

ANDREW SHIRREFS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES.

ONE of the most interesting figures, among the many men of genius and character which marked Aberdeen society towards the close of last century, is the man whom Burns described as "a little decrepid body with some abilities"—Andrew Shirrefs. For a number of years this "cripple votary of Parnassus" sat in the very focus of poetical fame in Aberdeen; gathered round him as friends and correspondents a number of poetical adepts and aspirants, who in many cases far eclipsed him in genius, and not unfrequently outstepped him in what is called success in life. The traditional respect which on all sides clusters round the cheery, genial, and unfortunate Andy, speaks well of his heart and head, though we are afraid he wore the former rather too much on his sleeve. He belonged to a family that made considerable headway in the world, in so far as securing good positions and gathering gear is doing so; and yet to-day, such is the irony of fate, Andrew, who secured neither of these, is the best remembered man of his race. His father, David Shirrefs, was a wright or builder in the Gallowgate of Aberdeen, a deacon of the Incorporated

Trades, a man of substance, who owned at least some five tenements along that then respectable thoroughfare. Andrew was the sixth son and eighth child of a family of eleven, and two of his elder brothers rose to positions of considerable distinction and honour in their native town: to wit, Dr. James Shirrefs, who was minister of St. Nicholas Church from 1778-1814, and author of "The Life of Dr. Guild"; and Alexander Shirrefs, advocate, sometime Sheriff-Clerk Depute, and latterly President of the Society of Advocates. Dr. James Shirrefs was singularly unfortunate in his family: his eldest son, David, a student of much promise, and a bit of a poet too, died at Madeira, where he had been sent for his health, 15th December, 1809; his second son, James, died at the same place, 19th December, 1813, as also his youngest son, Alexander, while on his passage thence, on the 4th September, 1814. This series of fatalities preyed on the father's mind so much, that he resigned his charge at St. Nicholas Church, as also the office of Patron to the Incorporated Trades, and lived a semi-hermit life at his little property of Friendville. An uncle of our author's, a William Shirrefs, was a fairly successful farmer at Auchindoir, some of the members of whose family went to Jamaica—David and Alexander both appearing in Andrew's list of subscribers, for 50 copies each, of his poems published in 1790. Andrew Shirrefs, the subject of the present sketch, was born in 1762, was educated at the Grammar School, entered Marischal College in 1779, and graduated in 1783. An affection, which ultimately caused him to lose the use of his legs, had come upon him in early years, a circumstance which, on his leaving college, determined him to try some other means of earning a livelihood than following out one of the learned professions, as he deemed any of these to require more bodily exertion than he could command. Rather a strange resolution to come to, and the very reverse, we should say, of what a physical weakling with a University training would come to now-a-days. But trade was easy then. The bustle and whirl, the press and unrest of the business life of to-day, were, relatively speaking, unknown among the comfortable burghers of a hundred years ago. The time to be sure was past when it was not uncommon for merchants to place a ticket in their window,

stating, to any customer who might call and find the door locked, that they had gone to the Links to play bowls, but would be back to business at such-and-such an hour! Yet the whole aspect of trading life was easy, and smacked of the old world. The local trade magnates had not as yet given up meeting the stocking-workers from the country every Friday at the Bow Brig, or making occasional ventures, at the Candlemas market, as far south as Stonehaven. "Customer wark" was the rule, and the click of the loom was as familiar a sound to the dwellers in the many closes that ran up St. Katherine's Hill, from Putachieside and Shiprow, as the roar of the factory is now to the dwellers around Broadford or the Green. The mighty "manufacturer" of to-day was represented by "the Deacon" (he exists only in name now—"rest an' bless him"!), who in his four-loom-shop, quaintly dressed in "moggan sleeves", white apron, his knee-breeches loosely tied with a "thrum", and feet ensconced in "trampers", exercised a craft as yet innocent of shoddy. The booksellers' shops were mostly lounges, where the town's gossips of the higher grades met one another, if the weather was not favourable for strolling on the "plainstones"; but then, gossip was often a prelude to business. It was the same all over; and it was into this quiet, plodding, easy, uncompetitive trading life that Andrew Shirrefs, with his "A.M." and a pair of crutches, resolved to enter in preference to any of the learned professions. Accordingly he acquired as much of the craft of bookbinding as enabled him to add that branch of work to those of bookseller and stationer, which he carried on conjointly till 1787, when the latter appeared to have become the principal item of his calling. Early allured to the muses, by the charms of Allan Ramsay, he more and more got absorbed in literature. In May, 1787, he appears to have made, along with some others, a venture which came to early grief. This was *The Aberdeen Chronicle*, of which he was one of the editors. The ephemeral he had to do with under this title has often been confounded with the able Liberal newspaper of the same name, which, in 1806, was started by Booth and Aberdeen in the Netherkirkgate, and which continued after 1808, for well nigh thirty years, to be published at "the North Street, opposite Longacre, in Brand's square of build-

