

CHAPTER XIII.

CLOSING LABOURS.

THE records of a busy literary life of half a century would be incomplete if I were to make no mention of its closing years, which have, in one sense, been the busiest of all. Like too many unfortunates in a country where Literature is ignored by the State, and scantily recognised by a Legislature that jealously affirms the rights of a man and his heirs to his houses, his lands, and his money, but denies the rights of an author and his heirs—except for a very short and limited period—to the works of his brain, I have found literature to be but a parsimonious mother in the way of pecuniary recompense. Literature in Great Britain is both a pleasant and a perilous profession. It is pleasant and remunerative

to those who care nothing for posthumous fame, and who make it their business to amuse the public, and tickle the thoughtless to laughter, who are merchants that deal in frivolous and light reading, and look to no other rewards than are expected by merchants who deal in cheese and butter, fish, flesh, and fowl, wines and broadcloths, or other physical commodities. It is pleasant and perilous, but often fatal, to those whose aims are too high to pander to the evanescent and often ignoble tastes of the multitude, and who have no hopes except in the appreciation and sympathy of the thoughtful few, and the barren homage to be rendered to their memory by a remote posterity.

In looking back upon my literary work, I am painfully conscious that my worst has been the most popular, and that my best has received but slight or no recognition. The ballads of "There's a good time coming" and "Cheer, boys, cheer," thrown off at a heat in an hour or two, have earned the acclamations of the million; while the conscientious labours of years have been welcomed only by the choice few, whose numbers might be counted by the score.

But, successful or unsuccessful, I have never "bated heart or hope" in the exercise of my vocation. I have laboured in it because I loved it, and, as Coleridge said of his poetry, that my work

was "its own exceeding great reward." During the last ten years, freed from the trammels and deprived of the regular income of daily or weekly journalism, I have—to use a phrase common among painters and sculptors—been compelled, by the not-to-be-avoided demands of baker, tailor, and house-owner, to produce "pot-boilers" to pay my way. Since the sudden cessation of my unfortunate connection with the *Times*—in the favour of which journal I stood high as long as Fortune seemed to smile on the cause of the Southern Confederacy—I have contributed anonymously to *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and to Dickens's *All the Year Round*, leaving myself leisure for other work that did not pay, but that ministered to my enjoyment, the increase of my knowledge, and the education of my mental faculties.

The chief of these labours of love was in historical philology, which always, as long back as my literary memory can carry me, had charms for my mind. The celebrated Dr. Samuel Johnson—an ignorant philologist, following in the track of still more ignorant predecessors—maintained, in his famous Dictionary, that the original inhabitants of England, who spoke Keltic, one of the oldest languages in the world, though spared by the Romans during five hundred years of occupation, were exterminated at a later period by their Saxon con-

querors, and that, being exterminated, their language was necessarily exterminated with them; that the few miserable fugitives who escaped the incredible massacre took refuge in Wales and the Highlands of Scotland; and that the remnants of their language which they carried along with them to their all but inaccessible mountain fastnesses were mere gibberish, unworthy of the attention of philologists and students of language.

He based his Dictionary on this unfounded assertion, and persuaded himself, his contemporaries, and successors in the industry of compiling Dictionaries, that the English language was almost wholly a variety of the Teutonic, enriched and extended by the Latin, and the Norman French, and that it was in no degree indebted to the British of the early inhabitants.

Dr. Johnson and his predecessors were utterly in the wrong, historically; and their philology was as much founded in error as their history. There is no evidence of the so-called extermination of the British, except the untrustworthy assertion of Gildas, a credulous British monk, who wrote a Latin treatise after he had taken refuge in Brittany. This prejudiced and frightened ecclesiastic endeavoured to prove that the Saxons occupied the whole interior of the country, as well as the fringe of the Southern and Eastern

coasts. He did not hint that they had put to the sword the helpless women and children of the Britons, or even any large proportion of the male inhabitants; and brought forward nothing to militate against the very natural supposition that, as the invaders had not brought their women along with them, they must have married in due time the daughters of the natives, who were of the same race, though not of the same language, as themselves, and that the children of such marriages must have learned to some extent in the nursery the language of their mothers.

