

JAMES HUTCHISON STIRLING

CHAPTER I

1820-1833

Introductory—Parentage—Boyhood

It is some seven-and-forty years since there issued from the Press a philosophical work, bearing the somewhat sensational title of the *Secret of Hegel*, which has since been said by "those who know" to form a landmark in the history of philosophy. In spite of the apparent incongruity between the unknown author's name on the title-page and the claim to importance put forth by the two solid volumes, the book at once attracted the attention of a wide circle of thoughtful readers. Though half-a-century had passed since the publication of Hegel's *Logik*, and thirty-four since his death, Hegel, if known by name, was still almost totally uncomprehended, not only in Britain, but, as the writer of the *Secret* had found to his cost, even in Germany; and while there were some students of philosophy who, adopting the tactics of the fox in the fable, denounced as unintelligible or worthless what they had failed to understand, there were many for whom the German philosopher's very reputation for obscurity and profundity helped to throw the glamour of mystery about his name.

A glance into the work of his British interpreter

was calculated to intensify whatever previous interest might have been felt in the philosophy of Hegel. It was not only the unusual vigour and vividness of the style in which the book was written ; it was not only the evidence throughout of hard study and hard thought, nor the striking and original illustrations which abounded on every page—what specially impressed, on a first reading of the *Secret*, was the writer's intense *sincerity*, his profound conviction of the supreme value to mankind of the outcome, or, as he would himself have named it, the substance, of Hegelianism. The philosophy of Hegel, he says, "yields at every step the choicest aliment of humanity—such aliment as nourishes us strongly into our true stature." In another passage : "The system of Hegel is this : not a mere theory or intellectual view, or collection of theories or intellectual views, but an *Organon*, through which passed, the individual soul finds itself on a new elevation, and with new powers." Again : "Hegel . . . seems to have closed an era, and has named the all of things in such terms of thought as will, perhaps, remain essentially the same for the next thousand years."

It is nearly half-a-century since those words were written ; but the conviction that they are true still will be felt by every thoughtful, unprejudiced person who, knowing the nature of the intellectual and spiritual wants of the present day, reads for the first time the Preface to the original edition of the *Secret of Hegel*. During the years since its publication, there has hardly been one man, in any part of the world, addicted however little to the higher philosophical thought, who has not, at some time or other, admitted his debt, for enlightenment and stimulus, to the *Secret of Hegel* ; nevertheless, there are perhaps many earnest, intelligent souls in the present day who know not that the book contains the very intellectual and spiritual nourishment for

which they are seeking—many who, on reading it for the first time, would feel

“ . . . like some watcher of the skies,
When a new planet swims into his ken.”

Without entering into philosophical technicalities (which are beyond the scope of the present volume), it is hoped that it may be possible to indicate, in terms intelligible to the thoughtful, but uninitiated, reader for whom these pages are specially written, the general nature of the grounds on which Stirling rests the claim to supreme value of the Hegelian philosophy, as well as to prove that those grounds are as strong as ever—that eighty years after the death of Hegel, and nearly half-a-century since his *Secret* was revealed to British readers, it is still, as Stirling himself expressed it, in “the vessel of Hegel” that what he calls the “Historic Pabulum”—*i.e.*, the spiritual nourishment which the wants of any special age demand—is contained. That part of the present undertaking, however, it is thought better to defer to a later chapter; and meantime to trace out the events of the life, and the various stages in the intellectual development, of the author of the “SECRET OF HEGEL.”

JAMES HUTCHISON STIRLING was born in Glasgow on the 22nd of June 1820—the youngest of the six children of William Stirling, and Elizabeth Christie, his wife.

The father of the future philosopher was in many ways a remarkable man. Owing chiefly, no doubt, to his characteristic reserve and taciturnity, little was known regarding his early life even to his son; and one feels, on recalling what one has heard of him, as if he had never been anything but the middle-aged man, father of a family, and partner in the firm of James Hutchison & Co., manufacturers, of whom such a vivid impression was preserved in the memory of his son.

Of his (William Stirling's) father, his grandson has often been heard to tell with pride that he fought as a private soldier in the war in Canada in the middle of the eighteenth century, rising to the rank of sergeant. That fact, however, is all that is now known of him. A certain mystery seems to hang around his origin and birthplace; and a believer in heredity might find evidence of old descent on the part of the soldier in the remarkably small, well-shaped hands and feet of some of his descendants. Those of Margaret Stirling, the philosopher's only sister, for instance, were like a sculptor's models—small, perfectly formed, smooth and white as wax. Stirling himself, however, never made any attempt to discover the origin of his family—a thing in which he had no interest.

No doubt a believer in heredity would trace to his soldier grandfather the military look, which distinguished the philosopher throughout life, and was the subject of frequent remark, as well as the fighting instinct which was a marked trait in his character, and the intense interest which he always took in descriptions of battles.

In many respects, William Stirling was fitted by nature to be the father of a man of genius, if it may not be said that he himself possessed, in some degree at least, the gift of genius. No man was ever more blessed, or cursed, with the *præfervidum ingenium* which is supposed to be characteristic of his countrymen. Usually remarkably silent, as has already been indicated, if he were roused by opposition to his will, or by any action on the part of a member of his family of which he disapproved, he would overwhelm the unfortunate offender with a lava stream of burning words. Intellectually, he was certainly a man of remarkable ability. Though we have no record of the steps, it must have been by his own talents that he raised himself to the position of partner in his firm, and amassed a con-

siderable fortune; and we know that it was his energy, his eagle eye for the detection of blemishes in the work of the employees, and the awe which he inspired in those under him, which earned for "Hutchison's muslin" the high reputation for excellence which it enjoyed. There is still extant, too, among his son's papers, a "rule for coming"—a sort of algebraic formula for use in weaving—which is believed to have secured for him his partnership in Hutchison's firm.

His business success, moreover, is not the only evidence we possess of the intellectual ability of William Stirling. We know that he made a special study of algebra and mathematics, and that he was seldom seen out of business hours without a book in his hand. A man to whom the pleasures of the table, of society, of sport, of the pipe and the flowing bowl, were almost unknown, his sole enjoyment was derived from books, with the occasional variety of a game of draughts. Tobacco he looked on with actual abhorrence.

Though mathematics seem to have formed his chief study, he devoted some attention to general literature; but in his literary tastes, unlike his son, he belonged entirely to the past. Pope and Goldsmith were his favourite authors. He never seems to have advanced beyond a liking for the stiff regularity of Pope's verse; he never learned to appreciate the spontaneity, the originality, the wealth of imagery, the variety of rhythm, of a Shelley or a Keats, who were the gods of his son's literary idolatry.

Of his wife, Elizabeth Christie, the mental portrait which survives in living memory is much fainter and dimmer than that of her husband. She was, we know, both as wife and mother, most loving and tender. To the end of his life, her youngest son preserved a warmly affectionate memory of her, and never ceased to regret her

comparatively early death before he had completed his eighth year. Although he was so young when she died, he had the liveliest recollections of her tenderness to him during a childish illness, and of her motherly pride in him—especially on the occasion of some school prize-giving, when he, probably not yet seven years of age, stood up in the Trades' Hall in Glasgow, and recited the speech of Cassius to Brutus in Scene II., Act 1 of Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*—surely a sufficiently remarkable feat for a boy of those years. Eighty years later, he was heard to recite the passage with literal correctness, though, in the long interval, he had never re-learned it.

If it was from his father's family that Stirling inherited his military look and fighting instinct, it was probably to his mother's side of the house that he owed the religious feeling which was deeply implanted in his nature. Among his books are one or two old editions of classic writers, inscribed with the name David Christie, and the date 1793, which belonged to a brother of his mother's, a remarkably good and pious young man, who died while preparing for the ministry of the Scottish Church.

The loss of his mother was of course a serious misfortune to the young Stirling. There was no one to take her place—if anyone ever can take the place of a mother. His sister was five years older than he; but a girl of twelve could not be expected to supply the place of a mother to a younger brother; and the boy, who was naturally warm-hearted, and eager for the affection of those around him, sadly missed the love and tender care of the mother he had lost.

If, however, the loss of his mother robbed the home of its comfort and happiness, and if the reserve and aloofness of his father often chilled him, the boy Stirling was possessed of too much

vitality and vigour to be permanently depressed by anything. Once outside the walls of the uncongenial home, he seems to have thrown the memory of it to the winds, and to have become the life and soul of his young companions, the leader in their sports and frolics. He was gifted by nature with a fine healthy physique, with what the older physiologists called a sanguine temperament, and with the vigour and high spirits which are the natural outcome of such qualities.

Of this period of the life of the future philosopher there are no written records; and the materials for this brief chapter have been drawn almost entirely from the memories of those who were privileged to hear the reminiscient talk in which he occasionally indulged, when surrounded by his family, or by intimate friends. Those talks seem to have turned but little on the subject of school and lessons. We know that Stirling attended "Young's Academy," which was considered, if not educationally, at least socially, superior to the High School; and there is evidence that he attained a certain proficiency in his studies in a copy of *Cæsar*, still among his books, bearing the inscription, "Jacobus Stirling, hoc meriti insignis præmium donavit Ro. Young A.M.," and the date 1833—the year when Stirling left the "Academy." Of what he learned there, however, of the masters who taught him, and the boys whose friendship he made, practically nothing is known.

If there is but little recollection of school, or lessons, or teachers left in the memories of those who have listened to Stirling's talks about the days of his boyhood, they all remember how his eye would light up as he fought over again some of the stone battles in the streets of Glasgow in which he took part as a boy; how he shuddered at the memory of his perilous recovery of a lost arrow by

creeping along the gutter on the roof of a four-storey house ; how he would glow as he recalled his swims across the Clyde, and his first ecstatic vision of the limpidly clear water, the rocky shores, and the fairy-like scenery of the Firth of Clyde, which always remained to him throughout life the most beautiful in the world.

There is a little story belonging to this period which shows the remarkable daring, courage, and strength of will which Stirling possessed even as a boy. He was about eight years old when he undertook to guide a boy-companion, a little older than himself, on foot, to Greenock, where the boy had relatives living. The distance between Glasgow and Greenock is over twenty miles ; but the self-constituted guide was as ignorant of the distance as he was of the direction ! However, he was not the sort of boy to allow a little want of knowledge to prevent his enjoyment of a day's adventure on which he had set his heart ; so the two set out in great excitement and high spirits.

No doubt, the sense of adventure and the novelty of the scene carried them very pleasantly over the first few miles ; but by-and-by, as they walked on and on, and Greenock did not appear in sight, doubts of his guide's reliability began to assail the elder boy, and he asked anxiously if " Jamie " was quite sure he knew the way. Jamie replied stoutly, if not quite truthfully, that " of course he did " ; and on the two tramped for another mile or two. Still Greenock seemed as far away as ever, and the dinner-hour was past ! The boys began to feel the pangs of hunger ; and the elder boy suggested that they should turn back ; but his autocratic guide would not hear of retreat. He had read stories of shipwrecked sailors being driven by the extremities of hunger to eat their own shoes ; and he had picked up a piece of leather from the road. This he handed to his companion, bidding him chew it,

and assuring him it would take away all feeling of hunger.

With that faith which children often show in a companion who is stronger and cleverer than themselves, the boy took the unpalatable morsel and munched at it; and the two trudged on again. Still no sight of Greenock; the day was advancing towards evening, and the piece of leather proved but an unsatisfactory substitute for the usual mid-day meal! Jamie's companion began to whimper, and to declare in terror that they were lost; but Jamie himself was quite undaunted, and as determined as ever to reach Greenock, though he was suffering with one of his heels, which became festered, and afterwards gave him much trouble. So on he limped bravely, alluring his dejected companion with assurances that Greenock was "just round the next corner," and the next, and the next, until at last—*mirabile dictu!*—the two adventurous little urchins did actually reach the goal of their hopes, and did actually stumble, as it were, into the arms of the amazed uncle of the elder boy! By him the truants were taken home to his wife, who treated them like a pair of heroes—fed them, and tended them, and put them to bed with a motherly tenderness which was as grateful as it was unaccustomed to the motherless young Stirling.

