

WILLIAM THOM.

IN the little burgh of Inverurie, despite the proverbial petty jealousies of all small-town life, hundreds of warm hearts are, and ever have been, open to the kindlier feelings of human brotherhood. Yet even there,—where the “bein hame” with its “cosy couthack” so often sees “sib and frem’t” linked together in the casual ties of no half-hearted philanthropy,—circumstances may so beset a poor struggling mortal, and so keep him, as it were, the apple of “miserie’s e’e”, as to make him feel insulated from all the warm sympathies of his kind. It was some such thought as this, no doubt, that in dark December, 1840, possessed the webless weaver, WILLIAM THOM, as under the scanty blankets he and his “mitherless bairns” crept closer together in the little attic on the Market Stance of Inverurie. The season’s “customar-wark” had drawn to a close—the loved helpmate, who through all his wanderings on the borderland of destitution and vagabondage was, for many years, his solace and his joy, had been newly laid in the kirkyard yonder—and the prospect of life lay before him black and unbroken by the faintest ray of hope. He had long ago learned that

When your pockets are toom,
An’ nae wab i’ the loom,

Then tak ye my word for’t, there’s naebody ken’s ye—

but he felt it harder *now* to bear up against his lot—solitary—alone—with his heart sinking within him. It had been his

wont during the slack season, to beguile the hours that otherwise would have hung heavy on his hands, by composing small poems on whatever subjects struck his fancy; but the fact that he occasionally courted the muses was only known to a limited few of his own class—congenial, kindred spirits, with whom in Aberdeen and Dundee he had been hand and glove. Here, then, under the shadow of his “dark Benachie”—with a prospective view of the House of Refuge for him and his bairns at no great distance—the happy thought struck him of sending one of his poetical bantlings to the editor of the *Aberdeen Herald*. The thing was done—he cast a seedling upon the waters, and he certainly found it ere many days. On January 2nd, 1841, the following appeared in that newspaper:—

THE BLIND BOY'S PRANKS.

[The following beautiful stanzas are by a Correspondent who subscribes himself “A Serf”, and declares that he has to “weave fourteen hours of the four-and-twenty”. We trust his daily toil will soon be abridged, that he may have more leisure to devote to an art in which he shows so much natural genius and cultivated taste.]

“I’ll tell some ither time quo’ he,
How we love an’ laugh in the north countrie”.—*Legend*.

Men grew sae cauld, maids sae unkind,
Love kent na whaur to stay;
Wi’ fient an arrow, bow, or string—
Wi’ droopin’ heart an’ drizzled wing,
He fought his lonely way.

“Is there nae mair, in Gairloch fair,
Ae spotless hame for me?
Have politics, an’ corn, an’ kye,
Ilk bosom stappit? Fie, O fie!
I’ll swithe me o’er the sea”.

He launched a leaf o’ jessamine,
On whilk he dared to swim,
An’ pillowed his head on a wee rose-bud;
Syne slighted Love awa’ did scud
Down Ury’s waefu’ stream.

The birds sang bonnie as Love drew near,
But dowie when he gaed by;
Till lulled wi’ the sough o’ monie a sang,
He slept fu’ soun’ as he sailed along
’Neath heaven’s gowden sky!

'Twas just whaur creepin' Ury greets
 Its mountain cousin Don,
 There wandered forth a weel faur'd dame,
 Wha listless gazed on the bonnie stream,
 As it flirted an' play'd wi' a sunny beam
 That flickered its bosom upon.

Love happit his head, I trow, that time,
 When the jessamine bark drew nigh,
 An' the lassie espied the wee rose-bud,
 An' aye her heart gae thud for thud,
 An' quiet it wadna lie.

"O gin I but had yon wearied wee flower
 That floats on the Ury so fair!"
 She lootit her hand for the silly rose-leaf,
 But little kent she o' the paukie thief,
 That was lurkin' an' laughin' there !

Love glower'd when he saw her bonnie dark e'e
 An' swore by heaven's grace
 He ne'er had seen nor thought to see
 Since e'er he left the Paphian lea,
 Mair lovely a dwallin' place.

Syne, first of a', in her blythesome breast,
 He built a bower, I ween ;
 An' what did the waefu' devilick neist ?
 But kindled a gleam like the rosy east,
 That sparkled frae baith her e'en,

An' O beneath ilk high e'e bree
 He placed a quiver there ;
 His bow ? What but her shinin' brew ;
 An' O sic deadly strings he drew
 Frae out her silken hair.