Having some knowledge of the Gaelic spoken in the Highlands of Scotland—which Dr. Johnson thought to be different from what he called the “Erse” spoken in Ireland, though the two are identically the same, with some slight varieties of orthography and pronunciation—I devoted my leisure to the further study of that venerable speech which the Keltic swarms, in their successive immigrations from Asia in the pre-historic ages, brought to Europe along with them. In that speech they gave names, still existent, to all the rivers, all the mountain ranges, and all the great physical features of Western Europe, including Greece, Italy, Spain, France, and the British Islands. That language is now proved and recognised to be co-eval and kindred with the Sanscrit, the Hindustani, the Turkish, the Arabic, the Persian, and the Hebrew.

With all of these it has many hundreds of words in common, all traceable to one source—the Sanscrit, one of the oldest languages which has come down to our times, though comparatively modern in comparison with the Chinese, and probably the Japanese and Malayan tongues.

Pursuing my investigations in this direction, I found the undoubted sources of hundreds of colloquial, vulgar, and unliterary expressions in common use among the English-speaking people, and of a multitude of recognized literary words in all the languages of Western Europe, for which Johnson and his successors in England down to the present time, and M. Littré in his great French Dictionary, had either been wholly unable to account, or for which they had imagined the most absurd and ludicrous etymologies.

I found that English “slang” or “flash” words—once called “cant,” “Pedlars’ Greek,” and “St. Giles’s Greek”—still spoken by tramps, thieves, and members of the very lowest substrata of the vulgar—as well as by some members of the upper vulgar who move in good society—are all derived from the original British, and are, in fact, the oldest words in the language. I also found that French “Argot” and the German “Rothwelsch” had the same ancient paternity.

I found, among other discoveries, that the intensely vulgar phrase, “do you *twig*?” was from

the Gaelic *tuig*, "to understand"; that a "cove" was the Gaelic *caomh* (*mh* pronounced as *v*) and signified a gentle or courteous person, synonymous with the equally vulgar word, a "gent"; that "beak" (a magistrate) was derived from the Gaelic *beachd*, "judgment, or a judge"; that "cut stick" or "cut your stick"—an intense vulgarism, which has been rendered still more vulgar, if that be possible, by the drearily comic modern phrase, "amputate your timber"—was the Gaelic *cuite 'a steach*, "quit the house"; that the equally vulgar phrase, "cut your lucky," was a corruption of the Gaelic *cuite an lorgach*, "quit the track!"

Among other discoveries which I made during my laborious researches, was that the apparently unmeaning choruses of many popular English and French songs and ballads, which Dr. Johnson would have treated as "gibberish," such as "Fal lal la," "Fol de rol," "Tooral looral," "Fal lero loo," "Hey, nonnie, nonnie," "Hey, derry down," "Hey, trollollie loo," and others—still popular, but more greatly popular in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—were in reality the desecrated remnants of Hymns to the Sun, sung by the Druids of France and the British Isles more than two thousand years ago, all distinctly traceable to the Keltic. "Fal lal la" is a corruption of *failte là là*, "hail to the day," a welcome to the sun, sung by the priests at day-break; *fallal*

là signifies "farewell to the day," sung at sunset; "tooral looral" signifies *tuath reul*—pronounced *tua-reul*—"north star," and *luath reul*—pronounced *lua-reul*—"swift star"; while "*hey, nonnie nonnie no*" signifies "hail to the noon," or the ninth hour—which at midsummer, in our northern latitudes, was reckoned from sunrise, at 3 A.M., making noon the *ninth* hour, or 12 o'clock by modern calculation.

