

Sketch of the Life of Mr Thomas Craigs,
Lately Elder and Precentor in the Scottish Church,
Wooler, Northumberland.
(Abridged)

MDCCCXLII.

SKETCH , & c.

Compared with the mass of mankind, God's people, in all ages, have not only been "A little flock"; it has also been found in the words of the great apostle, that "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are; that no flesh should glory in his presence," The steps of the warrior leave behind the unobliterated traces of blood; countries desolated, cities ravaged, wives made widows, and children left helpless orphans, history in glowing terms, records his deeds, and the loftiest strains of the Muse are engaged to perpetuate his praise! The soldier of the Cross, however, claims no such notice; and usually receives but a scanty share of this world's regards. The world perceives in him, the believer in Jesus to his native obscurity. But such as are "despised and rejected of men," are yet often precious in the sight of God, and at the greatest day shall be numbered among Jehovah's choicest jewels.

Thomas Craigs, the subject of the following notice, was of humble origin, and literally, through "life's sequestered vale pursued the noiseless tenor of his pious way." He was born in the year 1770, at the village of Lanton on the banks of the river Glen, within three miles, on one side, of the place where the famous battle of Homildon was fought on Holyrood Day, or day of the finding of the Holy Cross (May 3rd), 1402, in the reign of Henry IV, and about an equal distance of the other, from the scene of the still more celebrated and fatal field of Flodden, contested on the 9th of September 1513, in the reign of Henry VIII, and on which, as is well known, fell King James IV of Scotland, and the flower of Scottish nobility. This district of country is one of the richest and most romantic in the north of England, and is within nine miles of the border of Scotland. It is chiefly pastoral, and abounds with green hills, the eastern termination of the Cheviot mountains, among which meander clear and classic streams. In days of yore, this district was famous for other scenes than those in which Thomas Craigs, from infancy to age, found the sweetest solace of his life. War, in those rude times, here sadly marred the fair face of nature, and fields were then everywhere red with carnage, which are now "rent by no ravage, save the gentle plough." Thomas Craigs was a hand loom weaver by trade, at which employment he continued till he left Northumberland in May of the present year. He was

naturally of a quiet, unassuming, and peaceable disposition; great simplicity, as well as godly sincerity. His sincere, but unobtrusive piety, procured him, during his long life, the respect of all classes, and, generally speaking, the love, and almost veneration, of those who moved in his own humble sphere. Having been born and brought up a Presbyterian, though living in a lane of mitered heads, where religion is connected with much of the pomp and circumstance of the present world, Thomas Craigs warmly admired the simple, but apostolic and impressive forms to which he had been inured. So uniformly exemplary was his conduct, that about the year 1810, he was chosen an elder of the Scottish Church in Wooler, which he had attended from his infancy, and was ordained to that office by the late Reverend James Mitchell, then minister of that body of Christians. Having always evinced a taste for sacred music, he was, much about the same time, requested to become precentor or clerk, as that office is named in that part of the country) ; and his duties in both he continued, with great approbation, to discharge until the time of his departure for America. He was twice married, and, at the time of his removal from Wooler, had one of the finest families in that part of Northumberland; who, having all been trained up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, most of them, to the great satisfaction of their parents, while they prospered in their own humble callings, gave evidence that they were "growing in grace," and in the knowledge of the great Redeemer. When they appeared before the kirk-session, for examination previously to partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, they showed more than a common acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, and a deep reverence for divine things; so that Thomas Craigs', however humble, might be said to be one of the best regulated households in the neighborhood; for within it's walls might daily be heard "the voice of rejoicing and salvation." The man who conducted so well his own domestic affairs, was not one to neglect his public duties; and accordingly, in his two capacities in which he officiated, as elder and clerk,, no one could possibly have been more diligent or exemplary. In regard to his attendance upon Divine worship, the present minister of the Presbyterian Church at Wooler can testify that (although to and from Church, Thomas Craigs had a full twelve miles to walk), during the six years in which he knew him, he was never but once absent from his post, and that was when a severe thunderstorm of unusual violence, on a Sabbath day, visited as is often the case, that neighborhood. As an elder, this good man was "instant" in season and out of season", showing truly that al elder should be, and the most valuable assistant, in that respect, which and Christian minister could desire. His placid and kindly disposition gained him an easy access to almost every dwelling; but in the humble cottage of peasantry he was especially a welcome guest. The stormiest night, or the bleakest road, would not prevent him from braving their inclemency's, if he knew that there was a case of sickness or distress in which he could be of the least service to a suffering fellow creature. These Christian offices he confined not to the congregation in which he belonged; for, indeed, he regarded all mankind as his brethren, and hence was found the spiritual advisor, and the meek minister of mercy, at every sick or dying bed he could possibly attend. His diligence in this respect was truly astonishing: while, at the same time, he never neglected to