God be our guard ! sic deeds waur dune
 Roun' a' our countrie then ;
 An' monie a' hangin' lug was seen
 'Mang farmers fat an' lawyers lean,
 An' herds o' common men !

Inverury, Dec. 7, 1840.

The response was quick ; a half-sovereign found its way to Inverurie ere a week had well elapsed, and brought bread into the home, and sunshine to the heart of the hapless weaver.

Ere No. 3 of the "Pranks" had appeared (not, however, in the same order as in the published poems of our author), Mr. Gordon of Knockespoek had sent him *five pounds* through Mr. Chalmers of the *Aberdeen Journal*, and commendatory verses in his praise had come from a brother bard, Patrick Knox, then at Inverness. The magic charm of these small poems spread his fame far and wide—letters from every quarter spoke of them as the finest poetical products, with perhaps the exception of "Kilmeny", that had appeared since the master hand of Burns had been laid in the dust—and ere four months elapsed, William Thom, the weaver-"serf", under the patronage of Knockespoek, was whirling, the observed of all observers, among the literati and aristocracy of London—astonishing and astonished.

Such was the advent of William Thom into public life and the world of letters. Since then, much has been written and more said, which would have been better unsaid and unwritten, about the sudden rise and fall of that unfortunate son of genius—which sayings, at least, should have been considerably modified if due weight had been given to all the circumstances of the case. In the white light of a concentrated public gaze, who could hope to show himself unspotted? Have not the dangers of sudden prosperity passed into a proverb? And, is it not difficult to hold one's head in a new sphere of life and society, handicapped by the acquired habits of over forty years? Truly, to answer these goes a long way to enable one correctly to estimate the seemingly wayward character and career of Thom. Let us glance at his early years—briefly, for the narrative of his life is already in the public hands in Skinner's *Memoirs*, attached to the edition of his poems published by Gardner of Paisley, and we mean to summarise. Born in Sinclair's Close, Aberdeen, in 1798 or 1799, he spent his tender years in that locality—described with rare gusto by William Scott, in his "Flowers of Aberdeen", already mentioned—a locality, to say the least of it, not remarkable for the moral purity of its atmosphere. Out of this, he entered a cotton factory at the age of ten, and removed to the Taproom Close, Gallowgate, about the time when, as a full-fledged weaver, he began to drive his "picking-stick" at the Schoolhill Factory. With all the elements in his character which go to make an excellent

boon companion—a subtle, well-hung tongue, a ready mother-wit, a fair vocal and instrumental performer—he became the soul of all merry-makings, and stood high in the estimation of all his shop-fellows. The taproom in these days has been well named the working man's *alma mater*, and was the only rendezvous known to them where the cares of the week, the hand-to-mouth fight for existence, could be readily, cheaply, and, for the nonce, forgotten. Here it was customary for the young weaver to be raised to the dignity of manhood, when, as a reward for good work done, the man who looked after him at work gave him a glass of rum and a pipe! However much we may look down on this sort of thing now, we should never forget that it was the rule then, and not considered by the vast majority so desperately disreputable as it would be by the present generation. Amusements and dissipation are as amenable to the caprices of fashion as ladies' wares. That William Thom shone in these assemblies of the "unco social", was exactly the thing to be expected, just as natural an outcome of the man and his environment as any resultant in organic life could well be. He married—went to Dundee—gravitated to the "Wheat Sheaf", and made domestic shipwreck. Some years afterwards he came north to Aberdeen and Inverurie, with Jean (an *inamorata* after his own heart, to whom he had become attached in Dundee)—his journey being duly chronicled in his own peculiarly romantic style, in the "Recollections". Jean, as we have already said, died at Inverurie, and it was out of the quagmire of misery and destitution which followed this bereavement, that he came before the world as a "serf"—poverty and poesy-struck. Now, this kind of life—and, be it remembered, we would not for a moment think that the life of poverty which he shared in common with thousands of his fellow-mortals, was necessarily a bad life; far from it—but this kind of life was not the thing which fitted a man to stand on the pinnacle of fickle fame, "siccar" and self-contained, or in the light of the public eye, without exhibiting "the crooked pin in his sleeve". Had Thom never risen out of the ranks he was born into, had he been left to his own resources and at his ordinary shuttle-driving, the many aberrations in his life would have come as a

matter of course, been thought little about, and when rounded off in the last long sleep, would have been quickly forgotten. The misfortune for him was that, with the acquired habits of an average weaver, he awakened to the consciousness of a power of song—was led into the light of public life, revealing the moral deformities he was heir to—and even these made more grotesque, more exaggerated, by contrast with the conventional, artificial, make-believe respectabilities of hyper-critical Noodledom.