The boy, it is said, is father of the man. At first sight it may appear as if there were little in common between the profound philosopher and the high-spirited boy, with his ruddy cheeks, fair hair, and bluest of blue eyes; with his love of fun, and fighting, and adventure; but a little consideration will show us that the same qualities which were characteristic of the boy—force, spirit, independence, strength of will, and, perhaps we may add, the love of fighting—were afterwards conspicuous in the pages of the *Secret of Hegel*. Moreover, the boy Stirling was from an early age an omnivorous reader.

A little anecdote which he was often heard to relate would seem to show that, even at nine or ten, the future philosopher had within him that spirit of faith, which, later, he regarded as part of his mission to endeavour to reawaken in the minds of thinkers who were still under the influence of the eighteenth-century sceptical enlightenment. It happened, one evening, that he was very anxious to accompany his brother David, who was some ten years older than himself, to some place of entertainment, and being refused permission, he determined to go without it. So when his brother set out from the house, James slipped out after him, shut the door, took the key with him, and eagerly followed. It was a dark evening, and the boy found it by no means easy to keep in sight the figure of his brother, whose longer strides bore him rapidly through the streets, which were no doubt but dimly lighted in those days of the infancy of gas-illumination. Absorbed in his one object, he forgot everything else, till, suddenly—he knew not how or why—the thought of the house-key flashed into his brain, and he found it was gone! The shock of this alarming discovery brought his steps, and even his heart, as it seemed, to a sudden stop. For a moment or two, he stood paralyzed; then, with the spontaneity of instinct, he turned to the only power that could help—in the agony of his mind, he prayed to God to help him to find the key. Retracing his steps for a few yards, he stooped, and his fingers, groping over the pavement in the dark, closed on something hard and cold. It was the lost key!

How profound was the impression left on the mind of the philosopher by this incident is proved by the fact that he alludes to it in a letter written in 1904—seventy-four years after it took place!—remarking that the experience “acted as focus to what I say of prayer in the *Secret of Hegel*”—

“prayer must be believed, as it were, to stay the arm that sways the universe.” It was no doubt present to him, too, when, in 1877, he concluded that strange poem which contains the summary of his philosophy (*I am that I am*) with these lines:—

“Brute is the world in externality,
And blind, still stumbling in contingency;
But I, even I, am Lord: I will control
The monstrous masses, as they wheel, and check
Them there, and smooth the pillow for thy head—
Make thou thyself but mine—but me—in Prayer.”

CHAPTER II

1833-1838

Youth—Student Days—Early Love

So the early morning passed—fresh, breezy, healthy—and Stirling's day advanced towards its noon. He was only thirteen when, in October 1833, he may be said to have assumed the *toga virilis*, which in his case took the form of the red cloak worn by students attending Glasgow University. This cloak was regarded by its wearer as somewhat of a boon, not only for the welcome warmth which it afforded on the cold, dark, winter mornings when he sallied forth, breakfastless, to his early class in the dingy, gas-lit lecture-room, but also because it covered a multitude of sins in the way of missing buttons, and worn button-holes, in the apparel of the motherless lad.

Since that day in October 1833 when the young Stirling first took his place on the hard benches of the Latin, or, as it was called, Humanity, class-room, in which Professor William Ramsay then lectured, many changes have taken place in the Scottish Universities. During the last twenty years, the modern spirit has made a most successful invasion of those last strongholds of mediævalism, widening their doors to admit women, opening almost innumerable avenues to academic honours, where previously practically only one existed, giving the student an almost bewildering choice of his course of study, changing the session, which for generations was as fixed as the equinoxes, and, in the case of Glasgow at least, substituting noble

buildings, large, well-ventilated lecture-rooms and spacious corridors for the "quaint, dingy courts" and bare class-rooms in which the students of seventy years ago used to meet. One of the many changes which have taken place is in the age at which students begin their University career. No one nowadays would think of entering the University at such an early age as thirteen; but in 1833 it was quite common to do so, some students matriculating at an even earlier age.

For the next five sessions (which began early in October, and ended always on the first of May), Stirling attended the "Arts" classes, mounting, one by one, the prescribed seven steps which, for generations, had formed the only ladder by which "young ambition" could reach the proud position of Master of Arts. Among his papers there is still a packet of cards, yellow with age, signed by the various professors whose classes he attended, which testify to his regular attendance. On the backs of two of them—those referring to the Junior and Senior Mathematical Classes of the sessions 1834-5, and 1835-6—the professor has written, in his own hand, a testimonial to "Mr Stirling's" "unvarying propriety" of conduct, and to his "excellent capacity for scientific pursuits, accompanied by such a degree of steadiness as are rarely found in one so young." This professor was James Thomson, the father of the celebrated Lord Kelvin, who, along with a brother, attended the senior mathematical class during the same session as Stirling. It is Professor Thomson whom Stirling, in a letter to the Rev. John Snaith (an earnest student of philosophy, with whom, in later years, he carried on a frequent correspondence), describes as "of all my teachers, ablest, perhaps even kindest and gentlest." From the same letter, the following passage is here quoted as referring to the period which we have now reached:—

“The class under Thomson had, towards the end of said session [*i.e.*, the session 1835-6] three evenings of voluntary (or optional) examination for a prize; and for this a dozen or two students may have presented themselves in the class-room benches, of whom I was one. We found the black-board chalked over with problems of the Calculus, or others the like. Our business was, then and there, to write out and present to the professor solutions of them. Two evenings of those examinations I attended, and did the work of. On the evening of the third and last, however, J. Scott of Woolwich, afterwards Principal of Owens College, Manchester—whom we Glasgow students honoured, as religious preacher and philosophical lecturer, not much less than we did Carlyle himself—happened to be on one of his visits to Glasgow, and was advertised to lecture that very night. The temptation proved too great, and to Scott’s lecture I went, without difficulty consoling myself that, in said mathematical examination, I had of course no chance, the two sons of the professor, James and William (afterwards Lord Kelvin), being both in the competition. Great was my surprise, however, when, in reference to its result, I heard my own name the first called; and the professor, coming in front of me, said, ‘Mr Stirling, you did not attend the examination last night. Now—well, don’t speak!—don’t speak!’ (quite urgently). ‘If you were absent from illness, you will get an average—you stand very high.’ ‘I was absent through choice, sir.’ ‘Ah, then it is useless! With a little more exertion you might have done—very well!’ And that Irish ‘very well’ was enchantingly (with the pause) characteristic.”

This anecdote would seem to prove that, had Stirling chosen to devote himself to Mathematics, he might have become as eminent in that science as he afterwards became in Metaphysics. In after

years, when recalling this episode of his student days, he would sometimes smilingly lament that he had missed an opportunity of distinguishing himself by beating the future Lord Kelvin on his own ground!

If, in the class of Mathematics, he did not gain the first place, it cannot be said, nevertheless, that he failed to achieve distinction; and certificates, written in the year 1842 by Professors Ramsay, Buchanan, and Fleming, show that, in Latin, Logic, and Moral Philosophy, he did good work, and proved himself to be possessed of unusual ability. In Moral Philosophy, indeed, he won the first prize, which, in accordance with the custom which prevailed in the University at that time, was awarded to him by the votes of his fellow-students. It is interesting to note here that we have Stirling's own authority for saying that the honour gained in the Moral Philosophy class by the student of eighteen was not without its influence—even conscious influence—in determining his choice of Philosophy as the subject to which to devote himself. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Secret of Hegel* (published in 1898), referring to the "origin of the book" (*i.e.*, the "Secret"), the author says, with regard to the position which he took in the classes of the University, "if in Classics and Mathematics it could hardly be said that I was *not* distinguished, it was certainly in Philosophy that I was most so; and in that connection I could not but vividly recollect those, till then academically unheard-of, instantaneous *three* rounds of unrestrainable and *unrestrained* applause that crowned the reading of that essay of mine, and filled the old class-room to the roof with dust—the sweetest that ever in life I did taste, or shall!" Another reference to this his first attempt at philosophical writing occurs on p. 183 of the published edition of Stirling's Gifford Lectures (named "Philosophy and Theology"), where

we also find Stirling's estimate of his Moral Philosophy professor—Dr Fleming. He is there described as “not a man of large culture, either ancient or modern,” and as “on the whole, perhaps, not wholly sympathetic” with the literature of the nineteenth century. “*His* literature,” Stirling adds, “was Pope and Goldsmith, Hume and Robertson, Samuel Johnson and Dr Hugh Blair; and his philosophy, in the main, that of Reid, Stewart, and Brown, at the same time that his favourite writer of all, perhaps, philosophical or other, was David Hume. Dr Fleming was a very acceptable professor, a man of eloquence, judgment, and taste, and taught well; but, somehow, one did not expect to hear of Anselm at his hands.” In short, Professor Fleming, like Stirling's father, seems to have belonged to the past—to the eighteenth century, with its conventional standards of taste, its complacent conviction of the finality of its own judgments; its respect for the Understanding, and for the knowledge of *facts*, if not its contemptuous sneer at *Superstition*—with which name it stigmatized much that later thinkers regard as worthy of reverence.

As regards the other “Arts” professors whose classes Stirling attended, there is no evidence to show what impression they made on his mind. Of his Greek professor, Sir Daniel Sandford, little more than the name seems to have survived in his memory; of his Logic professor (Robert Buchanan) there was preserved, in addition, the recollection of his nickname, “Logic Bob”—this is all, at least, that those who, in after years, listened to the philosopher's talks of his college days can remember of either.

When one recalls those talks, it is surprising how few names one can remember of the young men who sat side by side with Stirling on the hard wooden benches of the dingy class-rooms, and who

raised that dust in the Moral Philosophy class-room which smelt so sweet in his young nostrils. One fellow-student in the Junior Latin class, we know, was Alexander Campbell Fraser, who, in later years, became the chief exponent of the philosophy of Berkeley, as Stirling of the profounder system of Hegel; but the two lads do not seem to have made each other's acquaintance, though they met at a later period in their lives. In his *Biographia Philosophica* (published in 1904) Professor Campbell Fraser casts a backward glance on the old University of Glasgow "in that far-off winter," and on the "dark winter mornings, as we gathered soon after seven to the sound of the college bell."

Lord Kelvin and his brother, James Thomson, have already been mentioned as fellow-students of Stirling's—at least in the class of Mathematics—but the college-chum whose name somehow rises most familiarly in one's memory is a certain "Hutchison," to whom Stirling seems to have been drawn by a common interest in dramatic recitation. Hutchison was possessed of a remarkable voice, and of unusual histrionic gifts, though he required the superior intellectual insight of his friend Stirling to interpret a part for him before he could grasp its significance. The two lads were in the habit, in their leisure hours, of reciting together Shakespeare's *Othello*, Stirling taking the part of Iago, and Hutchison of Othello; and Stirling was so much impressed with the power shown in his friend's impersonation of the Moor of Venice that he urged him to try to find an opening to go on the stage. Hutchison was so far influenced by Stirling's advice as to go up to London, carrying with him a letter to the great actor Macready. Macready, thinking no doubt that this was only another of the stage-struck young fools, many of whom he must have encountered, handed Hutchison over to his manager, with directions to see if he could do anything. The manager received the

young Scotsman at the theatre (Covent Garden?), and asked him what he could do. Othello? Good! They would just go through the chief scene between Othello and Iago, the manager reading the part of Iago. And, leading the way to the stage—no doubt, with the object of overawing the young aspirant to stage honours—the manager had the curtain run up on the bare, empty house. As the scene proceeded to the crisis, however, and Hutchison gave rein to the force and fire within him, and his magnificent voice awoke startling echoes in the vast empty space, it was the other who was startled and overawed. Recoiling before the advance of this overwhelming Othello, he exclaimed, in admiring wonder, “Terrible energy, sir!—terrible energy! Voice!—Ten times the voice of Kemble!”