Following out these clues, and a multiplicity of others which the study of Gaelic or Kymric afforded me, I compiled a comprehensive Dictionary, which I published by subscription in 1878, and dedicated by permission to the Prince of Wales, which I entitled *The Gaelic Etymology of the Languages of Western Europe, and more particularly of the English and Lowland Scotch, and of their Slang, Cant, and Colloquial Dialects*. In the compilation and preparation of this work I expended five years and upwards, of conscientious and careful work, and by its publication I incurred a pecuniary loss of upwards of £300. The only literary encouragement I received during its progress was from Dr. Bosworth, of the University of Oxford, author of the well-known Anglo-Saxon Dictionary and Grammar—two works by which, as he informed me, he gained first and last the handsome sum of £18,000. He informed me at the same time that he always regretted his ignorance of Gaelic and Kymric, and the other branches of the great and ancient Keltic languages,

and that, if it were not for his great age—he was then upwards of eighty—he would make it his pleasure and his duty to study them.

But I was not discouraged at my loss and my failure of recognition from prejudiced and ignorant English critics and philologists. The only exception was the late Rev. Dr. Stormonth, the author of a valuable English Dictionary, recently published by Messrs. Blackwood and Sons, of Edinburgh. I extended my researches in two other directions. The first is entitled *Recreations Gauloises, ou Origines Celtiques de la Langue Française*, which I wrote in French, with the hope of finding a French publisher. In this work I pointed out many of the omissions and mistakes of the well-known French philologist, M. Littré, whose ignorance of Keltic—not so great or so presumptuously displayed as that of Dr. Johnson—was nevertheless conspicuous. In that work I have traced the origin of more than seven hundred words against which in his Dictionary he has placed the commentary “*origine inconnue.*”

My accomplished and versatile friend, the late Mr. Grenville Murray, long resident in Paris, endeavoured in vain, and took the most zealous pains, to induce some of the most influential publishers of Paris to undertake the publication of this work; but they all refused, though nothing was expected for the copyright. They severally agreed in commendation of the work, and some went so

far as to say that it was "highly important," but that it would make such slow progress in public acceptance, that no profitable returns from its publication could be expected until after the lapse of many years. And as none of them could afford to wait, even for one year, for a return of at least a portion of their money, they respectfully declined the venture.

This work, which remains in manuscript, without a publisher, occupied me about four years; and, if the literary and popular ignorance of and prejudice against the Keltic are as great in France as they are in England, it is possible, and highly probable, that the publication—if it ever take place—will be posthumous.

Still another work of Gaelic research, which has been to me a labour of love, remains to be mentioned: *New Light derived from the Ancient Language of the British People on the obscure Words and Phrases in the Writings of Shakspeare and his Contemporaries*. Hitherto the editors of and commentators on Shakspeare's writings have looked to every imaginable source for the explanation of the archaic, obsolete, or unintelligible words that occur in his Plays, rather than to the current speech of the common people of Warwickshire and Mid-England, who had Keltic blood in their veins and Keltic words on their tongues, well understood by Shakspeare in his early boyhood and youth in his native town and

neighbourhood, though not intelligible to the literary men or public of London in the seventeenth century, or to the printers—then or subsequently—of his immortal works.

The ludicrous attempts of every one of these commentators to explain or account for these words may be exemplified by two or three instances which I select at random from the great mass of similar materials which I have collected :

COSIER.—Malvolio says in *Twelfth Night*, “Do you make an ale-house out of my lady’s house, that ye squeak out your *coziers’* catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice?” What is a *Cozier*, or *Cosier*, as it is sometimes written? Dr. Johnson thought it meant a *tailor*, from *coudre*, “to sew.” Nares and Halliwell considered it to mean a *cobbler*; while Harsnet, afterwards Archbishop of York, alludes to the catches or rounds sung by working people in ale-houses, and songs “sung by *tinkers* as they sit by the fire with a pot of good ale between their legs.” The Keltic etymology of the word refers it neither to tinker, tailor, nor cobbler, but to *cos*, “a foot,” and *cosaire*, “a traveller on foot, a walker, a pedestrian, a tramp”; *cosan*, “a footpath.” It would thus appear that in Shakspeare’s time the working men of England, when on the tramp, or travelling from place to place in search of employment, were in the habit of assembling in the evening at the way-

side public-houses, and to sing "rounds and catches" together. On this subject see Mr. Chappell's *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, Vol. I., pages 109, 110. The musical taste of the people was not confined to tailors, cobblers, or tinkers, as might be supposed by those who narrow the meaning of *Cosier* to any one handicraft, but prevailed generally among the working classes. In the introduction to Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Dr. Johnson*, the editor (the late Dr. Carruthers of Inverness) says that at that time the last gleams of romance in Highland life had been extinguished, and that the chiefs no longer boasted of their *coshir*, or retinue, *i.e.* their footmen, or men on foot, who followed them on grand occasions.