On his way home from the first London visit he was, on August, 28th, 1841, entertained at Robertson's Tavern, Miln's Square, Edinburgh, by a number of friends,—Hedderwick, Chambers, and others being there; and shortly after his arrival in Aberdeen a similar meeting was convened in the hall of the Royal Hotel, on 13th September, "as a public testimony to the high estimation in which he is held as the gifted author of 'The Blind Boy's Pranks'". About 50 gentlemen were present, and James Adam, editor of the *Herald*, occupied the chair. Nothing very noticeable occurred here—except the remark of the chairman that he had been more struck with the letter that accompanied Thom's verses than by the verses themselves, "it was so branded with strong good sense"—(the first public recognition of his masterly prose writing)—and the fact that Thom's gift of speech failed him in replying. "I always thought I could speak till now", he said, "but language fails me, and I can only say that I thank you from the bottom of my heart". He sang and read "Knockespoock's Lady", and no doubt felt profoundly relieved when next day he found himself once more at Inverurie and his loom. With the money now in possession he resolved to start customary weaving on his own account, engaged William Buchanan (author of "Olden Days in Aberdeen") and some other weavers, and was soon afloat on the world of business. Various offers had ere this been made to him with a view of raising him to some other position in life than the loom, but he instantly recoiled from them all. "If you want to help me, buy my webs", he said: and he was right—when he left the loom, he was undone. This period, from the time he started customary weaving till the publication of his volume of poetry (1841-44), has ever appeared to us the most

interesting in the life of the poet, and certainly as far as creative activity was concerned, it is the most prolific period in his whole career. In any sketch of him hitherto published, even in Mr. Skinner's excellent biography, it is passed over with a notice of his flying visits to the *Herald* and *Constitutional*, and of his being occasionally kidnapped, in his business visits to Aberdeen, by his social friends of the "Acorn Club", and other frequenters of Denham's Royal Oak tavern in Huxter Row. Nevertheless, away over the length and breadth of the shire, as he sojourned, now here, now there, in disposing of the products of his looms, many friends of the true "bardie clan", who had sent him words of God-speed when he issued from obscurity into the world of letters, had a cosy nook at their firesides, and a hearty welcome ever awaiting the genial, witty weaver bodie. Demands on his pen also kept growing, and the pages of the *Herald*, "Whistle Binkie", "The Ayrshire Wreath", and many other similar publications bear ample testimony to how closely he wooed the muses in these days. The friendly welcomes of brethren in song, Still, Harper, Cruickshank, and Mathers, soon ripened into friendships more true and lasting, through good report and bad report, than he found the butterfly gaddings which the sunshine of prosperity brought to him in his palmier days. While in London he corresponded with most of the above, and the interchange of poetical compliments which passed between Still, Mathers, and him, mostly in the form of draft copies of the poems then engaging their attention, give us a glimpse of literary life full of the romance of primitive simplicity, and possible only in the outlying retreats of humble rural life.

Some of these he acknowledged in the following letter to Mathers, who had also sent him kindly greetings:—

London, *June* 16, 1841.

Mr. T. Mathers.

Dear Sir,—I received some letters from Scotland yesterday, and among them one from our mutual friend and brother aspirant, P. Still. It is dated June 1st, and addressed to me at Inverury, hence, I apprehend, Peter is not aware how many miles spread their weary length between us. When I last saw him there was then so little thought of my getting so far south; but so it is. I would willingly tell you all about it, but at present I have not time—but certify this:—Two days after getting your letter,

and before I could well reply, down comes a letter from England desiring me to repair to London with all haste. This came from Mr. Gordon, Knokespock, under whose protection I am at present enjoying a holiday of two months, which he promised me: and must say he has kept his word, sparing neither pains nor cost, offering me every gratification with which this *monster city* abounds. I have seen your Queens, your Alberts, your Punch, your Toddys, and all manner of little great things. I have been in both Houses of Parliament during the late interesting debates, but matters are not conducted with that dignity which I expected to find. And I must say that my veneration (never boundless) since witnessing its ongoings has undergone a serious diminution. In plain words, their doings and manners would disgrace a common *Tap-room*, and in matter and in result God knows how well the groaning millions of our day can tell.