This must have been highly gratifying to the young Scot; but, alas, this was not all! Energy—even “terrible energy”—and a voice ten times more powerful than Kemble’s were not, it seemed, enough to make a successful actor! There must be dancing-lessons, and fencing-lessons, and boxing-lessons, and no doubt much else. Discouraged and disheartened, Hutchison stole back to Scotland—probably by the first available means—and never made another attempt to fulfil what his friend regarded as his vocation.

Many times in later years, Stirling has been heard to tell this little anecdote, describing the scene in the theatre with dramatic effect, and ending always with an impatient exclamation, and a characteristic shrug of the shoulders, condemnatory of this one more instance of a missed opportunity. On the stage, as Stirling thought, Hutchison was bound to have risen to eminence; in the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church, which he adopted as his calling, he never seems to have gained any particular distinction, living and dying

in comfortable obscurity as the U.P. minister of Greenock.

Perhaps, what has been said in the foregoing pages may have given some idea of the way in which Stirling passed through his five sessions in the "Arts" classes—from October 1833 to the first of May 1838. But the sessions only lasted seven months; from May to October, there were five consecutive months when professors and students were free to find for themselves other occupations and pursuits than those of the winter. Often in those days, the summer and winter of a Scottish University student offered a startling contrast, the summer being occupied with the labour of the fields, the winter with books and lectures. In the case of the young Stirling, the contrast was not by any means so marked; even in summer, books must have occupied the greater part of his day, though not, probably, the books used in the University classes. In a letter written in 1842, to which reference will be made later, he describes his private reading as "a chaotic *olla podrida*," consisting of—"Astronomy, chemistry, geology and mathematics, physic, physics, and metaphysics, history and poetry, voyages and travels, with thousands of tales, novels, and romances." The acquisition of this "*olla podrida*" must no doubt have occupied a great part of the long summer days; then there were walks, and walking expeditions with some chosen companions, swims and boating excursions on the beloved Firth of Clyde, occasional fervid talks with a congenial spirit or two, and the "long, long dreams of youth" to fill the long, mysterious gloaming of the Scottish summer.

In the "Foreign Country at Home," published in *Leigh Hunt's Journal* in 1851, there occurs a passage in which Stirling recalls an incident of a summer-time in his student days. The passage is so *real* and vivid—so full of fresh air and sunshine,

and the high spirits and good fellowship of youth—that it has been decided to quote it here in full. It will probably serve to make the young Stirling known to the reader better than any amount of description. The author, in the passage in question, is narrating what he calls a “Welsh experience” before he ever set foot in Wales (where he afterwards spent some eight years of his life).

This experience, he tells us, occurred “when I, a genial youth, hight the Clerk of Copemanhurst, with three other genial but older youths, hight respectively, Locksley, Athelstane, and the Black Knight, students all, strode it all the long summer days gallantly up and down a certain lovely and delightful watering-place. All objects had interest for us in those days, and one of those we met oftenest and enjoyed the most was a tallow-faced, full-figured, middle-aged woman, clad in rather plain and common habiliments, and seated in a green-painted wooden box on three wheels, the moving power of which box was a slender, commonplace-looking man of from thirty to thirty-five. There seemed some command in the dark angles of the cheeks of the lady, and some resignation in the bland jaws of her gentleman hackney. This appearance was too picturesque to escape our attention. Locksley told us—*us*, Athelstane, the Black Knight, and the Clerk of Copemanhurst—that the dame in the chariot, finding herself possessed of a small independency, incapable of self-transport, and insecure of her donkey, had adventurously advertised herself and her substance in the newspapers, with the view of procuring, in the person of a husband, a substitute for the distrusted animal. The present motive power of the chariot, Locksley continued, had eagerly responded, and after due inspection been happily accepted. He had turned out . . . a somewhat creditable husband to fall from an advertisement, and—*quiet in harness* [!] He did at times, when he chanced to have a copper in his pocket, suddenly vanish from his charge, but only to reappear with a blander smile, and a more deferential stoop than ever. The close of the information was that he was a Welshman.

“‘Humph! a Welshman!’ said the Black Knight. ‘Eh! a Welshman, is he?’ said Athelstane. ‘A Welshman!’ said the Clerk. And all four, having thus disburthened

themselves, looked for a moment questioningly into each other's faces, till Athelstane burst out with a loud guffaw, and the memorable distich,—

'Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief,' etc.

All of us, you may guess, joined heartily in guffaw and distich, for we all felt that the former was at our own ignorance, and that the latter contained the sum total of the knowledge of the whole of us—Clerk, Athelstane, Black Knight, and Locksley—in regard to Wales and the Welsh.

"During that summer, then, 'There's Taffy!' 'Here comes Taffy!' were among the pleasantest events of the day. I recollect we encountered the lady and the chariot on one of those occasions when Taffy, having happened to possess a specimen of copper in his pocket, had gone to deposit the same, leaving his charge in the very middle of the highway. The countenance of the lady looked black! Her hands were folded on her chest, and her lips were screwed expressively together. She seemed anything but comfortable, and was rapidly becoming less so under the approach of a large herd of ill-behaved cattle. The Black Knight, however, stood chivalrously to the rescue, gallantly supported by the bold outlaw, while Athelstane, with unusual vigour, blew out his well-speckled cheeks into an alarming 'Shoo!' meant for the cattle; and even the Clerk showed himself not unsympathetic. We had the pleasure to witness presently the quiet return of the bland Taffy, who only wiped his mouth and smiled. The lady said nothing; and the chariot moved on, leaving Knight, Clerk, Athelstane, and Locksley looking for a considerable time delightedly after them."

It is unfortunate that it is not possible at this date to identify the four "genial youths" of this passage. The "Clerk" has revealed his own identity; "Locksley" was probably a fellow-student named Lindsay; and "Athelstane" no doubt the Hutchison of whose histrionic gifts something has been already seen. As for the Black Knight, we fear he must remain incognito. The "lovely and delightful watering-place," where the said genial youths "strode it all the long summer days," is possibly

Helensburgh, on the Firth of Clyde, where the Stirling family usually spent part of the summer vacations.

It was no doubt this period of his own life that Stirling had in his mind when he wrote the introduction to the *Ballad of Merla*, which, together with other *Saved Leaves*, was published along with *Burns in Drama* in 1878. This introduction is so interesting, both for its literary quality, and for the vivid description which it gives of the inner life of youthful genius, that no apology appears to be due for quoting here the following passage from it :—

“I suppose life, if it is ever life, is emphatically so to the hobbledehoy who is literary and a student. He, surely, *formaliter* and *eminenter*—to speak like Descartes—lives. *Now* only it is that there is for him nature. The veil is lifted from the universe, and he sees it before him golden. He climbs the mountain, and has rapture in its breath. He rushes to the sea, and wrapt in its vast monologue, wanders delirious. Lake and river, rocks and trees and flowers, fountains that bubble up, the sun, the moon, the stars, clouds and the firmament of blue—he sees them all for the first time : there is a glamour in the very grass. Now it is, too, that his eyes fall upon the maidens ; and they are all beautiful—white-browed, vermeil-cheeked, golden-haired goddesses. Nay, the very men are caught up into the new glory : so strong they seem—well-built, firm-knit, and manly—so assured and self-possessed ! And books—poets ! How he glows as he reads them—how he treads as on billows of bliss when alone with them—how he raves with kindled eyes to his fellows of them !”

It was no doubt in some such glorified universe as that described here that the youth Stirling dwelt to the close, perhaps, of his eighteenth year. Nature, books, friendship, were his, and all looked ethereal in the glamour of the mysterious golden atmosphere which the poetic temperament, in early days, sheds on everything it beholds. It was during this period, too, that his eyes fell upon—not “the maidens,” but *the* maiden—and he found her beautiful. The date

of their first meeting is not now known ; but it must have been some time before his eighteenth year that Stirling met the one and only love of his life—the “Geenemer” of his verses, his loving partner for more than fifty years.

One of the agents of the firm of James Hutchison & Co., of which Stirling's father became partner, was a certain William Orr, who lived in the small town of Irvine in Ayrshire. For some reason or other not now known—perhaps for change of air after an illness—Stirling, while still in his early teens, was sent to Irvine on a visit to Orr and his family. To the motherless son of that cloud-wrapt, awful Jove in Glasgow, whose hand held the sleeping thunder-bolts, the family affection which existed in the Orr household, the mutual sympathy and confidence between parents and children, must have been both surprising and delightful to witness. To the end of his life, Stirling preserved a grateful memory of his visits to the Orr family (for the first visit was repeated several times in the following years).

It was on the occasion of one of those visits that Stirling met his future wife—Jane Hunter Mair. Her father, William Mair, who belonged to a family of “lairds,” the Mairs of Galston, was not successful in life—largely owing, no doubt, to faults in his own character. He had made a runaway marriage with an orphan girl of fifteen, who was still at a boarding-school ; and when he died, still a young man, he left her with but slender means, and a family of young children to bring up. Jane, who was the youngest, was adopted by a childless aunt and uncle-in-law, Mr and Mrs Hunter, whom she grew up to regard with the affection of a child for its parents.

The Hunters lived in Irvine ; and it was there that the early life of the future wife of the philosopher was passed—it was there that she grew into a girl of unusual beauty and charm. Of a good height, and well-formed, with crinkly golden hair, a face of

a milk-white pallor (which neither suggested, nor indicated, ill-health), and straight regular features, Jane, or as she was usually called, Jeannie, Mair must have owed her chief charm to the piquant contrast between the statuesque outer mask and the warm, vivacious soul which informed it. A man might have thrown an admiring look at the beautiful statue, and passed on ; but there was a roguish light in the grey eyes that *challenged* ; there was a sweetness in the upward curve of the smiling lips that *melted*—he could not pass ! And so he stayed, and was lost. One can well imagine the effect of such a vision as this on the fervid young poet-soul ! (For it was the poet, rather than the philosopher, who was awake at that time in Stirling's mind.) And it was not only to the eye that "Geenemer" (Stirling's fanciful contraction of Jeannie Mair) made her appeal. She possessed a voice of unusual power and beauty ; and she infused such feeling and expression into her singing as made it something to remember ; for she had the temperament of the artist, and the heart of the true woman. Vivacious, sensitive, perhaps quick-tempered, and above all, loving and sympathetic, she alternated, with unconscious art, between *espèglerie* and tenderness, never allowing her lover to be cloyed with too much sweetness, or chilled with too much reserve.

As will readily be understood, Stirling was very far from being the only man who succumbed to the remarkable attractions of Miss Mair. With a magnanimity which the favoured swain does not always display, he published many years later, among his own early writings, some verses addressed to her by an unsuccessful rival, which, as the following stanza will show, possessed real poetic merit :—

"Love peeps amid those tresses fair
That circle round that brow of white,
Like wavy clouds that wait the moon
In the still night."

