrating very grievous circumstances. It is written by the mate of The Jane Hamilton of Port Glasgow.

SIR,—I now sit down to give you the dismal account of the arrival of the Cholera in the west of Scotland. I sent it a month ago to a friend in London, to put into the newspapers, but it never appeared; so if you think it worth while, you may publish it. But if there be any paper or periodical that Campbell or Galt is connected with, I would rather it were sent to one of them, as they are both acquaintances and old schoolfellows, and will remember me very well.

Well then, Sir, you must know that in our passage from Riga to Liverpool, in January, we were attacked by very squally weather off the western coast of Scotland, and were obliged to put into one of those interminable narrow bays denominated lochs, in Argyleshire, where we cast anchor on very bad ground.

I cannot aver that our ship was perfectly clean, for we lost one fine old fellow by the way, and several others were very bad; so I was sent off to a mining or fishing village, to procure some medicine and fresh meat. Our captain had an immensely large black Newfoundland dog, whose name was Oakum, and who always attached himself to me, and followed me; but that day he chanced not to go ashore with me. Some time afterwards, some of the sailors going on shore to play themselves, Oakum went with them, and coming on the scent of my track he followed it. Now the natives had some way heard that the Cholera was come with the ship; but so little did they conceive what it was, that they were nothing afraid of coming in contact with me.

The village grocer, draper, hatter, and apothecary, had no medicines on hand, save Glauber's salts, and of these he had two corn-sacks full. I bought some; and while I was standing and bargaining about the price of a pig, I beheld a terrible commotion in the village: the men were stripped, and running as for a race; and the women were screaming and running after them, some of them having a child on their backs, and one below each arm, while the Gaelic was poured and shouted from every tongue. 'What is it? What in the world is it?' said I to the merchant, who had a little broken English. 'Oh, she pe tat tam bhaist te Gollara Mör,' said he; and away he ran with the rest.

It so happened that one Donald M'Coll was going down the coast on some errand, and meeting with Oakum with his broad gilded collar about his neck, he instantly knew who he was; and, alarmed beyond expression, he took to his heels, threw off his coat and bonnet and ran, giving the alarm all the way as he went; and men, women, and children, betook them to flight into the recesses of the mountains, where they lay peeping over the rocks and the heath, watching the progress of this destroying angel.

Honest Oakum was all the while chopping out of one cottage into another, enjoying the scraps exceedingly, which the people had left behind them in their haste. Yea, so well satisfied was he with his adventure, that he did not return until after dark, so that the Highlanders did not know he had returned at all. The people had not returned to their houses when we came away.

But the most singular circumstance is yet to relate. On our return to the Clyde from Liverpool, where we rode quarantine, we learnt that the Cholera Morbus had actually broken out in that village,—at least a most inveterate diarrhoea, accompanied with excessive pains and vomiting, which carried off a number of the inhabitants; but, the glen being greatly overstocked, they were

not much missed. Such a thing as Cholera Morbus or sending for a doctor never entered their heads, but a terrible consumption of the merchant's Glauber's salts ensued; and when no more could be done for their friends, they buried them, and then there was no more about it. Whether the disease was communicated to them by the dog, by myself, by the fright, or the heat they got in running, I cannot determine; but it is certain the place suffered severely. They themselves alleged as the cause, their having 'peen raiter, and te raiter too heafy on te herring and pothato.' It was from thence that the disease was communicated to Kirkintilloch by a single individual. Oakum continues in perfect health; but was obliged to undergo fumigation and a bath, by way of quarantine, which he took highly amiss.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

ALEXANDER M'ALISTER.

The next is the most hideous letter of all. We wish the writer may be quite in his right mind. But save in a little improvement in the orthography and grammar, we shall give it in his own words.

SIR,—Although I sent the following narrative to an Edinburgh newspaper, with the editor of which I was well acquainted; yet he refused to give it publicity, on the ground that it was only a dream of the imagination: but if a man cannot be believed in what he hears and sees, what is he to be believed in? Therefore, as I am told that you have great influence with the printers in London, I will thank you to get this printed; and if you can get me a trifle for it, so much the better.

I am a poor journeyman tradesman in the town of Fisherrow, and I always boarded with my mother and two sisters, who were all in the trade;² but my mother was rather fond of gossiping and visiting, and liked to get a dram now and then. So when that awful plague of Cholera came on us for the punishment of our sins, my mother would be running to every one that was affected; and people were very glad of her assistance, and would be giving her drains and little presents; and for all that my sisters and I could say to her, she would not be hindered.

'Mother,' said I to her, one night, 'gin ye winna leave aff rinning to infectit houses this gate, I'll be obliged to gang away an' leave ye an' shift for mysel' some gate else; an' my sisters shall gang away an' leave ye too. Do ye no consider, that ye are exposing the whole o' your family to the most terrible of deaths; an' if ye should bring infection among us, an' lose us a', how will ye answer to God for it?'

'Hout, Jamie, my man, ye make aye sic a wark about naething!' quoth she; 'I am sure ye ken an' believe that we are a' in our Maker's hand, and that he can defend us frae destruction that walketh at noonday, and from the pestilence that stealeth in by night?'

'I allow that, mother,' quoth I; 'I dinna misbelieve in an overruling Providence. But in the present instance, you are taking up an adder, and trusting in Providence that the serpent winna sting you and yours to death.'