provide, as well as his humble means allowed, for the wants of his own house. Yet, laboring chiefly for “the meat which endureth for everlasting life”, temporal comforts or personal advantages were but of secondary estimation with him; for he lived under a constant persuasion of the truth. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

But not only upon such emergencies as those mentioned, was Thomas Craigs found at the post of duty. All the spare time he could command was usually devoted to similar pursuits. On the Sabbath Day in particular, he seldom passed the cottages of any of his common acquaintances without tarrying by the way, to speak to them about the “things which belong to their eternal peace”. In this mode of reaching the human heart, he possessed a peculiar facility; and often have the peasantry been heard, in their own homely but expressive phrase, to eulogise the edifying and acceptable hours passed by him among them, in this pious and interesting manner. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated twice-a-year in this church in which Thomas Craigs once belonged; and as his dwelling was deemed too distant from the place of worship for an old man, on a day when the hour of meeting was earlier than on ordinary Sabbaths, he was usually pressed by some of his neighbours, in the more immediate vicinity of the church, to spend with them the Saturday night; when, we have often been told, that such were his fervent piety and heavenly converse, they were the means, under Divine grace, of bringing more than one to the house of God, on those solemn occasions, in the most devout and befitting frame of mind.

From the paucity of preachers in that district, it sometimes happens (though rarely), that the minister, when he leaves home to assist at a neighboring communion, is under the unavoidable necessity of leaving behind him a vacant pulpit. But on such occasions, Thomas Craigs was never known to remain at home, or in the least degree to show, like too many professing Christians, that to him the Sabbath was “a weariness.” Which he wished to be gone; on the contrary, his feelings were, as he has often expressed them, those of the Psalmist, “How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of host! My soul longs vehemently, yea, faints, for the courts of my God!” When in the vigor of life, and in good health, he has been known to have often walked distances of upwards of twenty miles, to listen to the glad tidings of salvation, from the lips of such servants of Christ as had been mentioned to him as more than usually devoted to the Redeemer’s cause, and the eternal interests of perishing souls. For the love of God, in sending his Son to die for sinner, “Christ and him crucified,” were the subjects in which he chiefly delighted; and which, above all others, he rejoiced to hear proclaimed to dying and sinful men.

In the Sabbath school, Thomas Craigs was a constant and most efficient teacher; in the occasional absence of the minister, always opening its exercises by prayer, as well as praise. At the stated prayer-meetings for the spread of the Gospel at home and abroad, he not only attended as punctually as on the Lord’s Day at public worship, but also took a prominent and most acceptable part in the duties of those associations. Scant though his means were, he was likewise a regular subscriber to the missionary and other such-like schemes connected with the congregation, which had for their great end the amelioration of human

misery, and the eternal welfare of mankind.

He was useful in more than his own proper department in life; for about the time that fearful epidemic, the cholera, visited our shores, so expert was Thomas Craigs in bleeding, and similar operations usually prescribed for the removal of that malady, that his very presence was deemed of no little service by the most intelligent among the humble people with whom he dealt. He was tolerably well versed in the more popular periods of ecclesiastical history, and took a particular delight in reading the lives of those pious and imminent men who suffered at the time of the general Reformation from Popery; as well as of those who endured unspeakable hardships in contending for the purity of the Presbyterian faith in Scotland, during the tyrannical and unprincipled reign of the Second Charles.