ings". Shirrefs's *Chronicle* seems to have been one of the many attempts got up in opposition to the *Journal*, by local booksellers and others, between 1752 and 1806. It did not live long, and does not seem to have occupied much of our author's attention, for he had entered on a more important undertaking some months before (in March or April) as part proprietor and joint-editor of the *Caledonian Magazine*. He was now fairly in for literature. His pastoral play, "Jamie and Bess", was produced at "the new Concert Hall, North Street", occasionally used as a theatre, by a company of players from the south: and got favourable notice in a communication to the *Caledonian Mercury*, as "the production of a Mr. Shirrefs, a stationer of this place". He came into contact and correspondence with Skinner, Beattie, Farquhar, and other literary devotees, and the *Caledonian Magazine* made rapid headway among periodicals. 'Twas the blink before the shower. Towards the end of 1787, his partner (Alexander Leighton) absconded, the creditors came down on the concern, and poor Shirrefs was glad to find himself no worse off than being left with the printing materials. He now continued the magazine in his own name, and, what with the help of willing contributors, and his own indomitable pluck and good nature, made it a miscellany which Bon-Accord might well be proud of. William Beattie, the heckler-poet, made his first appearance before the public in its pages, the volume for 1789 containing poems and songs from his pen, some of the longer pieces ("Mortality" and "The Winter's Night") having introductory and other stanzas which were left out when republished in his volume of 1801. How circumstances veered round against Shirrefs and his magazine, we cannot tell. It ceased to be published in 1790, and he turns up in Edinburgh as a bookseller and printer in Shakespeare Square, as we learn from a long poetical epistle which he wrote to Crawford, the Heriot's Hospital poet, and which he subscribed—

"I'm printer Shirrefs and your servan'".

He had published "Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. By Andrew Shirrefs, A.M. Edinburgh, printed for the author, 1790"; but success in business does not seem to have been

found by him in Edinburgh more than in Aberdeen, though the spirit he carried with him wherever he went soon gained him many friends, eager and willing to do what in them lay for the unfortunate poet. When, some time after, funds fell to a low ebb, a company of amateurs, mostly composed of old Aberdeen friends, got up his pastoral comedy of "Jamie and Bess", and performed it for his benefit. Mr. Stenhouse, in his "Illustrations to the Lyric Poetry and Music of Scotland", mentions having been present on that occasion, and hearing Mr. Shirrefs sing his own song, "A cogie o' yill and a pickle ait-meal", to a melody composed by Robert M'Intosh, an Edinburgh musician. This very characteristic song deserves reproduction here, being, to say the least of it, as good a sample of his muse as anything he has left us:—

A cogie o' yill and a pickle ait-meal,
 And a dainty wee drappie o' whiskey,
 Was our forefathers' dose, for to sweel down their brose,
 And keep them aye cheery and frisky.
 Then hey for the whiskey, and hey for the meal,
 And hey for the cogie, and hey for the yill;
 Gin ye steer a' thegither, they'll do unco weel
 To keep a chiel cheery and brisk aye.