'Tush! Away wi' your grand siinilitudes, Jamie,' said she; 'ye were aye ower-learned for me. I'll tell ye what I believe. It is, that if we be to take the disease an' dee in it, we'll take the disease an' dee in it; and if it is otherwise ordained, we'll neither take it nor dee in it: for my part, I ken fu' weel that I'll no be smittit, for the wee drap drink, whilk ye ken I always take in great moderation, will keep me frae taking the infection; an' if ye keep yoursels a' tight an' clean, as ye hae done, the angel o' Egypt will still pass by your door an' hurt you not.'

² Probably the fish trade.

‘I wot weel,’ said my sister Jane, ‘I expect every day to be my last, for my mither will take nae body’s advice but her am. An’ weel do I ken that if I take it I’ll dee in it. I hae the awfu’est dreams about it! I dreamed the last night that I dee’d o’ the plague, an’ I thought I set my head out o’ the cauld grave at midnight, an’ saw the ghosts of a’ the Cholera fok gaun trailing about the kirk-yard wi’ their white withered faces an’ their glazed een; an’ I thought I crap out o’ my grave an’ took away my mother and brother to see them, an’ I had some kind o’ impression that I left Annie there behind me.’

‘O! for mercy’s sake, haud your tongue, lassie,’ cried Annie; ‘I declare ye gar a’ my flesh creep to hear you. It is nae that I’m ony feard for death in ony other way but that. But the fearsome an’ loathsome sufferings, an’ the fearsome looks gars a’ ane’s heart grue to think o’. An’ yet our mither rins the hale day frae ane to anither, and seems to take a pleasure in witnessing their cries, their writhings, and contortions. I wonder what kind o’ heart she has, but it fears me it canna be a right ane.’

My poor dear sister Annie! she fell down in the Cholera the next day, and was a corpse before midnight; and, three days after, her sister followed her to the kirk-yard, where their new graves rise side by side thegither among many more. To describe their sufferings is out of my power, for the thoughts of them turns me giddy, so that I lose the power of measuring time, sometimes feeling as if I had lost my sisters only as it were yesterday, and sometimes an age ago. From the moment that Annie was seized, my state of mind has been deplorable; I expected every hour to fall a victim to it myself: but as for my mother, she bustled about as if it had been some great event in which it behoved her to make an imposing figure. She scolded the surgeon, the officers of the Board of Health, and even the poor dying girls, for their unearthly looks and cries. ‘Ye hae muckle to cry for,’ cried she; ‘afore ye come through what I hae done in life, ye’ll hae mair to cry for nor a bit cramp i’ the stomach.’

When they both died she was rather taken short, and expressed herself as if she weened that she had not been fairly dealt with by Providence, considering how much she had done for others; but she had that sort of nature in her that nothing could daunt or dismay, and continued her course—running to visit every Cholera patient within her reach, and going out and coming in at all times of the night.

After nine or ten days, there was one Sabbath night that I was awoke by voices which I thought I knew; and on looking over the bed, I saw my two sisters sitting one on each side of my mother, conversing with her, while she was looking fearfully first to the one and then to the other; but I did not understand their language, for they seemed to be talking keenly of a dance.

My sisters having both been buried in their Sunday clothes, and the rest burnt, the only impression I had was, that they had actually come alive and risen from the grave; and if I had not been naked at the time I would have flown to embrace them, for there were reports of that kind going. But when I began to speak, Jane held up her hand and shook her head at me; and I held my peace, for there was a chilness and terror came over me; yet it was not for my sisters, for they had no appearance of being ghosts: on the contrary, I thought I never saw them look so beautiful. They continued talking of their dance with apparent fervour; and I heard one of them saying, it was a dance of death, and held in the churchyard. And as the plague of Cholera was a breath of hell, they who died of it got no rest in their graves, so that it behoved all, but parents in particular, to keep out of its influences till the vapour of death passed over.

‘But now, dear mother, you must go with us and see,’ said Annie.

‘Oh, by all means!’ said Jane, ‘since you have introduced us into such splendid company, you must go with us, and see how we act our parts. “Come along, come along,” cried both of them at

the same time; and they led my mother off between them: she never spoke, but continued to fix the most hideous looks first on the one and then on the other. She was apparently under the power of some supernatural influence, for she manifested no power of resistance, but walked peaceably away between them. I cried with a tremulous voice, 'Dear, dear sisters, will you not take me with you too?' But Annie, who was next me, said, 'No, dearest brother, lie still and sleep till your Redeemer wakes you—We will come for you again.'

I then felt the house fall a-wheeling round with me, swifter than a mill-wheel, the bed sank, and I fell I knew not whither. The truth is, that I had fainted, for I remember no more until next day. As I did not go to work at my usual time, my master had sent his 'prentice-boy to inquire about me, thinking I had been attacked by Cholera. He found me insensible, lying bathed in cold sweat, and sent some of the official people to me, who soon brought me to myself. I said nothing of what I had seen; but went straight to the churchyard, persuaded that I would find my sisters' graves open, and they out of them; but, behold! they were the same as I left them, and I have never seen mother or sisters more. I could almost have persuaded myself that I had been in a dream, had it not been for the loss of my mother; but as she has not been seen or heard of since that night, I must believe all that I saw to have been real. I know it is suspected both here and in Edinburgh, that she has been burked,³ as she was always running about by night; but I know what I saw, and must believe in it though I cannot comprehend it.

Yours most humbly,
JAMES M'L—.

³ Suffocated.