Thomas Craigs had, besides all of this, some little turn for sacred poetry and the composition of themes on religious subjects, though, of course, in these departments, much could not be expected from one whose education had been but very limited. It is often characteristic of the employment followed by the subject of this notice, to be intermeddling, speculative, curious, and given to change; no man, however, was ever less remarkable for these offensive qualities than was Thomas Craigs. He was truly content with the allotments of Providence and respectful for his superiors; while he left the matters of state policy to abler hands, and was never heard to drop an angry or censorious word regarding any human creature. Of him it might well be said, "What hath Grace wrought?" The year previous to his departure, the congregation presented him with a handsome and entire suit of clothes, a pair of silver spectacles and a psalm-book to which a grateful reference is made by Thomas Craigs in one of the subjoined letters from himself.

It could not but happen that a man so amiable and exemplary in every relation of life, would be much missed and greatly regretted, when he left the sphere in which he no longer moved, and in which he was so much, and so deservedly beloved. Accordingly, when he found, in his old age, that his trade, at no time lucrative, was becoming daily more precarious; and having been often, and earnestly urged by two dutiful sons, who had preceded him as settlers in America, to take up, during the remainder of his life, his residence with them; he, at length, after much prayerful reflection, acceded to their proposal.

Various and urgent persuasions were used by his friends in Northumberland, to induce him to forego this purpose, but to no effect. In this emergency, the honest feelings of the subject of this sketch led him to shrink from becoming burdensome to his friends, when he thought he could at all avoid it. Yet, being poor, as we have already hinted, and knowing that it was quite impossible for him to afford the expense of conveying himself and family to America, he had recourse to an expedient, in raising a little money, frequently, but improperly, adopted in similar circumstances; by the humbler classes, on both sides of the Tweed.

A Clock, which had been long in his family, he set up to be raffled for, at a shilling each ticket, and, as Providence permitted, from among the many competitors of different classes for the article, the person to whom the clock fell was a military gentleman of the congregation, of well-known and remarkable

benevolence, who, on learning of his success, as he (Thomas Craigs) was about to embark for London, handsomely returned his prize to its original owner; leaving him thereby with this valued heirloom still in his family, and the sum of £8 besides, to aid him in his intended design. On which occasion, our aged friend, disposed to ascribe every thing to its proper source, was heard to observe, in the words of Solomon, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposition thereof is of the Lord".

But the friends of Thomas Craigs were not altogether to be left behind in generosity, and they accordingly took this plain but unassuming hint, that he here needed their pecuniary assistance. For when it was thus, at length, perceived that he was fully bent on taking final farewell of them, and the scenes of his former life, a subscription was sent on foot, headed by the most respectable members of the church to which this pious man belonged, to defray the contingent expenses of his voyage across the Atlantic, with that of his wife, and a son and daughter, who accompanied him. The money raised was more than sufficient for the intended purpose, and to it many persons had contributed of the greatest distinction in that part of the country, unconnected with the congregation of which Thomas Craigs had been a member for so long. Various necessities of life were besides given for the use of their voyage, and themselves and household effects conveyed, free of charge, to the ship which was to carry them part of their way from their native land.

The evening on which Thomas Craigs left the scenes of his early life, was uncommonly beautiful and calm. The air was redolent with fragrance from the hawthorn, then in bloom, (for almost every field there is belted with the tree); while each grove poured forth unceasing melody from its countless feathered tribes. A few fleecy clouds threw their partial shawdows on the middle of the vale, where the streams, life threads of silver, pursued their silent way through fields of living green; while a full flood of rays fell obliquely from the setting sun on the emerald hills, which on the opposite side of the plain, reared their heads in repose undisturbed, save by the bleating of countless flocks grazing along their acclivities. Upon ascending a rising ground which commanded an extensive prospect of this lovely and varied landscape, Thomas Craigs, accompanied by one of his sons, and the writer of this sketch, was thus addressed, "Take your last look, Thomas, of those calm and lovely retreats, where you have spent so many happy, and I trust, useful years; you may go far before you meet with anything resembling them." "Yes", replied the good man, "It is sad to leave such scenes and to leave them forever ! But there is above a land lovier even than this, a land of peace and eternal rest, where I hope, at last, we shall all meet to be parted no more!"