When I see our Scots lads, wi' their kilts and cockauds,
 That sae aften hae lounder'd our foes, man,
 I think to mysel' on the meal and the yill,
 And the fruits o' our Scottish kail brose, man.
 Then hey for the whiskey, &c.

When our brave Highland blades, wi' their claymores and plaids,
 In the field drive like sheep a' our foes, man;
 Their courage and pow'r—spring frae this to be sure,
 They're the noble effects o' the brose, man.
 Then hey for the whiskey, &c.

But your spindle-shank'd sparks, wha sae ill fill their sarks,
 Your pale-visaged milksops and beaux, man;
 I think when I see them 'twere kindness to gi'e them—
 A cogie o' yill or o' brose, man.
 Then hey for the whiskey, &c.

What John Bull despises, our better sense prizes;
 He denies eatin' blanter ava, man;
 But by eatin' o' blanter, his mare's grown, I'll warrant her,
 The manliest brute o' the twa, man.
 Then hey for the whiskey, &c.

At last, in 1798, he left "Auld Reekie" for London, after which we have in vain sought for any information regarding him. In M'Kie's "Burns' Calendar", compiled by the late Mr. Gibson, of the Shakspearian Library, Stratford-on-Avon, the date of Shirrefs's death is given as 1807, an evident misreading of Stenhouse's note to the above song, in which, the composer of the music (M'Intosh) is said to have died in London on the date given. In the family papers now in the possession of the descendants of Dr. Shirrefs, no mention of Andrew's death is to be found, although from his non-appearance, along with his other brothers, in the will of Alexander, the Jamaica planter, who died in October, 1801, it might be inferred that he was dead before that date. In that document we find, besides certain cousins, legatees, the poet's brothers James, Alexander, and Burnett,—James being residuary legatee, and eventually having for his share the Mary-Hill (Jamaica) estate, with its working plant and slaves. It is curious to note that in an inventory of that estate sent to Dr. Shirrefs in 1810, we find a list of 162 negro slaves (77 males and 85 females), their names, occupations, and general physical condition detailed—and among them "a carpenter,—able-bodied and healthy—Andrew Shirrefs"!

The contents of the handsome volume published in 1790 containing the "poetical" works of Shirrefs, and adorned with a fine portrait by Beugo of the "little decrepid body", is of a very mixed character indeed. Of his play "Jamie and Bess", which he evidently considered his *magnum opus*, it would be difficult to assign it to any one of Polonius's categories. Whether it ought to be classed as "comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, scene-undividable, or poem unlimited", we have been unable to decide. It is divided into the orthodox five acts, has its cast of characters and actors' names, prologue, epilogue, &c., and the characters have mostly more or less to do with the story, such as it is. Besides all this it had a run of three nights when it was first performed in Aberdeen in the summer of 1787, and was afterwards, in 1796, performed by a company of amateurs in Edinburgh, so we may be safe in calling it a stage play. Before considering the play itself we would call attention to the prologue, which is written by a Mr.

Sutherland, one of the actors, and manager of the theatre at Chronicle Lane, which was popularly known as "Coachy's Playhouse". Joseph Robertson says of him, that he was the first who adopted what is designated the "starring system", and that he was deserted by his company and became a ruined man. We take it, however, that he was the same George Sutherland who, after he "became a ruined man", of course, was manager of the Dumfries Theatre about 1790-91, and for whom Burns wrote a couple of prologues—one spoken on New Year's Day evening, 1790, and the other on the occasion of Sutherland's benefit. He seems to have been a great crony of Burns's, who says of him, "A worthier or cleverer fellow I have rarely met with". The "Jamie and Bess" prologue referred to gives a satisfactory explanation of a saying which is often used with a sense of opprobrium towards Aberdonians, and is as follows:—