I would fain say something of Rogers and Cunningham, and other master minds to whom I have been introduced—and some of whom I stop hours with daily—but time will not permit. I have enclosed a few reprints, of which I beg your acceptance. Be so kind as send those so marked to Peter with my compliments—and if you or he would favour me with a line at leisure, on being addressed to the Postmaster, Inverury, Aberdeenshire, it will be forwarded to me.

Now, sir, permit me to offer my simple but sincere thanks for the very kind sentiments you express towards me in your interesting ditties. Certainly it would be something namelessly worse than affectation in me to say that I was otherwise than delighted with the warm and brotherly feelings that prevailed between you and Peter in your notices of my little poetical ramblings. June 17th.—I was interrupted while writing to you yesterday, and only resume my pen to tell you that I have since had the pleasure of seeing the “Cottar’s Saturday Night” in the handwriting of our deathless poet. Do you not envy me in this? I shall not attempt to say what I feel while gazing on the heavenly relic. Allan Cunningham gave £10 for it—a gentleman in my hearing offered him £100 for it; but no. Mr. Cunningham also showed other two pieces of Burns’s manuscript—“Does haughty Gaul invasion threat”, and the “Elegy on Matthew Henderson”. The invasion is written on a sheet of excise paper blotted with stamps. Excuse this hasty scrawl, and let me hear from you soon.—Yours truly,

W. THOM.

Among the enclosures were “Jeanie’s Grave”, “Old Father Frost and his Family”, and that weirdly sad, little lyric subsequently entitled “The Last Tryst”, but which was then No. 5 of “The Blind Boy’s Pranks”.

This nicht ye’ll cross the bosky glen,
 Ance mair, O would ye meet me then?
 I’ll seem as bygane bliss an’ pain
 Were a’ forgot;

I winna weep to weary thee,
 Nor seek the love ye canna gie ;
 Whaur first we met, O let that be
 The parting spot !

The hour just when the faithless licht
 O' yon pale star forsakes the nicht ;
 I wouldna pain ye wi' the blicht
 Ye've brought to me.
 Nor would I that yon proud cauld ray
 Should mock me wi' its scornfu' play ;—
 The sunken een and tresses grey
 Ye maunna see.

Wi' sindered hearts few words will sair,
 An' brain-dried grief nae tears can spare ;
 These bluidless lips shall never mair
 Name thine or thee.
 At murky nicht, O, meet me then !
 Restore my plighted troth again ;
 Your bonnie bride shall never ken
 Your wrangs to me.

The Thomas Mathers mentioned above was a fisherman from St. Monance, Fifeshire, who came regularly, in pursuit of his calling, to Peterhead during the herring fishing season. Though far inferior in point of scholarship to any of his contemporaries, his conversational powers and lyrical faculty were of such undoubted merit as made him a much valued friend and companion to a wide circle of admirers. Thom had not forgotten these sons of song when a continuation of "Whistle Binkie" was spoken about at the Edinburgh meeting, as the following letter to Still will show :—

Inverury, 11th October, 1841.

My Dear Sir,—I had intended to write you some time ago, but my purposes of that kind are too weak to battle with an ugly disposition in me to borrow and borrow on an unborn day. And that, like most other debts ; begetting propensities, grows stronger with indulgence—until now, in an epistolary sense, I have become fairly bankrupt. Here then comes your little dividend. I hope and wish that you and your dear little family are well, as I know you will be glad to hear of the welfare of me and mine. I have seen and been conversant with a pretty large section of what is called upper life, since you and I met, and I could point to many things found there that might be procured and possessed by ourselves with very little trouble. I mean kindly and obliging manners. There is more

in these everyday civilities than we are willing to allow, and more disregarded (some) of them amongst us than we are fit to justify. We cannot, to be sure, seize on a man's acres, or on his shop, but then, because he possesses these blessings, that is no good reason why we should dispossess ourselves of the superior blessings of kind-heartedness and gentle leanings; but so it is, and the Lord look to it; for we are not only cold, and hungry, by the misrule of our forerunners, but we exaggerate our own misery by an agreed relinquishment of every shade of tenderness, that might smooth our short, sad passage to eternity.

I was very happy in having it in my power to bring you before the public while in Edinburgh. I made mention of some of my poetical correspondents, and you among the rest. I gave my promise to obtain a song or two from you to be inserted in a forthcoming work—a work meant as a channel for the poetical workings of the obscure and nameless sons of song—such I take you to be; and knowing this, I hold it my duty to bring you before those who can appreciate and reward. Your song, “The Birken Glen”, is capital, but too long—will you condense it? or allow me to do so? Any little thing in your budget you will forward to me, and I will give my opinion, and let you know its fate. Do you know of any other poets in your neighbourhood? I never was in a locality above a week but I found out “the man of rhyme”. Write to Mathers and make the same request that I have now made to you. I am in haste or I would have written to him. Make my kind regards to your wife; say I shall soon be at Peterhead and step across to see whether she has a black teapot and what's in't.—Your ever sincere friend,

WM. THOM.