As the venerable patriarch went along, each of the various villages through which he passed, sent forth, as it were, its deputation, to bid him an affectionate farewell. He had been furnished with horses, and a servant to convey him on his way, by the kindness of a wealthy gentleman of the congregation on whom he called as he proceeded to Berwick; and, though he himself seemed fortified with all confidence and serenity of a true Christian, in those moving moments; not a few tears were the tears shed, and the prayers that were uttered, when, at

length, leave was taken of the venerable and venerated man, as he rode away, and disappeared from view of the friends of his former life.

Early on Monday, the 17th of May, this worthy family left the port of Berwick-on-Tweed for Newcastle and from thence proceeded via Carlisle to Liverpool, where they finally embarked for North America. It should not be omitted here, that though Thomas Craigs had nearly twenty miles to go after attending Divine service, he could not allow himself to be absent from his wonted post on the day previous to his final departure. Accordingly, on that day, having come from Milfield to officiate in his usual capacities of elder and clerk, and sung, as his last hymn, the 122d Psalm, from the 6th verse ("Pray that Jerusalem may have peace and felicity, etc). Mr. Gray delivered a suitable sermon which seemed to make a deep impression on the audience, from Gen. xii. 1: "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, into a land that I will show thee:" with the peroration of which discourse, as the part more immediately referring to the subject of this Sketch, we shall conclude; first, however, giving two of Thomas Craig's letters, after his departure from Wooler; which, in an affecting manner, evince the piety and benevolent feelings of that truly excellent and amiable man, of whom, in the words of the Savior, it might well be said, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!"

"Liverpool, May 23, 1841

"Rev. Sir, I take this opportunity to let you know that we have got thus far on our journey. Your kind letter, which arrived here before me, I received from Mr. Bolton, the Mayor of Liverpool, who has shown us much kindness. We hope to sail on Monday or Tuesday next, having got a ship to St. John's when we shall have to encounter the dangers of the deep; but I hope that God, who has brought us thus far, will neither leave us to ourselves in a strange land nor to perish in the midst of the seas. I heard a sermon on Sabbath, from Col. iii.24. "Ye serve the Lord Christ; "but I thought it strange, when I was not in my usual place praising the Lord. We are all well, and hope this will find you so likewise., Oh! Remember me to all your congregation, whom I love so dear. May the Lord bless you all. When I arrive, I will not fail to write you.

(Signed) "Thomas Craigs"

This pious family were altogether six weeks and four days on their passage from Northumberland to New Brunswick; and it is said that the first act of all who accompanied them on landing was, after Thomas Craigs' example, to kneel down on the shore, and return thanks to Almighty God for his goodness in preserving them on the deep, and bringing them in safety to another land! How like the example of St. Paul and his converts, of whom it is said (Acts xxi 5), as they were progressing through different ports in the Mediterranean Sea, on their way to Jerusalem; "When we had accomplished those days we departed, and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city; and we kneeled down on the shore and prayed."

As soon after he was settled as possible, punctual to his promise, Thomas Craigs wrote to Mr. Gray the following letter.....