In days of yore when proverbs rife had been,
 'Mongst others there was one for Aberdeen,
 The adage thus, "Aye, tak' your word again".
 From whence some wicked wits would fain imply
 A double meaning couch'd, and archly cry
 Whene'er they find the time or cause convene,
 "Hoot, man, awa'! you'll tak' your word again".
 To dash their gibes, one fact I'll tell alone,
 Mark, now, how plain a tale shall set them down.
 A merchant once, who lived in Aberdeen,
 And kept a shop somewhere about the Green,
 To London city yearly made resort,
 With stockings, shoes—and got good profit for't,
 But chanc'd one time of money to fall short.
 As paper credit then was never used,
 And, honest carle, was loth to be refused
 The goods he bargain'd for, he bluntly cry'd,
 "I dinna like to seek and be deny'd;
 What maun I do, guidman? the siller's slack,
 Maun I gae up your goods and sae gang back"?
 "Nay", says the factor, "Friend, since that's the case,
 And as I like your good, old, honest face,
 Take home the goods, and when you come next year
 To buy again, I trust you'll make all clear".
 The time came round, the merchant paid the claim,
 "Aye", quoth the cit, "I'll tak' your word again".

The scene of "Jamie and Bess" is laid in "a shepherds' village and fields some miles north-west of Aberdeen", and the characters consist of two couples of lovers, *Jamie* and *Bess*, and *Simon* and *Katie*; *Dory*, Katie's father; *Branky*, Simon's father and reputed uncle to Jamie; *Helen*, the reputed aunt of Bess; a pair of clowns, *Geordy* and *Ned*; and the knight, *Sir Archibald*, whose mission seems to be to turn up at stated intervals and deliver sententious speeches. The story opens with *Branky's* return from Aberdeen, where he has succeeded in freeing *Simon* from the hands of a recruiting sergeant who had enlisted him after he had been indulging in the recreations of a country market, not wisely but too well. After a scene with his sweetheart, *Katie*, in which he promises to be a good boy in future, he drops almost entirely out of the piece, till the pairing time at the fall of the curtain. *Bess*, the heroine, is beloved by the two clowns, whom she makes fun of. One day, young *Seton-Ha'* (a laird, of course), overtaken by a storm, had sought shelter in the cottage of *Bess* and her aunt, where he falls in love with *Bess*. He goes away, disguises himself, takes *Branky* into his confidence, and courts *Bess* as *Jamie* the young shepherd. His disguise is seen through by the knight and also by *Bess's* aunt, who has preternaturally sharp eyes for some things, and who has long let it be known that no one under the rank of "a laird" need apply. She again recognises him when he comes in the character of an old wizard, "spaeing" a laird to *Bess*. Meanwhile, *Ned* has poisoned *Geordy's* ear with a scandalous story concerning *Bess*, and so cleared the way of a rival. The knight, however, has *Ned* brought before him, and proceeds to "raise the deil" to get at the author of the scandal. *Ned* gets frightened, and confesses his guilt. *Bess* refuses *Geordy*; the knight proposes *Jamie* as a fit and proper person; the aunt pretends to demur, declaring *Bess* to be of noble blood. *Jamie* enters as *Seton-Ha'*—*Bess's* father turns out to have been a cousin of *Seton-Ha'*, who married "a humble maid", was disinherited, and left for foreign parts, while *Bess* and her mother found an asylum with *Helen*. Nothing remains now but to marry the two pairs of lovers. But *Helen* has yet another surprise in store. Waving a letter, she announces that *Bess's* father, rich as the Indies, "this day has landed safe at

Aberdeen", and would be with them immediately, "attended by black servants in a coach". Universal joy, and curtain!

Prefixed to each scene of the play is a short poetical description, after the manner of Ramsay in the "Gentle Shepherd". These short "prologues", as he calls them, are by far the best work of the piece, and make us regret that Shirrefs did not give more attention to what we may call word miniature painting, and less to his ponderous didactics and lengthy versified epistles. The following short specimens show that he had an eye to see, and a pen that could describe what he did see:—