DUC DA ME.—This word or phrase occurs as a line in a stanza added by Jacques to a song sung by Amiens in *As You Like It*:

If it do come to pass
That any man turn ass,
Leaving his wealth and ease
A stubborn will to please,
 Duc da mé, Duc da mé,
 Here shall he see
 Gross fools as he.

Amiens, puzzled by the phrase *Duc da mé*, asks Jacques what it means. Jacques replies, "'Tis a Greek invocation, to call fools into a circle." By "Greek" he appears to have meant "*Pedlars' Greek*"—the popular name for slang or for the

cant language of the beggars and gipsies of his day, which is not wholly disused in our own. In a note on this passage, Mr. Staunton says: "After all that has been written in elucidation of the word, we are disposed to believe that it is mere unmeaning babble coined for the occasion." Sir Thomas Hanmer and others thought it was once a call of farm-wives and farm-servants when summoning the ducks to be fed!

No one has discovered, or even hinted at, the "circle" to which Jacques alludes. Perhaps the old game of Tom Tidler's Ground may throw some light on the matter. One of the most ancient of the rhymes still sung by British children is:

Here I am on Tom Tidler's ground,
Picking up gold and silver.

The origin and meaning of the name *Tom Tidler* have given rise to much controversy. The Rev. E. Cobham Brewer, in his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, maintains it to be a corruption of "Tom th' Idler." "Tom," he says, "in the game stands on a heap or mound of stones, gravel, &c. Other boys rush on the heap, crying, 'Here I am on Tom Tidler's Ground,' &c. *Tom* bestirs himself to keep the invaders off." This has hitherto passed muster; but the true derivation is from the Keltic or Gaelic, proving the game to have been known to British children before the Saxon and Danish irruption and conquest. *Tom* signifies "hill or

mound," a word that enters into the composition of the names of many places in the British Isles; and *tiodlach*, "gift, offering, treasure": so that *Tom-tiodlach*—corrupted by the Danes and Saxons into *Tom-tiddler*—signifies "the hill of gifts or treasure," of which the players seek to hold or to regain possession. It was the custom for the boy who temporarily held the hill or *tom* to assert that the ground or circle belonged to him of right, and dare the invaders to dispossess him, by the exclamation of "*Duc da mé!*" This phrase has puzzled commentators quite as much as the name of *Tom Tiddler* has done. The word, however, resolves itself into the Keltic or Gaelic *Duthaich* (the *t* silent before the aspirate, pronounced *du-haic*), and signifying "a country, an estate, a territory, a piece of land"; or *duc*, "a mound or artificial hillock"; *do* signifying "to," and *mí* "me"—*i.e.* "this territory or ground is to me; it is my land or estate." This old British phrase continued to be used by children and illiterate people long after the British language had given way to the Saxon English, and was repeated by boys and girls in the game now called *Tom Tiddler's Ground* so lately as forty years ago, when I heard it used by children on the Links of Leith and the Inches of my native city of Perth.

I have extracted these specimen words from a small pamphlet which I have sent forth into the

world, as a sort of pilot balloon, or forerunner of the greater work, with the elaboration and the preparation of which I have employed and amused the fast closing years of my life, in the hope that the undying popularity of Shakspeare would ensure some amount of public support towards its publication. But the literary prejudice of English philologists against the Keltic is so wide-spread in England that I shall not be very greatly disappointed if I find but scanty support in the undertaking, unless, perhaps, in Germany, where Shakspeare is as highly appreciated as in England, where the importance of the study of Keltic is acknowledged by all scholars, where no Anglo-Saxon prejudice exists against it, and where its true value and antiquity as a matrix of many languages, even to some extent of the German, is fully recognised.

As regards the years I have spent in these studies, I will but say in conclusion, in the words of a true poet—

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.