There can be no question but they all looked up to Thom as an elder brother, who was, during many years at least, the poetical arbiter of the north. They felt proud that one of themselves had by the sheer force of his genius commanded the ear of the world. They rejoiced in his fame, as adding lustre to the lowly life, and in his songs, as weaving immortal garlands round the scenes of a country-side they loved so well. We catch a glimpse of one of the many brotherly meetings, with their no small “feast of wit and flow of soul”, which, in the plodding every-day life of trading, comes like a luscious morsel at a dry feast. One fine forenoon which had brought a holiday to Still, found him in Peterhead, in search of his friend Mathers. He found him at his boat, and both turned into town to see the grand procession of Van Ambrugh's menagerie pass through the streets. Among the crowd of sight-seers they found their friend Thom. He had opened, temporarily, a shop there, during the fishing season, for the disposal of his

“hame-mades” and had turned out along with others to see the spectacle. They adjourned to some handy house near by to enjoy their crack, their smoke, and a bottle of Scotch porter. We can imagine the gusto with which Willie would tell them of the Aberdeen gentleman who, sending for some goods, requested him to weave a table-cloth with a device in the centre emblematical of himself as the Inverury poet, and also their relish of Willie’s characteristic answer:—“Your table-cover shall come, but alas for the emblems! Emblems of a bard? Is it thinness you mean; Gnawed round the side, and a hole in the centre? Stained, crumpled, blotched! Alas for the emblems! Such are the emblems of a bard!” He invited them to dinner in his temporary home, and Still speaks of the kindly, brotherly spirit in which he treated them there. He had just written his “Ravensraig”, which he read to them, and spoke of the delight he experienced in his visit to Mr. Brands, and how he had never expected to see such beautiful scenery as was presented to his view on the banks of the Ugie. The spell of association kept up long, but the necessities of business proved at last too much for it; Mathers must to his nets, Thom to his preparations for a visit to New Deer, and Peter to bethink himself of to-morrow’s peat casting!

As time rolled on in this easy-going, peripatetic trading concern of his, in which friendship, sociality, and business were better blended for him than ever they had been or would afterwards be, the clamour of his patrons for the promised volume—still hanging fire—still set over to “the unborn day”—had at length to be seen to; so accordingly, in July, 1844, “The Rhymes and Recollections of a Handloom Weaver” came before the public, and brought him speedily to the climax of his fame. It was scarcely out ere he showed Peter Still a letter from the Messrs. Chambers, of Edinburgh, offering him a situation in their establishment at £50 a year, to sort and arrange papers, and promising to treat him as a gentleman; but he refused, even though it had no reference to writing for their paper. His little volume was soon sold out, and, the demand for copies continuing, he, at the suggestion of Knockespeck resolved to take up his residence in London, to superintend the bringing out of a second and enlarged edition. This seemed a very

sensible move, as he could at the same time become agent for his own home-made cloths, and so widen the area of his trade as a weaver. It was the fatal step. We need not go into details. The public feasting and fuddlings at the "Crown and Anchor" and other noted haunts—the hopes that were inspired in him—the sad disappointments that followed, and the bitter little jealousies that preyed on his failings, and secretly exulted over his fall—all are well known already, and we pass them over. The muse that had smiled so favourably upon him on Urieside had forsaken him in Charlotte Square—the gilded cage had silenced the rural song bird. His second edition was financially a comparative failure; but the money presents which flowed in to him from all quarters, and the easy-going open heartedness of the man made him carrion for the parasites, who soon found out his weak points. He was too much dominated by sentiment and impulse to carry himself safely through the many temptations of London, or indeed of any city life. He has been charged with turning purse-proud, and with giving the cold shoulder to his former acquaintances in humble life, but there is not a particle of truth to justify such calumnies. In Charlotte Square, London, during these three years he kept an open table where penniless political discontents of the Chartist order, and neglected poets, equally penniless, like Tom Denham, found a ready and a hearty welcome as long as the funds lasted. He sent money to relieve poor "Copperie" Anderson, the would-be "Inverury poet and dramatist", when steeped in poverty, and he sent it anonymously too, so that none but the hand that gave it knew from whence it came. He interested himself in furthering the publications of Tom Denham and Peter Still, and all so quietly and unostentatiously that it was only known to a few. "Thom", says Still, in a letter now before us, "with all his reputed faults, has been doing something for me in London. I received an order for 50 copies from his publishers (Smith, Elder, & Co.), to whom he has recommended my book. He also desires them to send me a sovereign as *his* subscription to my new edition, and I sent a gilt copy to him in my parcel to his publishers".