A flow'ry walk, extended wide,
 With lofty elms on ilka side,
 Whase meeting taps hide a' aboon ;
 But, gin ye laigher look between,
 Ye, first, observe the clear blue sky,
 Then, laigher still, ye charm the eye
 With woods, and groves, and flow'ry fields,
 And a' the sweets which nature yields.
 * * * * *
 It's Helen's dwalling, view it well,
 For it can bide a look.
 Auld Lucky singing, at her reel,
 Ben, in the pantry-nook,
 Excuse ; for she a wee maun slack.
 Just as ye heard the reely chack,
 By some wrang cadge she ga'e her hand,
 She's tint her end, and wark maun stand,
 'Cause she's but weak o' sight ;
 'Till, raxing to the chimney-stane,
 She, shortly, finds twa usefu' een
 That help to mend her light ;
 Whilk, ance adjusted on her nose,
 To wark, thus cannily, she goes,
 First, wets the pirn, then thum's it round about ;
 Till, wi' a prin, she pirls the tint-end out,
 And tenty draws it loose ;
 Syn, to the reel, ance, tightly tied,
 Down, in the sole, she lays aside
 Her een for after use.
 And now, by cautious turns and slow,
 Ance mair she gars the reely go.

In noting a specimen or two from the play itself, we may remark regarding the first, that it would appear there is no

monopoly, either in "Auld Ayr" or elsewhere, of that bewitching bit of creation which has been a disturbing element in the history of man since the days of the Mesopotamian beauty, who had such an unlucky *penchant* for fruit, till those of the particular specimen each reader has in his thoughts:—

I mony a strappin' lass, nae doubt ha'e seen,
 For there's nae want of sic in Aberdeen.
 There's scarce a lassie there, that ye wad meet,
 But wha has something in her face that's sweet.
 Ilk ither town for beauties it surpasses ;
It's just the nursery o' bonny lasses.

Let us hope that the Magistrates of Bon-Accord will long preserve the character given to them by Branky:—

Things as unjust by judges ha'e been dane,
 But never think 'twas sae at Aberdeen.
 Ye mauna speak o' them in sic a strain,
 They've aye been kent for downright honest men ;
 Wha's ilka action speaks their growin' fame,
 And shaws them judges worthy o' the name.
 By them the honest never suffer'd yet,
 Guilt is the only object of their hate ;
 To punish which, they use their gritest art,
 But never, never, act an unjust part.

The two following extracts will show the quality of the preaching the Knight and his friends indulge in throughout the piece:—

Tales that are good, or harmless, when ye hear,
 You may with freedom spread them far and near.
 But lies, or tales which blast your neighbours fame,
 Whaever spreads them, surely is to blame.

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Books are the grand refiners of our taste,
 Our understanding's choicest friends, and best.
 They teach us our rude passions to controll,
 And nurse the seeds of virtue in the soul :
 Pleasure and profit they, at once, impart,
 And mend the head, while they improve the heart.
 When vacant hours, to these, are wisely lent,
 How sweetly do we find the moments spent !
 What grand advantages from reading flow,
 None, but the happy relishers, can know !

The art of fortune-telling is happily expounded in the following lines:—

The spaeing crew

Gin they e'er light on onything that's true,
 They first maun learn't, by some trick of art,
 Before they enter on the spaeing part.
 Frae neighbours aft they wale what truth they tell,
 And whiles, by cunning, frae weak folks themsell:
 Marking wi' care what answers they may hear,
 To wyly questions, which they archly spier.
 Meanwhile, they stare them slyly in the face,
 To see what approbation they may trace:
 And guided thus by what they hear and see,
 They ken when they may venture on a lie.
 For ance they find they have ae truth exprest,
 They're sure to get a' credit for the rest.
 They then at Fortune's happy turns may guess,
 For lies, like that, are never ta'en amiss.
 'Tis thus they on the credulous impose,
 And thus they get the wonders they disclose.
 From others' ignorance their skill they draw,
 While to the devil fools impute it a'.

Interspersed throughout the play are numerous songs which have quite a colourless character. His other poems consist of Elegies, Epistles, Songs, etc., with several pieces written at a very early age, and which are mere clever precocities and nothing else. He has one epistle to Skinner, to whom he sends a copy of "Jamie and Bess". Skinner's poetical reply is given, in which he good-humouredly refers to the play being an avowed imitation of Ramsay by saying that everybody imitates someone else, one way or another.