Of the verses which he himself addressed to his future wife, Stirling preserved only those entitled "Geenemer" (published among his other *Saved Leaves* in 1878), which belong to a later period than that which we have here reached, having been written in 1846. In *Ogrebabe, the Body-snatcher*, however—a somewhat gruesome tale of the dissecting-room, which forms part of the contents of the volume of 1878, and must have been written about 1838 or 1839—there occur passages in which, under a thin disguise, we can recognize the scenes, and perhaps some of the incidents, of his young romance. The "Erfine" of the story is seen at once to be Irvine; and the scene, through which "Ogrebabe" and his companions are described as passing on that stormy night, is one with which the author had become familiar on the occasions "when, with his feet, he had vanquished the barriers of space between him and *her*"—when, starting at dawn, or before it, he had tramped the six-and-twenty miles that lay between Glasgow and Irvine, to be met at the garden-gate with smiles of welcome by his "Geenemer"! "Oh, the exultation with which he had trod that footpath—the blow of triumph which, once in other days, his stick had inflicted, till it rang again, on that iron gate, when, with his feet, he had vanquished the barriers of space between him and *her*! Her? Ah, was not that the very bank whereon he had sat with her? Was it not on that very spot that that so pleasant word had fallen—that that so innocent, betraying little look had escaped?"

To those who have heard, from the lips of the chief actor, the description of those walks from the lamp-lit streets of Glasgow, through "dark, tortuous suburbs," between "hedges dimly seen," "past garden-walls, and mansion-gates, and low cottages," to Irvine bathed in morning sunshine, and the iron gate, where *she* stood awaiting him—to them the

picture is so real and living that it appears fadeless. The two lovers, like those in Keats' immortal Ode, seem to be fixed there for ever, in their frame of golden sunshine, she standing by the gate, with the glow on her white face, the light in her eye, and the tender smile on her lips, he striding towards her, his face "afame with joy and eager expectation," his limbs "firm with the triumph of a weary thirty miles conquered beneath them."

"For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair."

CHAPTER III

1838—1843

Choice of a Profession—The Eglinton Tournament—First
Literary Efforts—Correspondence with Carlyle

IT is about the period now reached—at the close of Stirling's eighteenth year—that the first break seems to occur in his life. The fresh dawn of childhood had glided smoothly into the sunny morning of early youth; but at noon a cloud seems to have darkened the sky of the future philosopher. What was the nature of the cloud is perhaps sufficiently indicated in the letter of 1842 to which reference has already been made. The literary hobbledohoy, who had been living in the enchanted world described in the quotation in the last chapter, found himself suddenly confronted with one of the stern realities of life—found himself, as he put it, "compelled by some circumstances, and induced by others," to "come to some conclusion as to what method I should win my bread by, and, that determined, to accomplish it as soon as possible."

It is easy to surmise that the circumstances which "compelled" were connected with Stirling's father, while those which "induced" were concerned with his love. Alas, that even the enchanted portals of romance should give entrance into the noisy market-place, with its vulgar struggle for bread!

After some reflection, Stirling decided to adopt medicine as his "bread-and-butter science"—not, as it appears, because he felt any special vocation for the profession, but because, of the professions open to him, he thought there was most to be said

in its favour. It was a "manly trade—soon acquired—giving bodily health and exercise, with wholesome variety, in its pursuit—power of attending to my own health, and to that of those around me—opportunities of seeing, and ministering to, human nature . . . and, lastly, want of time for literary pursuits was hardly to be a fear. To these general arguments were added others of a special nature : so medicine *was* the trade I chose."

So, in the beginning of November 1838, the future philosopher became a student of Medicine, enrolling himself in the classes of Anatomy and Chemistry, and taking out a ticket for the dissecting-room. It is to this period that belongs *Ogrebabe*, the story referred to in last chapter, with its realistic glimpse of the dissecting-room and its occupants—living and otherwise!—in the early years of the nineteenth century.

It was during the summer following his admission to the medical classes (in August 1839) that Stirling had the good fortune to be present at a remarkable scene, which left a lively impression on his imagination. Few people now living have probably heard of the Eglinton Tournament—an attempt made by the then Earl of Eglinton to restore, for a couple of days, the splendour of the jousts and tilting and combats in armour of the old days of chivalry—but at the time it occurred the event caused great interest and excitement. The tournament took place in a large meadow near Irvine, where, as has been said, Stirling's future wife lived ; and she has often been heard to tell of the bustle and agitation into which the little town was thrown by being made the scene of the most remarkable spectacle of the time. For months beforehand, applications were received from would-be spectators by every inn for miles around, and almost by every inhabitant of the town ; and when the eve of the great day arrived, even the floors

of the "best parlours" of Irvine could not afford sufficient sleeping-places for the enormous crowds that had assembled, from every part of the country, to witness the pageant; and many found beds in covered vehicles, and in boats on the beach!

All the plans and arrangements had been carried out with the most faithful regard for historical accuracy in even minute details. It was a real tournament that the spectators were to witness—such as Ivanhoe or Bois-Guilbert might have taken part in, with lists, and armour, and heralds, and knights, and even a Queen of Beauty, as in the old days. It was not likely that young Stirling, for whom the knightly and chivalrous had always a powerful fascination, would miss the opportunity of being present on such an interesting occasion. Among his papers there is still a faded blue card, bearing, in the centre, the figure of a knight in full armour on a mailed horse, riding full tilt, lance in rest, and, above and below the figure, the words, "Eglinton Tournament," and "XXVIII and XXIX August, MDCCCXXXIX."

But, alas, men—even earls!—may propose, but the weather disposes. When, on the great day, in spite of rain, and sodden ground, crowds assembled at the scene of the pageant, it was only to be told that, in consequence of the state of the weather, the tournament would not take place that day. On the following day the programme of jousts and tilting—or such portion of it as was possible under existing conditions—was carried out; but the disadvantages of wet and slippery ground interfered seriously with the display of feats of arms and horsemanship, for which those who took part in it had been so long preparing.

We have mentioned above the story of *Ogre-babe*; but it must not be supposed that it was its author's first attempt at literary composition. It was not even the first which he preserved and

printed. Like those of all genuinely literary people—like those of the human race in general—Stirling's first attempts at writing were in verse. Perhaps the earliest of his literary compositions which he preserved was the *Ballad of Merla*, "sketched, and in a manner finished," as he says himself, "in the summer of '37," though touched up and added to some four years later. To the same period (1837) belongs *The Tale of Aihai*, which, though written in prose, is poetic in conception and language.

Of those two early writings, the latter is not only intrinsically superior to the other, both for completeness and originality, but also, to a biographer, more interesting, as it seems to give a glimpse into the inner life of its writer, while *Merla* is, from its very nature, impersonal. The little prose tale is, in fact, the reflection of that mood of dejection and self-depreciation to which the poetic temperament is at times peculiarly liable, and it furnishes evidence that, even in that enchanted period of youth described in the introduction to *Merla*, Stirling was not altogether without his moments of "divine discontent" and morbid self-consciousness. Aihai (Greek *aîai*), the son of Wosmi (Woe's me), a lad "eager in his soul, and like unto a flame in thinking," is yet discontented with his slight stature, and shrinks from his fellows in bitter self-consciousness. One evening, as he sat apart "on a green slope that took the champagne in," lonely and dejected, he prayed that the Father might remove the reproach of his dwarfish stature, and make him of the height of other men; and in the morning, when he awoke, he found he had grown! And "all day long, he strode about the streets, exulting; he overlooked this thing, and he measured himself by that. He followed his shadow in the sun; and he delighted himself by the water-course." But when evening came, the mood of discontent returned—his height

was not yet sufficient. "He grew bitter as of old, and cursed himself." Again that night, he "waxed in his sleep"; and again evening brought back his bitterness and discontent. So it went on, each morning bringing joy in the discovery that he had grown in the night, each evening renewing his discontent that his stature was not greater.

At length, after many adventures and vicissitudes, when he had grown to gigantic proportions, the King of the country sent for him, and made him a guard before the gate of the palace. At first people flocked to see him; but after a while they began to murmur and complain, because it cost so much to feed and clothe his huge body that they came near to starve.

"Then Aihai saw their thoughts; and he arose in bitterness. . . . And he went forth. A mighty shape, he trod the impenetrable forests, and they crashed before him. . . . He whooped to the eagle; he raced with the wild horse. He chased the elephant in wantonness; and sprang upon him with a shout, and weighed him to the ground; and the huge bulk stumbled powerless. . . . And the sun at length *stooped to the forest, and threw his red eye through the trees.* . . . And Aihai stood up; and lo, he was taller than the tallest of the forest brood; their green heads lay beneath him like a sea. . . . But still with tenfold speed he felt his huge frame grow and grow, uprushing to the heavens. *In mid-air he met the lark,* that dropped in terror. And the eagle rested on his head, nor knew that there was life in him. . . . Then rushed the mighty bulk like tempest over earth, and leaped into the main. In vain! *Great ocean like a rivulet but wets his feet.* . . . He falls!—'Ha! 'Tis but a dream!'

"On the green slope . . . the youth was sitting; and night was over him, and the unfathomable stars. And he arose; and behold! as he stood up the veil was lifted; and he saw the whole huge universe lying in the hollow of God's hand."

Even from this brief extract, it is surely easy to see that this is a most remarkable production for

a lad of seventeen—remarkable for its originality of conception, its beauty of language and imagery, and above all, for its *maturity*, both in form, and in the underlying thought. When, more than forty years after it was written, the tale was published in the volume of 1878 already referred to, a poet,¹ who admired, above almost every other writer of the time, Victor Hugo, did not hesitate to say that *Aihai* was “sublimier” than the work of the Frenchman, nor even to draw a parallel between it and the *Prometheus* of Æschylus.

The *Ballad of Merla* is more fragmentary and unequal than *Aihai*, and contains more traces of youthfulness; but there are verses here and there—there are images scattered throughout—which prove the possession on the author’s part of original poetic faculty of even a high order. Take, for instance, the invocation to the “Muse of the Ballad-chant,” with which the poem opens. The tone we hear there is not the thin note of the versifier’s cheap pipe; it has something of the mellowness of the flute of Keats himself. Then, surely, the following verses, descriptive of an autumn morning, are no mere echo of previous writers, but exhibit the freshness of one who *looks* and *names* for himself:—

“Autumnal morn! Within the fog,
The path shows white across the lea,
The hoar-frost furs the fallen log,
Breathes on the stile, and silvers every tree.

The sun, sole alchemist, transmutes
To gold the silver of the dawn;
The smitten pathway swiftly shoots,
Kindling and blackening, o’er the smoking lawn.

Eastward, the illuminated mist,
That drinks the glory of the sun,
Is loud with quick-voiced, eagerest
Lark, whose new joy is never to be done.”

Belshazzar’s Feast, a comparatively short poem,

¹ The Hon. Roden Noel, author of “Beatrice,” “The Red Flag,” “A Little Child’s Monument,” and several other poems.

which belongs partly to the following year (1838), though touched up some three years later, shows a marked advance on *Merla*, in completeness, in originality of measure and rhythm, and in maturity. The little poem, with its vivid suggestion of tumultuous movement, passion, life; of splendour, and pomp and pride—all brought to a sudden check by “horror’s awful thrill”—is not unworthy to be the work of even the best of our poets. It does not lend itself well to quotation—it ought to be read as a whole—but perhaps the following lines from the opening of the poem will serve to give some impression of the bounding, dance-like rhythm of the first part of it, the latter part being written in blank verse.

“Belshazzar, the king, makes a feast to-night.
 The windows are flashing their floods of light
 On the dazzled eye
 Of the passer-by,
 Who pauses a moment to list to the sound
 Of music, and mirth, and jollity.
 How the casements shake to the dancers’ bound,
 And the roof laughs out in joy and glee!”