"Harvey's Settlement July 12, 1941

"Rev Sir, I now take my pen to let you know that we got safe to land, than God for his goodness to us all! I am now in a distant land, absent from you and your people in body, but often present in spirit. My Pen, reverend sir, is not able to express the feelings of my soul to you and your congregation, my friends in Jesus Christ, for whom I will not cease to pray; for while memory and time last with me, I cannot forget all the favors you have conferred upon me and mine. It would give me inexpressible pleasure to be in your company for a single day, that I might disclose all the feelings of my soul, since I parted with you and my friends in Wooler; but I must at least write, were it only to say that I have received good from all your prayers; for I never went to a place, but God went before, and friends were always ready to receive me; so that it has been made good to me, "Commit thy way to God, and he will bring it to pass." From Berwick to Newcastle we were one day on the passage, and stopped two nights in our brother's house at the latter place; next day we went by railway to Carlisle where we stopped two nights, and met with our former fellow-worshipper, William Mathieson, who showed us much kindness. We landed late Friday night at Liverpool, and were taken in by Mr. Cock, with all our goods, and treated kindly. I then went to the Mayor, Thomas Boldon, Esq., where I received your letter; and he went and found a ship for ST. John's, by which we sailed on the Tuesday following, and were five weeks and four days until we landed at our port. The ship we sailed on was large, and employed in the timber trade, having many sailors for her crew. At first, these people spoke very ungardly, but I believe I have seldom had a better opportunity of doing good; for being much in their company, I failed not to let drop such words of advice as might be of use to their immortal souls. So favorable seemed the impression at length made, that we parted with great reluctance at the end of the voyage, by which time our conversation had become very different from that they were at first; and when taking leave, I aid, I hoped we should all meet in Heaven. One of them came with us several miles, helping us to beare part of our goods to another ship, which was to take us up the river and before parting, he requested earnestly one of the owners of that ship to take notice of us; who, accordingly, showed us much kindness. Thus we had friends all the way to Fredericton. When we arrived there, we found one Thomas Kay, ready to receive us, from our sons; for he got a place for us, and all our lading, free of charge; after which we had twenty-five miles to wlk to our son's house, on a Saturday, where we once more all met in Christian affection and love. There is a place a worship five miles off, to which I went the next day, although I was very wearied; and as thee is here, as yet, no regular ministers to preach the Word, having been called upon, I made some remarks from the 7th, 8th and 9th veress of the 89th Psalm; pointing ut the nature of the fear due to God in the meetings of the Saints, that none can be compared with our God, who reigns even in the raging sea, and doth still the waves agin when they roar and swell. On this I can speak from experience, to men who had similar experience; for they all come from England and many of them had seen the need of God's protection, when the seas rolled, and danger threatened. I concluded by singing the same verses of the same Psalm. Thus far

have I gone, my reverend friend, but yet, like David, I often long that I had “the wings of a dove” that I might find myself among you all, my former friends, on the Lord’s day. O that I may feel the same joy when I close my eyes in death that I have often felt when singing the praises of God, and sitting down at a communion table! From this last unspeakable privilege I am, for a time, withdrawn; but there is a table in heaven which will never be drawn any more. But not that God hath led me into the wilderness, O that he would speak comfortably to my soul! To you, my spiritual friend, I will not withhold, for I have felt the love of God on my soul more than I could in word or in writing express, when none but God, that knoweth all things, was present.

“The people here show me greater respect than I deserve, and seem glad to have me among them on the Sabbath-day. Yet I often regret leaving my friends, from whom I received so many tokens of respect. When I put these on, I yet fancy I am amongst you all! The people here have seen them, and wondered at all your gifts. How, then, can I speak of all your kindness, and not be moved with gratitude, as well as love to your souls! I know not what the Lord may have to do with me, who am I but a weak instrument in his hand; but O that I were able to proclaim his glory to all men on sea or land, for what he hath done for my soul! To you, with whom I have been so long acquainted, and one whose welfare I am bound to pray for from my very soul, to the congregation, too, of which you are minister, how often so my thoughts turn! I have three times dreamed of being in that hallowed place; and none but God and myself can tell how ardently I wished that it had been more than a dream! This should teach us to improve our privileges while we enjoy them, and to catch the favorable influences of the spirit of grace, lest God withdraw from us our mercies. When I look back, I can see many failings, which should lead me to “redeem the time, since the days are few and evil.” I have not much opportunity of writing, as the house I am in is unfurnished; but they promise me to have it ready soon, and all that is needful is at hand, for this end. You will remember me, my reverend friend, to all your congregation, and let them know how dear they are to my soul. O that they may improve under your ministry, and that teacher and taught may both be taught of God! Peace be within the walls where I have worshipped so long, and to which “I joyed when it was said, Go up to the house of God!” Oh,! Remember me in your prayers, who am in a distant land; and when this comes to hand, write me an answer, it will be a cordial to my soul! Once more, to you, and the elders and trustees, and all the people, I send the respects of all of us all; and may the Lord bless you all! Amen! Waiting your answer, I remain your humble friend and wellwisher.

(Signed) “Thomas Craigs”

This letter was received in Ayrshire, and almost immediately replied to from Glasgow, where Mr. Gray then was on professional duty.

[Conclusion of Discourse from Gen. xii,1 preached on the departure of Mr.

Thomas Craigs for America, by Rev. Thomas Gray, Sabbath, May 16, 1841.]

<< Note: Sermon at end of sketch not transcribed here. >>

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