In a "Fragment", part of which we give below, Shirrefs has made some approach to the old ballad spirit:—

Fu' dark and dismal was the night,
 And loud the winds did roar;
 The waves were rowin' mountain-height,
 And whiten'd a' the shore.

Yet a' were wrapt in downy rest,
 Before the storm arose,
 And only *Peggy's* anxious breast,
 Was stranger to repose.

Nae wonder that her spirits fail'd,
 How cou'd she happy be?
 The bark in which her *Jamie* sail'd
 Lay nae far aff at sea.

Sair, sair she hang on him to bide,
 But then he could not stay ;
 Alas ! that ev'ning's cruel tide
 Had bore her *Love* away.

Peggy, distracted with grief, haunts the shore during the whole night of storm, when in the morning—

Now floating on the billows ly
 A human corse she spy'd,
 And saw it, with a tearful eye,
 Approaching with the tide.

As floating slow towards the rock
 The lifeless body came,
 Alas ! how dreadful was the shock
 Which thrilled thro' *Peggy's* frame !

Just as she crav'd the angry storm
 Her *Jamie's* life might save,
 Hard on the rock his lifeless form
 Was dash'd by th' cruel wave !

My Life ! my Love ! my All ! she cries,
 Shall I remain to weep !
 Then from the precipice she flies,
 And plung'd into the deep !

From the graceful lines "To Myra", we extract the following verses, which stand out conspicuously from most of his artificial, namby-pamby lyrics :—

Each beauteous form which I explore,
 Each sweet, each fair, each blooming face,
 But serves to make me prize the more
 Thy each superior charming grace.

Tho' Fortune long has been unkind,
 And forc'd me from thy dear embrace,
 She cannot to *thy* worth be blind,
 For thee, she'll make my sorrows less.

She now assumes a milder air,
 As if regretting she had err'd,
 And seems to listen to the pray'r,
 Too long, for thee, in vain, preferr'd.

We will conclude our extracts with a specimen of the curious and whimsical "Shop Bill", which enjoyed a great

popularity in its day, and was imitated *ad nauseam* till not so very long ago :—

—begs ye would attention pay,
Till he, with due submission, tell ye
What articles he's got to sell ye.
Imprimis, German flutes and misic,
Variety of books on physic,
All kinds of Classics, Homer's Illiad,
Sermons, Plays, and Balm of Gilead.
Songs, Bibles, Psalm-Books, and the like,
As mony as would big a dyke.

* * * * *

The Poets, too, are in his shop,
As Milton, Addison, and Pope,
Young, guid aul' Shakespear, and some dizzens
Of Catechis', and Thomson's Seasons ;
Hoyle's Rules for those as choose to gamble,
Philosophy by Doctors Campbell,
Beattie, Gerard, Blair, and Reid,
The world's wonder for a *head*.

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Books, too, he has for arithmetic,
And Chalmers' almanacks prophetic,
A Sinner's only undertaker,
The Farrier, or young Horse-breaker ;
All kinds of Prayer books, Saints' Delight,
And History of the Second Sight ;
Reflections on a Future State,
Philosopher the greatest Cheat,
Tom Jones, Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy,
Songs set to music, as Blyth Sandy ;
With Humphry Clinker, Roderick Random,
And children's books if ye demand 'em.
French authors too as Boileau,
New Paraphrases and Crusoe ;
Reviews and critical inspections ;
With Master Masson's grand Collections ;
The Gentleman's and Lady's Callin' ;
Religious Thoughts by Joseph Allen.

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Scales, compasses, and ither trocks,
Fit only for your learned folks ;
With mony mair, a strange convention,
Too tedious, just now, to mention.

Shirrefs is mentioned in "Inglis' Dramatic Writers of Scotland" as the author of a small dramatic piece entitled "The Sons of Brittania, an Interlude", which is said to have been acted in Edinburgh in 1796 for the author's benefit (very likely on the occasion mentioned above), but it seems not to have been printed.