These extracts from Stirling’s early writings are given here without apology. True, they have been published elsewhere; but there are many readers familiar with Stirling’s philosophical works to whom the first-fruits of his genius are quite unknown; and they deserve to be known. In these days no writer is allowed to be able to excel in two departments of literature. If a writer enjoys a reputation as a philosopher, no one will credit him with the possession of poetic faculty; yet it is often the poet of nineteen who becomes the most profound philosopher at fifty. Imagination develops earlier than the faculty of abstract thought, and the possession of a vigorous imagination in youth gives the best promise of a power of profound thinking in mature years. There is no better criterion of intellect than the power to form original metaphors, original images;

and this power constitutes the very essence of *poetic* faculty. "Nothing," says Emerson, "so marks a man as imaginative expressions. . . . Genius thus makes the transfer from one part of Nature to a remote part, and betrays the rhymes and echoes that pole makes with pole. . . . A happy symbol is a sort of evidence that your thought is just. . . . Thus a good symbol is the best argument, and is a missionary to persuade thousands."

In the preface to the original edition of the *Secret* Stirling touches on this subject, in speaking of the Hegelian distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff*—i.e. between "a symbol, a metaphor, as it were, *an externalization of thought*" and a pure notion—"thought *proper*." He condemns, as unphilosophical, and unsuitable for a student of Hegel, the habit of *thinking in pictures*—of making use of "*Vorstellung*, figurate conception, imagination, *in lieu of thought*." At the same time, he goes on to say:—

"We must bear in mind, on the other hand, that *Vorstellungen* are always the beginning, and constitute the express conditions, of thought. We are not to remain by them, nevertheless, as what is ultimate. . . . The concrete *Vorstellung* is the preliminary condition, but it must be purified into the abstract *Begriff*, else we never attain to mastery over ourselves, but float about a helpless prey to our own pictures. . . . So much, indeed, is *Vorstellung* the condition of the *Begriff*, *that we should attribute Hegel's success in the latter to his immense power in the former*. No man had ever clearer, firmer *Vorstellungen* than he; but he had the mastery over them—he made them at will tenaciously remain before him, or equally tenaciously draw themselves the one after the other. *Vorstellung*, in fact, is for the most part *the key to mental power*; and if you know a man's *Vorstellungen*, you know himself. If, on the one side, then, the habit of *Vorstellungen*, and previous formation of *Vorstellungen* without attempt to reduce them to *Begriffe*, constitutes the greatest obstacle to the understanding of Hegel, *power of Vorstellung* is, on the other

side, *absolutely necessary to this understanding itself*. So it is that, of all our literary men, we are accustomed to think of Shelley and Keats as *those the best adapted by nature for the understanding of a Hegel*. These young men had a real power of *Vorstellung*; and their *Vorstellungen* were not mere crass, external pictures, but *fine images analytic and expressive of thought*. . . . There is a distinction, then, between *those who move in Vorstellungen wholly as such*, and *those who use them as living bodies with a soul of thought consciously within them*; and the classes separated by this distinction will be differently placed as regards Hegel: while the former, in all probability, will never get near him, the latter, on the other hand, will possess the power to succeed."

The italics in the above passage, it may be mentioned in passing, do not belong to the original text; they have been employed to emphasize the passages which support the assertion, made above, that "the poet of nineteen often becomes the most profound philosopher at fifty." One of the objects of this memoir is to trace the intellectual development of the subject of it. The extracts from his early writings are given to prove that he possessed what he called himself "a real power of *Vorstellung*," which is "the key to mental power."

Meantime, while his leisure hours were given to the writing and polishing of his "Merlas" and "Belshazzars," the chief part of Stirling's day was occupied with the study of medicine. Though at a later period he threw himself heartily into his profession, and to the end of his life prided himself on his knowledge of, and skill in, medicine, at the time which we have here reached he does not seem to have found the study of medicine wholly to his liking. "The minuteness of detail with which it was to be studied," he writes in 1842, "was irksome. Besides, literature was to be banished; medicine had taken its place. . . . I was afraid of medicine strangling literature; and again, and with better reason, of literature strangling medicine."

Indeed, it was hardly to be expected that the youth, with his poetic and literary aspirations, should find the atmosphere of the dissecting-room and the operating-theatre entirely congenial. He longed, as others like himself have longed and will long, to be able to devote himself wholly to literature. It was this longing which, in 1840, induced him to write to Thomas Carlyle, who, after years of obscurity, had become famous, some three years earlier, by the publication, in 1837, of his *French Revolution*. Like all young men of literary leanings at that time, Stirling had been deeply impressed by the new force, the original personality revealed in the pages of *Sartor* and the *French Revolution*. No writer hitherto, unless we except Shelley and Keats, had exerted so profound an influence on him. As he himself stated in a letter to Carlyle, the acquaintance with the latter's works was, at that period of his life, "the most important element in my being." Forty-six years later, too, we find him¹ paying the following tribute to the extraordinary influence wielded by Carlyle:—

"Carlyle lived when Dickens and Thackeray, when Tennyson and Browning, lived, but there can be no doubt that of them all it was he that excited the intensest and most general interest. He was every literary young man's idol, almost the god he prayed to. Even a morsel of white paper with the name of Carlyle upon it would have been picked up from the street as a veritable amulet. No wonder that every such young man—and there were hundreds the like—brought himself, through person or through letter, into presence of the god; for it is questionable if even Voltaire attracted to himself, on the part of literary men, such an enormous mass of correspondence as, very plainly, Carlyle did."

Considering how overwhelming was the attraction which Carlyle exerted over all the ardent young minds of the day, it would have been

¹ In *Thomas Carlyle's Counsels*. Edinburgh: James Thin.

strange indeed if Stirling, with his literary longings, and literary enthusiasm, had escaped its influence.

Stirling's first letter to Carlyle, dated 11th May 1840, while it gives evidence of literary power, is undoubtedly the letter of a very young man. His object in writing is, as he says himself, "to submit to you a scheme to secure to literary men meat and drink, fire, clothes, and lodging." The scheme is the formation of an association of men interested in the promotion of literature—what the writer calls a *Letter-League*—who are to gather together, by subscriptions and other means suggested, a sum of £1000 to be offered as a prize for the best work on some subject proposed by them. No fewer than *nine* rules are laid down by which the association would be made "capable of continuing itself, and of increasing its resources"; and the letter ends with an enthusiastic reference to the advantages to literature to be derived from such an association.

"What a new power would not literary men thus come to have by aggregation! What a power in directing the tastes of the community by the subjects they might propose! Might they not in process of time grow into a constituent part of the body politic?"

This letter, along with the entire correspondence with Carlyle to which it gave rise, was, some two years later, copied out by the writer's hand "for Jeannie" (his future wife); and to the copy this note is appended:—

"At this time [May 1840] Carlyle was lecturing on Hero-worship; and I flatter myself I find in the introduction to his lecture on the literary man, delivered two or three days after receipt of my letter, evidence that his mind was somewhat led to comment on this subject of the organization of literary men even by poor me. So true is it that no man's word dies!"

Carlyle's reply to his young and unknown correspondent is the letter of the mature literary man of forty-five he then was. He puts his finger at once on what is undoubtedly the weakest point in the proposed *Letter-League*.

"5 CHEYNE ROW, CHELSEA,
20th May 1840.

"MY DEAR SIR,—I have read your letter, and shown it to another literary man, a person of sound practical habits and judgment, who, lamenting along with you the evil as it at present stands, agrees with me that your proposed plan is entirely inexecutable. No society could be formed here or elsewhere that I know, on such a principle; and if there were one formed, the *fallibility* of its decisions would too certainly dissolve it again,—for its decisions, only some degrees better than those of the huge gross public, could not hope to be *infallible*; and, unlike those of the public, they would not be reversible, capable of rectifying themselves in the long run. What is to be got from societies of that kind, in the present epoch of the world, may be seen from many instances: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, to go no further; let us look at that, and despair of societies at present. 'Societies' in fact are a kind of *machines* for doing what is not mechanical, what cannot be done by machinery at all; windmills laboriously built up to grind—let us say sunbeams, or some other entirely ungrindable substance; they do not accordingly grind it; they produce nothing but fuss, dinner-oratory, newspaper-puffery, under various figures—*wind*.

"For yourself, my dear sir, if you are, as I suppose likely, a young literary man struggling towards the accomplishment of something good and manful, I will bid you in brief *accomplish it*, and lay it down silently in this all-embracing Universe,

with the sure faith that if it *is* good, the Universe will not reject but will accept it. Neither are the difficulties one strives under useless, wholly obstructive; very far from that; they have their most precious indispensable uses, and have furthered us while seeming only to obstruct: believe that you will find it so one day. Poverty itself, whatever the grossness of the world may think of it, is by no manner of means a very great or the chief evil a man has to struggle under; nay, in these days, if you gave me a true man to breed up, with the heart of a man in him, I should say rather, *Let* him be poor! This I believe to be decidedly true.—Courage!—With many good wishes and hopes, yours very truly,
T. CARLYLE.”

Stirling's letter in reply to the above, it has been decided to give here in full, because it is the only one of his letters in his early correspondence with Carlyle which escaped its writer's disapproval in later years as “young” and “foolish.” It seems to show the writer's readiness and quickness to *learn*—to prove his possession of the sort of mind into which a seed of thought dropped develops into a great tree.

“GLASGOW,
May 26/40.

“SIR,—I know not whether it is meet for me to write again; I fear that this second intrusion will wear the appearance of a threat to dun you: but were I not to express my sense of the kind and noble manner in which you have written to me, I feel that a sort of fretting, unsatisfied sensation of something not completed would remain with me.

“It will not appear wonderful perhaps that my notion of the scheme about which I wrote to you is now changed. A person might indeed, once

or twice, contrive to make money by it, I conceive ; but *I* shall not. I had some vague indistinct glimpses of some of the things which you have stated, but was too full of the bigness of the good which I had conjured up to be able to fix and anatomize them. Reflecting in the train into which your letter took me, I had little difficulty in perceiving that the contrivance which is to grind sunbeams must be of their own nature ; that the machinery which is to influence thought and spirit must be of thought and spirit ; and that a Letter-League, becoming a monopoly, would become also a Letter-despotism and a nuisance. I remembered that it had been said, ‘ That a great original writer must, in some measure, create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed,’ and by a greater, ‘ That everything of the highest excellence that comes forth, everything most worthy of remark that occurs, is, so long as it is barely possible, denied.’ I remembered those sayings, and, in their truth, *saw that the prizes of such Letter-League would be bestowed only on imitative men, men in test of whom it had existing formulas to apply ;* would be bestowed not on sowers, but on gatherers and binders, not on makers but on clippers, raspers, joiners, polishers. By the light of your words, sir, I was able to remember and see these things.

“ It is impossible for me to express the enthusiasm, firmness, energy, and hope which the words you addressed specially to myself infused into me. My whole being seemed to expand ; the shackles of matter seemed fallen : — the emotion passed ; I looked into my mind, and sought for the suitability of such words being addressed to me, and found indeed that there was nothing *done*, that all was to be *accomplished*. I rest satisfied, sir, that in your writings it is, and in those of the great men to whom your judgment points as being teachers, that I am to find that breath and spirit which is to clear

the channels for the outpassing of aught of good or manful which may be in me; and if none such there be, I content myself with the hope that, by lying in their radiancy, I shall be able to drink in their lustre, as a lily-cup the sun, and that thus, steeped in brightness, interpenetrated with light, I shall be able to spread and diffuse it where otherwise it might not come. This is no small object; and to attain this, or higher, it is not the least spur to energy and action that, by such attainment, I shall perhaps reach such station as shall make possible even intercourse with you. Deeply grateful for the words you have addressed to me, for the kind and truly great manner in which you have met my boyish proposal, I take my leave of you, sir, and am, etc."

The copy ends abruptly without signature. If it will readily be allowed that there is a certain flavour of youthful hyperbole about the latter part of this letter, it must, on the other hand, be admitted that the paragraph in which the italics occur, so far from youthfulness, exhibits a quite remarkable maturity for a lad not yet twenty.