As if it were not enough to be weighted in the race of life by habits and impulses long since beyond manageable control,

the little success he had achieved gave occasion for various ventings of spleen, open and covert. At the unlucky moment when, in 1847, his credit was beginning to be somewhat shaky, an instance of this, which troubled him very considerably, took place in the publication of "A Farewell to London, by William Thom, of Inverury", in one of the widely circulated London weeklies. The authorship of this piece of miserable doggerel was not only denied by the poet himself, but it was pronounced spurious at once by those who knew the man best. "Surely your acumen", says Peter Still, in May, 1847, to his brother, "has been blunted by something uncommon, when you thought Thom was the author of 'The Farewell to London'. The poem is no more Thom's than it is mine. It is a *cut* at the poor fellow by some of the Edinburgh poets—a broad hint to the *weaver* that he is out of his proper element among the lions of London". Thom wrote to the editor of the paper it appeared in (Julien Harney, we believe), repudiating the affair, but no notice was taken of his communication. Meeting that gentleman in a public hall, Thom reproached him with his negligence in putting matters right, and they parted with a promise that the spurious character of the rhyme would be pointed out in his next issue—but it never was done. Of course, one of the effects of that piece was the bringing down upon him of every creditor whose little bill was as yet unpaid—which, in his then circumstances, brought the wind-up more speedily than it might have come. With the ebb of the exchequer, Thom's butterfly friends soon forsook him, and those other friends who would have fain proved true to him were so offended at the seeming imprudence and prodigality with which he had conducted affairs—but which was in reality a weakness born of the hand-to-mouth life he had so long led, unfitting him for the management of money concerns—that they stood aloof. In fact, it was only when he came to his last ten pounds that he saw the necessity of "closing the *Hospital*", as he was wont to call the open house for all and sundry, which he then kept. Looking back on the "heck an-mangerin'" of these years, he began to see, as he said, how "the siller had run through my hands like a pickle dry sand—but", he added, "it was only when the landlord seized on the bits o' sticks, and sell't them, I suppose,

that the *Hospital* was finally closed". To add to the flood of miseries which then o'erwhelmed him, the breach in his health and spirits was equally grave as that in his fortunes. His heart turned to auld Scotland, and his spirit yearned for be-north the Tweed. Some literary friends who knew that he was "more sinned against than sinning", provided the necessary means, partly by private subscriptions, and partly by a grant from the Literary Fund; and towards the close of 1847, he settled in the Hawkhill at Dundee. His career was at an end, however; the welcomes of old friends were all that kindness could give, but they charmed him not—the demon of unrest held him in his toils. His last public appearance was at a festival of the Watt Institution, on 19th January, 1848, when he was introduced to a large assembly by Lord Kinnaird, and met with a hearty reception; but such things had lost their zest, and the eloquent tongue could not respond to a dead heart. Let the curtain fall! It is worse than heartless work to note the decline and fall of either state or man. He died on 29th February following, and on 3rd March, his remains were honoured with what is too often a solemn mockery—a "public" funeral. Peter Still was dying, but the memory of Urie's bard was not forgotten by the singers who had enjoyed his friendship in his native north. The verses of Mathers, and more particularly those of William Anderson, written almost impromptu, bespeak in no small measure the tender regard they had for the genius and worth of the inspired weaver.

Turning now from the incidents of his life, to a consideration of his poetry, we may premise that in the whole range of locally published verse, there is no work that we are acquainted with so free from anything of the nature of padding, so fairly level in its excellence, as the first edition of the "Rhymes and Recollections of a Handloom Weaver". In the second and third editions (1845 and 1847) some small verbal changes were introduced, and ten new pieces added, but these, like the five hitherto uncollected poems given in Skinner's edition of 1880, cannot be said to rise much above mediocrity, and certainly add nothing to the fame which he had already won by the tiny little volume of 1844. In both of these larger editions of his poems some remarkable omissions were made—

the whole of "Whaur does the blythe bee sup" and "A Wish", as well as the third verse of "They speak o' wyles", being left out—for what reason it is difficult to conjecture. At all events, those who wish to see Thom at his best, those who desire to form a judgment of his poetical powers, and appreciate his place in the world of letters, must study what he put forth as deliberately finished work, before the lowering influence of "lionising idlers and professed exhibitors" had begun to tell upon his natural tastes and more matured judgment—and that must be in the small 12mo. of 123 pages, printed at the *Herald* Office in 1844.