With this letter the correspondence with Carlyle ended for the time; but nearly two years later (in January 1842) Stirling re-opened it with a long letter of a much more personal nature than his first, accompanied with some of his early writings, including the *Ballad of Merla*. It is the letter of the disciple to the master, seeking for guidance and counsel in the mental difficulties with which he found himself beset—reverent, enthusiastic, unreserved. It is to this letter that reference has already been made more than once in the previous pages. It cannot be given here, as its writer has forbidden its publication; but one sentence from it, it is permissible to quote, since it is already made public

by the following reference to it in the *Secret of Hegel*:—

“In a letter written to a literary veteran, some twenty years ago, by a stricken youth,—in one of those intrusions which are, to budding letters, in the light of love, so natural, but to budded letters, in the light of experience, so unendurable,—there occurs the following passage:—‘I lie in the centre of this *me*, this dew-drop, round which the rays of Deity, interpenetrating and passing through it, paint the spectrum of the universe.’ This may be allowed to be a fair symbol for idealism in general; and the same youth, separated by many years from any knowledge of German, stumbled in his thoughts on what may perhaps be allowed to be a fair symbol for the phase of idealism which now occupies us.”

Of Carlyle’s reply to the letter in question, Stirling, writing in 1886, said: “I am inclined to confess that, with the ‘Essays’ before me, with the ‘Mahomet’ before me, still I know of no more perfect piece of writing than that letter in the whole compass of the Carlyle literature; and this, whether we look to the matter, or whether we look even to the expression alone. . . . The generous welcome [in the letter] to the mere callow enthusiasm of young literature in a complete stranger,—the wonderfully ungrudging sacrifice both of time and labour in it,—the earnest sincerity and inestimable weight of the counsels,—the incomparable felicity of the characteristic figures,—the perfectly admirable finish of the composition generally: all this cannot but impress, and even surprise. There is a flood to the heart with the exclamation, ‘That is the true *grit*’; and Carlyle, after all, must have been superlatively a ‘fine fellow,’ a really good, true, and great man!”

Although this letter has already been published separately (in 1886) under the title, *Thomas Carlyle’s Counsels to a Literary Aspirant*, it has been decided to give it here in full, partly because it is felt that no biography of Stirling would be complete which did not include it, and partly because the letter is in

itself so excellent, both in language and in thought, that it would be hardly possible for literary young men to have too many opportunities of reading it. Indeed it is doubtful whether, in the whole field of epistolary literature, it would be possible to match it for the combination of wisdom, sincerity, and originality of expression which it exhibits.

“CHELSEA,
18th January 1842.

“MY DEAR SIR,—The decision you so earnestly expect ought at least to be sent you soon; unfortunately, it is all the kindness I can show you at present. I have read the whole of your prose manuscript. If you knew what an element one lives in here, this of itself might be proof that you are something to me! The poetic manuscript I have not read in whole, but only in parts—such parts as seemed sufficient for grounding a practical conclusion on; and this I now in great haste proceed to transmit to you.

“It appears to me clearly altogether improbable that any bookseller, in these times of the book-trade, would so much as consent to publish your MS. at his own cost, far less pay down any sum of money for it. Nay, I am not at all sure, harsh as this may seem, that it were for your own real good to have it published, to have it even what is called ‘succeed.’ There is undoubtedly sign of talent in it; but talent in far too loose, crude, and unformed a condition. To have *such* accounted real finished talent, and praised and preached abroad, is precisely the fatallest future for a youth of any merit,—the sweetness in the mouth, which in the belly becomes bitter as gall. You will understand all that better, I hope, some ten years hence, and twenty years hence better still. But, on the whole, however that may be, I hesitate not to pronounce your poem entirely unworkable as a financial element, in this

place, at this time; and advise you not to spend more effort in that direction, but to quit it altogether for some more promising one. I at least, who know hardly any bookseller, and have indeed small sympathy with their trade and aims at present, must profess my inability to make any helpful use of this MS. I will, if you still request it, submit the paper to the publisher of *Fraser's Magazine*, the only bookseller I speak to once in six months; but I must say beforehand that I think he has no chance to accept it. This is my sincere verdict. A much politer and softer to the ear might easily have been written; but my words are to do you good if they can, and a deeper feeling of regard orders me to avoid all flattering unctious in your case.

“You seem to me a young man to whom Nature has given a superior endowment, which you run a considerable risk of *failing* to unfold. Alas, it is so easy to fail! You have in you that generous warmth of heart which is usually, if it be well guided, the mother-soil of all sorts of talent; but which also, if ill guided, can run up into miserablest waste and weeds. Your mind is opening in many directions, great ideas or prophecies of ideas announcing themselves to you; all this is well, and the best. But, as I can discern withal, all this must as yet be kept in, held down with iron rigour, till it fashion and articulate itself; the cruellest waste for it were to dig it all out at present as germinating seed, to let it all rush up as worthless spurry and chickweed. My dear young friend, you must learn the indispensable significance of hard, stern, long-continued *labour*. Grudge not labour, grudge not pain, disappointment, sorrow, or distress of any kind—all is for your good, if you can endeavour and endure. If you cannot, why then it is all hopeless. No man ever grew to anything who durst not look death itself in the face, and say to *all* kinds of martyrdom, ‘Ye shall not subdue me!’ Be of courage; a man

lies in you : but a man is not born the second time, any more than the first, without travail. Your desultory mode of study hitherto has probably been a great misfortune—a thing to be pitied, as I well know, and not to be blamed as times now go ; but it is a thing you must correct and get the better of. I fancy I discern in you, indeed, a certain natural tendency to haste, crudity, semi-articulate diffusion. I earnestly entreat you, stand up against that unmercifully as against your worst foe ! It will never do. The world wants alcohol, not beer-wort. It is a crime to produce the latter, if the former be in you. You must learn the meaning of *silence*—that forgotten knowledge of silence I am always speaking of. Be in no haste to speak yourself. Why be *porous*, incontinent ? Nothing can ferment itself to clearness in a *colander*. Pray that you may be *forced* to hold your tongue. The longer you keep silence, the richer will your speech be when it does come.

“Practically, my advice were very decidedly that you *kept* by medicine ; that you resolved faithfully to learn it, on all sides of it, and make yourself in actual fact an ἰατρὸς, a man that *could heal disease*. I am very serious in this. Pecuniary means will occasion difficulty ;¹ but they need not prove insuperable if you bestir yourself. If a man bestir himself, what thing *is* insuperable ? Your present wishes, tastes, etc., ought to go for little with you. A man who cannot gird himself into harness will take no weight along these highways ! I would even advise that you resolutely postponed, into the unexplored uncertainty of the Future, all concern with literature ; determined to set no store by that, to let it come or stay away as it might chance to like. As a trade, I will protest against your meddling with it ; describe it as the fright-

¹ Stirling has a note here :—“There was no such difficulty in reality.”

fullest, fatallest, too generally despicablest of all trades now followed under the sun. He that can, Mithridates-like, make poison his aliment, let him live in it, and conquer (by *suffering*) first of all; let no other try it. A steady course of professional industry has ever been held the usefullest support for *mind* as well as body: I heartily agree with that. And often I have said, What profession is there equal in true nobleness to medicine? He that can abolish pain, relieve his fellow mortal from sickness, he is the indisputably usefullest of all men. Him savage and civilized will honour. He is in the right, be in the wrong who may. As a Lord Chancellor, under one's horse-hair wig, there might be misgivings; still more perhaps as a Lord Primate, under one's cauliflower; but if I could heal disease, I should say to all men and angels without fear, 'En, ecce!'

"If literature do unfold itself at length under shelter of such a profession, then let literature be welcome; it will be safe, beneficial, and have a chance to be true and wise in such circumstances. How many true physicians have turned out to be true speakers, or even singers! A man *can* first speak when he has got to *know* something; and knowledge comes from experience alone. My decided advice is that you stand resolutely by medicine, determined to find an honest livelihood by medicine, and do a man's task in that way. Then is there a solid *back-bone* in one's existence, round which all beautiful and wholesome things will grow.

"And so farewell for the present; and a good genius guide you—a good, patient, valiant heart, which is the best of all geniuses! I have not time to write another word.—Yours, with many good wishes,
T. CARLYLE."

On the time-yellowed pages, with their faded writing, on which Stirling at twenty-one copied out

the correspondence "for Jeannie," there is added, in darker, firmer characters, by Stirling at forty-six:—"Carlyle's letters, the originals of which will be found elsewhere, are of great value, but my own young foolish letters are to be BURNED. *First* correspondence not so bad.—J. H. Stirling, 1866."

So does forty-six pass judgment on twenty-one!

CHAPTER IV

1843-1845

Early Manhood—The Start in Life—Pontypool—Some Welsh Characters—*The Foreign Country at Home*—South Wales—The Iron-masters—The Merthyr Riots

THE year and a half which follows the correspondence with Carlyle is, as regards any records of the life of Stirling, almost absolutely blank—a blank which, unfortunately, cannot be filled by the recollections of any of those now living. All that we know with certainty regarding this period is that Stirling faithfully followed the advice of Carlyle to “keep by medicine,” and in July 1842 received the Diploma of the College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

After that date there occurs a gap of nearly fifteen months, and the next event recorded comes upon the biographer searching for materials with a sort of shock—“Sept. 30, 1843. Left Glasgow.” The bareness and abruptness of the entry, without any allusion to preceding events, have a certain startling effect on one. It is written, with some later dates, on the inner cover of a small leather pocket portfolio, which bears also the inscription, “To James H. Stirling, Esq., from a Friend. Sept. 30, 1843.” Who the “friend” was we are not told; but perhaps it is not impossible to guess.

With this gift, in all likelihood, in his breast pocket, and with all his worldly possessions—including, no doubt, his medical diploma, as well as some books and manuscripts—contained in a small, black, leather-covered box, studded with brass nails, which afterwards accompanied him in all his journeyings,

and is still in existence, the future philosopher set out for London. It is humiliating to feel that, while one is familiar with his travelling companion, the little, battered, old, leather-covered box, one knows next to nothing of the circumstances connected with the most important step which Stirling had hitherto taken in life. He was setting out on the first long journey he had ever undertaken; he was leaving his father's roof, and his native country; he was passing out of the period of youth and apprenticeship into that of manhood and independence—and all the information permitted to the biographer is contained in that brief note written on the cover of the little old portfolio—"Sept. 30, 1843. Left Glasgow"!

It would be interesting to know what were the reasons which led to the choice of London as his first stopping-place; how father and son parted—whether the cold reserve of the former showed any signs of melting—how the young man travelled to London, and what were his first impressions of the great metropolis. Of all this, however, we know nothing.

Of his stay in London, which lasted a little over a month, we have as little knowledge as of the events which led to his going thither. We know, however, that he was in search of employment, which he did not find it easy to obtain, and that his hopes and funds were alike pretty well exhausted when he at length secured the appointment of medical assistant to a Dr Lawrence in Pontypool, Monmouthshire. It was during his stay in London, when he was beginning to despair of finding work, that he sent to *Punch* the following satirical advertisement, which appeared in one of the numbers for November 1843:—

"DOUCEUR TO THE INFLUENTIAL

"A gentleman who has been ten years at the

University, and who is possessed of sundry gifts and acquirements, mathematical, metaphysical, philosophical, literary, scientific, and otherwise, begs to announce his full acquiescence in the verdict of the public as to the uselessness of such gifts and acquirements; and as he has *twenty shillings* to spare, will be most happy to make over the same to any proprietor of a street-crossing who will initiate him into the mysteries of the profession, and procure him a good thoroughfare. The muddier the better. Thinks he might be able to manage the conductorship of an omnibus, but not the drivership. Presumes to hope he could grind a street organ, but thinks himself best qualified for the crossing.

“*Mem.* Can give no references—only the twenty shillings.”