A very slight perusal of its pages is required to show any one that Thom possessed "the vision and the faculty divine"—limited in measure perhaps, but more exquisite in quality than has, perhaps without a single exception, been gifted to any bard benorth the Tay, from then till now. The general structure of his verses is as simple as our ballad minstrelsy—his diction largely alliterative, his choice of words and figures of speech remarkable for their precision and deep suggestiveness—and his rhythm almost perfect, especially in such of the songs as he wedded to favourite old airs.

Ye dinna ken yon bower,
 Frae the glow'rin' warl' hidden,
 Ye maunna ken yon bower,
 Bonnie in the gloamin'.
 Nae woodbine sheds a fragrance there,
 Nae rose, nae daffodillie fair;
 But, O! yon flow'r beyond compare,
 That blossoms in the gloamin'.

There's little licht in yon bower,
 Day and darkness elbow ither,
That's the licht in yon bower,
 Bonnie in the gloamin'.
 Awa', ye sun, wi' lavish licht,
 And bid brown Benachie guid nicht;
 To me a star mair dearly bricht
 Aye glimmers in the gloamin'.

There's nae a sound in yon bower,
 Merl's sough nor mavis singin';
 Whispers saft in yon bower,
 Mingle in the gloamin'.

What tho' drowsie lav'rock's rest,
 Cow'rin' in their sangless nest?
 When, O! the voice that I like best,
 Cheers me in the gloamin'.

There's artless truth in yon bower,
 Sweeter than the scented blossom;
 Bindin' hearts in yon bower
 Glowin' in the gloamin'.

The freshness o' the upland lea,
 The fragrance o' the blossom'd pea,
 A' mingle in her breath to me,
 Sichin' in the gloamin'.

Then haud awa' frae yon bower,
 Cauldrife breast or loveless bosom;
 True love dwells in yon bower,
 Gladdest in the gloamin'.

Note here, as also in all his best pieces, the great disparity between means and effects, for though few could juggle with words better than he when it so suited his purpose, yet, in his poetry, the simplicity of his diction may be said to be in a direct ratio to its suggestiveness. This is the universal mark of high poetical genius, for, while the mere poetaster labours with phrase piled on phrase to work up the impressions he would fain leave on his reader, the master lyricist, by a few simple touches, and keeping in mind that it is the low sun that makes the colour, reaches the universal heart.

They speak o' wyles in woman's smiles,
 An' ruin in her e'e—
 I ken they bring a pang at whiles
 That's unco sair to dree;
 But mind ye this, the half-ta'en kiss,
 The first fond fa'in' tear,
 Is, Heaven kens, fu' sweet amen's,
 An' tints o' heaven here.

When twa leal hearts in fondness meet,
 Life's tempests howl in vain—
 The very tears o' love are sweet
 When paid with tears again.
 Shall sapless prudence shake its pow,
 Shall cauldrie caution fear?
 O dinna, dinna droun the lowe
 That lights a heaven here.

What tho' we're ca'd a wee before
 The stale "threescore an' ten";
 When "Joy" keeks kindly at your door,
 Aye bid her welcome ben.
 About yon blissfu' bower above
 Let doubtfu' mortals speir,
 Sae weel ken we that "heaven is love",
 Since love maks heaven here.

With an insight into his own nature rarely vouchsafed to an author in humble life—for it is well known that minor poets, as a rule, have "a guid conceit o' themsel's"—Thom knew well the strength and weakness of the elements which lay at the foundation of his genius. He expressed this very happily, in the preface to his second edition, when he said:—"Some degree of fancy has fallen to my lot—judgment, in the better construction of the term, has been sparingly doled out to me". Is it possible to study his poetry or his life and come to any other conclusion? We wot not. The changes may be rung upon that succinct deliverance—it may be amplified to any extent, but the central truth, the kernel of the whole concern remains—some fancy—sparse judgment. It could scarcely be otherwise with him; for as regards actual knowledge, on which all sound judgment is based, he was not only not beyond the average of his class, but far behind many of them who, as the saying goes, never got their heads above water. Warmly affectionate, however, and keenly sympathetic, the emotional bias of his nature was most pronounced, and almost compelled him to poesy. On the other hand, the actual experiences of life, which had come to him laden with so much bitterness and disappointment, had such a sobering, saddening influence on the outgoings of his fancy as set almost all his poetry on a minor key. It was this peculiar conjunction of natural endowment with an adverse fate that gives his writings the characteristic flavour of a pathetic "waefu'ness", so apparent in most of them. This, as a phase of mind, is an occasional attitude with most poets, but with Thom it became almost habitual. His friend, Mr. Forbes Robertson, of London, gives a good illustration of this peculiarity of our poet in the following incident. That gentleman had been singing the rollicking song, "Blythe, blythe, and merry are we". "We

all", he says, "joined in the chorus, and when the song was finished, Thom turned to me, and, with tears in his eyes, crooned this variation of it:—

Blythe, blythe, and merry are we,
 Blythe are we, ane an' a;
But the blythest heart that's here the nicht
Maun lithely lig beneath the snaw.

and then said mournfully, "Think o' that, lad!"

Cast in this particular mould, the stanzas, "Did they meet again?" show rare power of glamourie by their shadowy outline and indefinite suggestiveness, leaving in the mind a weird impression of love and sadness, which haunts one for hours after perusal. Perhaps the tenderest of all his verses are those composed some short time after the death of Jean, when he shut up his dwelling and became more than ever nomadic in his habits of life. It opens:—

The ae dark spot in this loveless world,
 That spot maun ever be, Willie;
 Where she sat an' dauted yer bonnie brown hair,
 An' lithely lookit to me, Willie;
 An' oh! my heart owned a' the power
 Of your mither's gifted e'e, Willie.

There's now nae blink at our slacken'd hearth,
 Nor kindred breathing there, Willie;
 But cauld and still our hame of Death,
 Wi' it's darkness evermair, Willie;
 For she wha' lived in our love, is cauld,
 An' her grave the stranger's lair, Willie.

* * * * *

The play of his fancy, ever warm and enlivening, and most at home in the quiet, out of the way nooks of life and nature, is seen at its best in No. 1 of "The Blind Boys Pranks", already quoted—and which stands as a piece of literary craftsmanship, head and shoulders above anything he ever wrote. The popularity of "The Mitherless Bairn" arises more, we suspect, from the nature of the subject than anything else, and has ever seemed to us inferior in point of poetic art to many of his less known pieces. His "Song of the Forsaken" and his picture of the forsaken one—

Her looks ance gay as gleams o' gowd
 Upon a silver sea ;
 Now dark an' dowie as the cloud
 That creeps athwart yon leafless wood
 In cauld December's e'e.

—with the graphic sketch “By the lowe o’ a lawyer’s ingle bright”—have made lasting impressions on every reader of his poetry, and will continue to do so despite the fluctuation of fashionable taste, because the hand of a master placed them there. Reference has already been made to his prose. His “Recollections” have by one section of readers been highly admired and much belauded, by another they have been condemned as over-coloured, stilted, and unnatural—the pathos forced, and the surroundings vulgar. The fact is, they were written when in circumstances which enabled him to look back on bygone hardships with some degree of complacency—his aim being to paint an effective picture. He wrote perhaps not his feelings at the time of the occurrences, but what they appeared when looked at from a distance through the spectacles of his poetic fancy. The language is the language in common use with him, and very effective language it is. The pictures, despite all this, are true, though unconventional, for there is nothing more unconventional than the truth.

It has been customary in talking about Thom and his poetry to compare him with this poet and with that, and endeavour to determine his place in our national literature by a variety of methods, yea, even to the counting of the number of gems he has set in the crown of Scottish song. We can away with all such, for quality baffles the lower calculus of quantity. To us Thom has ever seemed to stand alone in the walk of poesy his genius elected to move in; his circle was indeed a narrow one, but he had the good sense to keep within it, and keeping within it, he exercised a power which endeared him to the hearts of his countrymen, and placed him unmisstakeably in the front of Scotland’s minor poets.

If life had only been a poem—something to trick out in cunning phrase, the great ends of which might be possibly attained by a jingle of words, who could have managed it better than Thom? But, alas! events are not linked together

by the power of man's elaborative faculty—the relation of ends and means in the eternal fitness of things cannot be controlled by the play of human ideas—poets, as well as more ordinary mortals, have to find sooner or later that the successful conduct of life is a sadly prosaic affair, attainable less through the possession of brilliant gifts than by the practice of the minor virtues, and possible only to those who have truly learned, that

Prudent, cautious self-control
Is wisdom's root.—