The next entry on the cover of the little portfolio is even more laconic than the previous one. “Nov. 5, Pontypool”—that is all! In this case, however, the little portfolio is, fortunately, not the only source of information. In *The Foreign Country at Home* we are permitted to accompany its author on his journey to Pontypool, and to get a vivid glimpse, not only of Pontypool, but of the scenery and people of South Wales, where the next eight years of his life were passed.

The *strangeness* of the country to which he was now called, and of all connected with it, so impressed the young, untravelled Scot that he seems to have transferred it *alive*, as it were, to his pages; and on reading the Welsh articles, one is overwhelmed with the sense of novelty and surprise which their writer experienced when he alighted in the dark from the coach, which had brought him from Newport to Pontypool, and followed a guide unknown “into a house unknown, to face people unknown, in this unknown, unseen, strange witch of a place that is written down Pont-y-pool.”

But the Welsh articles strike one with a sense, not only of *strangeness*, but also of *reality*. Those are real people—those fellow-passengers of the young Scot, on board the little steamer which bore him from Bristol to Newport, across the “dirty, yellow clay-washings” which were called sea, and which he could not help contrasting with the sea he knew, “into which it was such a joy to look over the vessel’s prow, as the beak below struck into white opacity the all but invisible water.” There was the “tall, light, stiff, elderly Welshman, who walked with a stick, a slight stoop, and an eternal simper,” and was for ever singing the praises of Newport, where he lived. “There never was such a place as Newport. ‘Yiss, sure, it was a famoos place Newport—it beat—it beat—what did it beat, sir?—it beat Cardiff!’” Then, seeing that his listener was not very much impressed, he became more daring in his comparisons. “‘Yiss, indeed! yiss to goodness! it beat—it beat—it ’ud beat Bristol!’” Then there was the “great raw-boned Scotchman, with red hair, six feet and a half high, whose ear he [the Newportite] repeatedly climbed a-tiptoe to,” and who was overheard to say, “Ay, mun, dae ye say sae? Od, it’ll be anither Glescae!” And there was the man from Cardiff, “all cheek, with just a sprout of nose sufficient for the purposes of his barber,” who, hearing his native town unfavourably compared with Newport, “cluck-clucked and gobble-gobbled out angrily such a series of stutters about the docks, the Cardiff docks, and his most noble the Marquis of Bute, that, ghastly and gasping, the Newportite was fain to withdraw himself.” It seems worth while to give the conclusion of the meeting with the Newportite in Stirling’s own words:—

“For solace, he [the Newportite] told me his story yet once more; and it would have been worth seeing my courteous air of attention and acceptance, while I could

scarcely decently cover the agonies of my internal laughter, and his rueful dubiousness of aspect while he scrutinized me for some manifestation of the demoralizing influence which his rejection by the Cardiff man must have produced on me. . . . I overtook my friend the Newportite on the bridge [at Newport], walking brisker than could have been expected, and snuffing up the air with uncommon satisfaction. I passed him with a simple, 'Well, we have arrived, sir!' for I hadn't the heart to ask for the dock. . . . As I passed through the town on the top of the coach, I caught a farewell glimpse of [him]: he was tapping at a little green door; and I made sure there was hot tea, with toasted cheese and leeks ready within for him."

We leave the Newportite knocking at his little green door, and return to Stirling whom we left, just alighted from the coach at Pontypool, following his guide into an unknown house, to face unknown people. Of those unknown people we are vouchsafed no glimpse, either in the pages of *The Foreign Country at Home* or elsewhere, nor can we recall any verbal description of them. Yet for several months Stirling must have lived under the same roof with them, and partaken of his daily meals at the same table. It is strange how, here and there, a day stands out clear to us in almost every moment of its twenty-four hours, like the brief glimpse of sunlit landscape between two tunnels to the traveller by rail; and then all is dark again! Perhaps the following little passage from *The Foreign Country*, however, may be admitted to throw a side-light on one at least of those whose roof he shared:—

"With the names of localities, by-the-bye, how puzzled I was—and how hopelessly I floundered amid the intricacies of such words as Pontnewynydd, Pentwyn, Golynos, Cwm Brau, etc., till the irritation of my Welsh host pronounced me an extraordinary speller! I thought it a highly justifiable *revanche* to ask him if Paralysis for Paralysis were not original and eccentric."

While we are permitted no glimpse of the

people with whom, at this period of his life, Stirling was in daily association, we are given a full and vivid description of the strange new country in which he now found himself—a “foreign country at home,” truly! The scenery and the people—their clothes, houses, customs, manners, and character—are brought before us with the clearness of actual vision. Here is the description of a visit to a farm-house—a *superior* farm-house! The visitor, after losing himself “in a little wood of twigs,” making his way “through bushes and fences, and across calf-deep fields, and over dry walls tumbling all abroad,” which constitute the approach (!) to the farm from the high-road, finds himself at last in “the purlieus of the farm-house—a little chaos of bulging, dry-stone structures, with heaps of rubbish, not in one place, but in all.”

“You cannot, for the life of you, make out which is cow-house and which is stable. Nay, worse, you cannot, for the life of you, make out which is out-house and which is dwelling-house, and suppose you do decide on this latter point, you cannot, for ten lives of you, make out which is back and which is front. That rank little paddock, with its forlorn cabbages and droop-headed leeks, with its tumble-down borders of stick, stone, iron-hoop, old barrel, thorn hedge, bramble, briar, or defunct chair, can never be a garden! At length, however, as you stumble noisily over the rubbish-heaps . . . you are relieved from these perplexities by the sudden yelp and rush of some half-a-dozen of a peculiar race of small, blue-grey, long-nosed, milk-eyed collies. A human voice follows them, shouting out some such sounds as ‘Ki! ki! rast! rast! tan zone ki! On’t bite, shir! she not bite!’ . . . You stoop under a low doorway, in obedience to invitation. . . . You are some time before you can accommodate your pupils to the change of light; but presently you find it is a kitchen you have been introduced into. . . . The fireplace, you find, occupies the whole of one wall, except, in one corner, the door of entrance, and in the other, another door. . . . Within the capacious chimney, you may possibly perceive a rope line with clothes across it. The fender you discern to be the

segment of the iron wheel of some defunct tram. . . . The landlord having now got you as near the fire as he can, observes to you, proud of his English, 'Tish fine dai!' (pronounce dai, dye). To which, you having responded, he adds, 'Verree fine dai!' There is then a pause, which is terminated by the landlord opening and holding towards you a small, round-headed, flat, tin box containing snuff—light, high-dried Welsh; and at the same time uttering the interrogative word 'Shnuff?' and the deprecatory ones, 'Take pinch!' You accept, you inhale, you sneeze; he puts his finger on the cuff of your coat, and bringing his white, thin face to yours, he says, 'Shnuff good! 'tish good shnuff!' The goodwife then says some Welsh to you, at which you looking aghast, both say, 'Meelk! ha' dracht meelk!' You refuse or accept, and in either case, especially the former, there is another painful pause. You put various questions, but you are hardly understood, and you find the landlord's English limited to, 'I 'stand you now,' or 'I not 'stand you now,' with 'yiss, yiss!' 'ay, sure,' and a few such phrases."

Of course, those were long before the days of Free Education and the Board School. Here is a brief description of the Welsh teacher of the time :—

"There was a stout little fellow, with ragged, dusty, snuffy brown clothes, and a rabbit-skin cap, through the top of which his own hair appeared. He had a broad, smooth, ruddy-sallow face; and looked to me like one of those men who dyspeptically fatten within doors, without exercise, amid dust and cobwebs. They told me he was a teacher! He snivelled and stuttered, *not* her Majesty's English. I wondered what he taught, and whom he taught."

While those passages, and many others, in his Welsh articles show us vividly the country in which he lived at this time, and the people with whom he came in contact, only this one little passage seems to give us a glimpse of the writer himself—of his thoughts and feelings in the midst of his new surroundings :—

'From the hill over Cwm Brau, I recollect there was

a fine view of the country that stretched and spread to Newport and the Severn. I think it was about my only delight in Pont-y-pool to catch from that hill the far glitter of the sea; and if to that the white glimpse of a sail were added, the charm was complete."

"I think it was about my only delight in Pont-y-pool." That casual remark tells, doubtless, a good deal of the inner history of the writer at the time. It tells of the home-sickness of the young Scot in his "Foreign Country," of the longing of the poet-littérateur to escape from the comparatively uncongenial world of medicine to his native realm, of the yearning of the lover for the sight of his mistress, separated from him by hundreds of miles. Two sets of verses—"Lonely" and "Parted," published among the *Saved Leaves* in 1878—seem to confirm, in part at least, the suggestion contained in that chance phrase in the Welsh article. Both, however, belong to a slightly later period than the Ponty-pool time, the earlier of the two ("Lonely") having been written in September 1844, some months after Stirling had left that place.

Between the writing of these verses and his earliest correspondence with Carlyle, there is a period of over four years during which Stirling, following Carlyle's advice, seems to have been learning "the meaning of silence." During those four years, he wrote nothing, or at least *preserved* nothing, if he did write. He applied himself whole-heartedly to the work of his profession, and took the responsibility of his position very seriously. In Pontypool he was kept very hard at work, the necessity of making himself, to some extent, acquainted with the Welsh language, and the long distances which he had often to ride, from the house of one patient to another, occupying a great deal of his time. As, however, in the course of time, he became more at home with his work, it

appeared that after all medicine need not of necessity "strangle literature." As we shall see, some of his finest literary, as contrasted with his philosophical, writings belong to the years from 1845 to 1851, when he was in very active practice as a surgeon.

The next date on the cover of the little portfolio is "April /44, Hirwain." In spite of the strangeness, the *Welshness* of Pontypool, Stirling had been disappointed to find that it was not *in* Wales, since Monmouthshire was reckoned an English county, and, as he says himself, "I longed to be able to set down my foot on soil that neither map nor mortal could deny to be Welsh." He had his wish in April 1844.

"The opportunity came sooner than I expected; and leaving the Welsh of Pont-y-pool with tears in my eyes, and the firm belief that they were the most simple, courteous, credulous, and primitive of peoples, I found myself one fine spring afternoon on the box of a rattling, dashing, thorough-going mail *en route* for Merthyr and Swansea *via* Abergavenny. . . . I had to stay a night in Abergavenny, much to my own satisfaction, for *Humphrey Clinker* had made it a glorified creature of the mind to me. . . . I strolled up and down the town, I was never tired of poking into every street and lane I chanced upon. In the morning, too, I had a little available time, and that I applied to a walk into the surrounding country. Truly, it was most beautiful! No man need be sorry to go and live in Abergavenny. There is one green mountain there, of a singular shape, which it is quite a joy to gaze on; there is a lovely pastoral stream, too, clear, and bright, and musical; there are pleasant, pleasant roads, that well out away into pleasant, pleasant fields, between sweet hedges, and past neat gateways with honey-suckled lodges; and the town itself is as clean and wholesome as mind can wish for. Altogether, Abergavenny abides in my remembrance like the perfumed leaves of some sweet-briar I had plucked."

There is a strong temptation to quote here the entire description of the coach-ride from

Abergavenny to Swansea, so wonderfully *real* and striking is it, with its contrast between the beauty of the natural scenery and the squalor and hideousness of the monstrous works of man; but a sense of proportion, and consideration of the mass of material belonging to this period forbid more than the following brief extract:—

“I do not believe that to be carried to New Zealand would present much greater contrasts than these iron highlands have for him who as yet knows only the well-cultivated lowlands. The clear Welsh air; the long ridges of hills that run like combs over bleak, bare commons; the exquisite miniature little valleys, that nestle in the mountain-bosoms down from these; the equally exquisite, rich, narrow straths, that lie like green ribands between two parallel hill-ranges; the uncouth houses; the uncouth towns of such; the uncouth language, the strange shapes of pliant forms and supple features; the gigantic iron-works, that, amid blue, excavated mountains, thunder with the most indescribable din, and belch forth fire and smoke upon the scene; all is novel, strange, and unexampled; and all these things the ride from Abergavenny to Swansea abundantly possesses . . . for grandeur and for squalor, for beauty and for ugliness, for importance and for meanness, for interestingness and for uninterestingness, it is unsurpassed in the kingdom.”

It must be remembered that those years of Stirling's sojourn in Wales belonged to what may not unfitly be called the *Iron Age*. The so-called Industrial Revolution, inaugurated in the latter part of the eighteenth century by the invention of *spinning-jennies*, and steam engines, and other labour-saving machinery, had brought about a very largely-increased demand for iron, which, moreover, in more recent years, had begun to be applied to many uses for which, previously, it had been thought totally unsuitable. Only some half-century or so before the time when Stirling arrived in Pontypool, John Wilkinson, one of the greatest iron-masters of his day, had been thought “iron mad” because he

believed that that metal could be employed for making bridges and ships, and for many other purposes for which it had not previously been used; and already the celebrated iron suspension bridge over the Menai Strait, built by the great Scottish engineer, Telford, was some seventeen years old, while an iron steamer (built by Napier of Glasgow) began plying between Glasgow and Dublin in the very year when Stirling set out from his native town to make his way in life alone. Besides bridges and ships, the railways, which at that time were being laid down all over the country with feverish haste, made an increased demand for iron. It was not yet thirty years since the first experimental line, laid by Stephenson between Stockton and Darlington, had been opened, and the railway mania was just about its height in the country. It was in 1845 that Lord Cockburn described Britain as "an island of lunatics, all railway mad."

With such an enormously increased demand for iron, it was not to be wondered at that the mineral field of South Wales suddenly rose to immense importance, and became the scene of a vast activity.

"In the wilds, where, some forty years ago, for miles and miles over the barren desolation, no object moved but the sheep, the sheep-dog, and the shepherd—in those very wilds where, some forty years ago, an old Welsh crone, not without misgivings, passed her hand inquiringly from the head to the heel of an English stripling, muttering, 'Diew! diew! a Sais, is he?' and exclaiming at length, in the most posed astonishment, 'N'enwdyn! the sam' as we, the sam' as we he is!'—in those very wilds are scores upon scores of mighty blast furnaces, and thousands upon thousands of populous homesteads. The rapidity with which such places as Nantyglo, Tredegar, Rhymney, Dowlais, Merthyr, Aberdare, etc., have grown and risen is altogether wonderful."

Of course all this immense activity—all those scores of blast-furnaces, and thousands of workers—could not but make fortunes for some lucky men.

Those were the days of the Welsh iron-kings, the predecessors of the American millionaires and multi-millionaires, though, as Stirling believed, at the time when he arrived in Wales, the iron-masters had "already reached their *acme*, and must now, like all other sublunary things, culminate and decline." Some half-dozen of them had, up till then, "possessed advantages by no means transferable." They had "obtained their materials for nothing, nearly nothing, or (by sub-leases) less than nothing." But "old leases fall in daily; and rent will henceforth infinitely increase the price of the materials, as competition will henceforth infinitely diminish the profits of them."

Meantime, the first-comers—the half-dozen pioneers—had, as the modern saying is, made their pile, and were more or less independent of later caprices of Fortune. Of those half-dozen, the man who was regarded as "*par excellence* the Welsh iron-master" was William Crawshay, whose grandfather "if not the first, was about the first, who cut the sod" of the Welsh mountains. It was this Crawshay, or rather his son, Frank Crawshay, who was to be Stirling's "chief"¹ at Hirwain, where he was first assistant, then (in 1845) partner, and lastly (in 1846) sole surgeon to the great iron-works. It seems most likely, if not quite certain, that it is Frank Crawshay who is described in the following passage from *The Foreign Country*. Stirling is passing through Merthyr on his coach-ride from Abergavenny to Swansea, when—

"Suddenly military music strikes on the ear, surging the heart, and filling the eyes. A brass band comes up the street; behind it is a brawny figure, with the front, power, and reputation of a young Antony. That is an iron-master; and that is his surgeon beside him. They are followed by an orderly procession of well-dressed workmen, with sashes, banners, and other paraphernalia. . . . As you mount the hill, you see, down in the valley, tents erected: thither wends the procession you have seen; and,

¹ "Chief" is Stirling's own word.

as you listen to the romantic story of the coachman in regard to the iron-masters in question, about their amazing personal strength, their recklessness of heat or cold, of wet or dry, of night or day, of time or season; their power of doing the work of any one workman in their gigantic works, above ground or under ground, as well as that workman, and better than that workman,—as you hear this tale, I say, and as you see the scene of festivity before your eyes, and hear the glorious music floating up the valley, and re-image the heroic figure that you saw, knowing, moreover, that he is a millionaire, and that these are but his workmen beside him, you believe that the old times are resuscitated—the grand old times, when master mingled with man, rest with toil, and festivity with drudgery.”

How vividly this passage brings before us, not only the scene—the village street, the procession, the brass band, the tents in the valley, and the “heroic figure” of the “young Antony”—but the person who saw it all in the golden light which imagination throws on all it looks on—the man who was still so young, and simple, and enthusiastic that the sight of a commonplace procession of ordinary workmen, and the sound of a commonplace brass band (doubtless playing no more “glorious music” than the “March of the Men of Harlech” slightly out of tune!) could rouse him to the belief that the Heroic Age had come again!

In the months that followed, a pretty close association with his “young Antony” (if, indeed, the “heroic figure” described was that of Frank Crawshay) robbed him of a great deal of the glamour with which a first glimpse had invested him; but he always remained in Stirling’s memory—and in the memories of those who, fifty years later, frequently heard him described—a singularly striking, and even romantic figure. Tall, and of a powerful build, with a handsome face and head, he was of a restlessly active temperament, bold and daring, self-willed and overbearing, passionate and hot-tempered—a very Berserker when roused to anger.

One taste which Crawshay and Stirling had in common was a love of boating ; and when the young surgeon was not occupied with his many professional engagements, he would sometimes enjoy a sail with his "chief" in the little sailing boat, *Red Rover*, which the latter kept on a small lake, or large pond, in the neighbourhood of Hirwain. This custom led to a little incident which is perhaps worth recording as illustrative of character. On one occasion, when a stiff wind was blowing down the little lake, Crawshay dared Stirling to sail to the upper end, turn the boat, and sail back again. Stirling was young, daring, and possessed of enough youthful vanity to resent even the appearance of a slur on his courage : he took up the challenge. Along with the single boatman who "manned" the little craft, he went on board, and took command of the rudder. By judicious tacking, he managed to sail up the lake ; but the real difficulty, and danger, lay in the turning round, which must expose the boat broadside to the wind. With his hand on the rudder, Stirling hesitated for a moment while he made up his mind as to his course. To go on and land, was to own himself beaten, to lose his bet ; while, on the other hand, to turn the boat in the eye of the wind was certainly to sink it. Only for a moment he hesitated, then the "dare-devil" which, in those days, undoubtedly formed one of the many elements in the character of the future philosopher, carried the day. "Can you swim, George?" he asked the boatman. "Ay, ay, sir," was the answer ; and the next minute, the boat, turned broadside to the breeze, was rapidly sinking, while Stirling—attired in a heavy top-coat and long riding-boots!—was striking out for the shore. After a few strokes he glanced backwards to see if it was well with his companion, and beheld him motionless, calmly clinging to the mast of the submerged boat! "The wretch!" he used to exclaim, when he told the story in later years, indig-

nant at the effect of his *coup* being spoiled. "He knew very well that the water was not deep enough to submerge the boat entirely." When Crawshay, white and agitated, reached the point in the shore for which Stirling was making, he found the latter unconcernedly running the water out of his long boots!

While we are speaking of Crawshay, it may as well be said here that, as might have been expected, considering his character and that of Stirling, with his independent spirit, his pride, and sensitiveness, collisions occurred between them, one of them (in 1848) serious enough to induce Stirling to resign his appointment.

The rise into importance of its mineral field and its iron-masters was not the only circumstance which lent a special interest to Wales in the early "forties." Only some three or four years before Stirling landed at Newport, that town had been the scene of a great Chartist rising. In Merthyr, too, there had been riots not long before Stirling set foot there; and in *The Foreign Country* he pictures the scenes that took place with a vividness not surpassed by any passage in Carlyle's *French Revolution*. The "thousands of motley savages," "with inflamed faces that promise perdition to the whole universe," seem to move actually before us; we seem to hear their volleys of "Diaouls!" to see the "Little Petticoats," as the Welsh called the Highlanders, standing in file before the door of the house they are guarding, eating their bread and cheese, "while the scummy river of the mob, hoarse in Welsh, flows around and between them."

"Their comrades [the comrades of the file of Highlanders] are within the house; and the iron-masters from the windows, by threats and conciliations, endeavour to disperse the rabble. In vain: clamour, bluster, swagger, and gesticulation are as rank as ever; and it seems a very explosion of 'diaouls' . . . the Little Petticoats are quite

impervious; Welsh oaths fall dead on them; they eat their victuals. Suddenly, there is a cry, a rush, a bustle: the muskets of the inapprehensive soldiery are seized by the mob, and crash now on the skulls of their owners. Stunned, stupid, bleeding, battered, weaponless, these few Highlanders are tossed upon the waves of the crowd, still struggling for the haven of the inn. The sword of an officer is sheathed in the body of a ring-leader. The sharp crack of musketry rings on the ear. The mob fires into the windows; and bullets pass between iron-masters. The Little Petticoats within, indignant at the usage of their comrades, reply with interest. . . . The street is clear; the mob has dispersed suddenly into their cabins, or into the defiles of their tips. But all night long there are tumult, agitation, apprehension and excitement everywhere. The gentlemen and the soldiery repair to Penydarran House, and fortify the same. Brave messengers, with determined hearts, ride through the darkness to Cardiff, to Brecon, to Swansea, in quest of arms, in quest of military. . . . Morning breaks: from Tredegar—Rhymney—from all over the hills—from Newbridge, from Aberdare, from Hirwain—from every colliery or iron-work, far or near, come droves of workmen to swell the numbers of the insurgents. . . . The tips have their thousands; the hill over Aberdare has its thousands; and on the stony precipices that overhang the Brecon road there are other thousands. . . . The mouth of the defile is blocked up by a numerous band; and all up the precipices there are others busy unfixing the rocks, and ready to roll them down on the heads of all who may be bold enough to try a passage . . . and still the gentlemen are at Penydarran, with the handful of Little Petticoats. The Little Petticoats are at their ease, however, and know what they know. They are increased to about a hundred now; for the ammunition and the reinforcement have found a way over the hills to them. There are also some three hundred mounted yeomanry. The various multitudes have now collected into one multitude, and have settled on the Merthyr tips. The gentlemen, with the yeomanry and the Highlanders, leave their fastnesses, and march upon them. The Riot Act is read; they are called on to disperse; they refuse. Forward, brave mounted yeomanry! The brave mounted yeomanry are sluggish. 'Right and left, then,' shouts a brave man, 'and my little Highlanders will do it!' The hundred Little Petticoats step to the

front—forward upon thousands: they level their muskets: they are in act to fire: an iron-master throws himself before them, yet again beseeches the mob—succeeds. The motley rabble melts from their eyes like snow; and the Merthyr riots have come to their conclusion.”

When one reads the description of those scenes of riot, it is difficult to believe that they took place only some seventy years or so ago. There is a sort of primitive savagery about the mob, which seems to suggest a much earlier period. Yet it was among people such as these that Stirling lived from 1843 to 1851, learning their language, studying their habits and characters, and healing, or endeavouring to heal, their diseases and ailments.