

CHAPTER II.

THE CHILD.

BEING not propped by ancestry (whose grace
 Chalks successors their way), neither allied
 To eminent assistants, but spider-like,
 Out of his self-drawing web, he gives us note
 The force of his own merit, makes his way;
 A gift that Heaven gives for him.

SHAKESPEARE.

IN the Canongate of Jedburgh, where it slopes down to the river and the old bridge, there is a plain substantial house,¹ which is frequently pointed out to visitors. In a westward room of this, his father's house, a little child drew the first breath of a life of eighty-six years on the 11th of December 1781, a little after mid-day. DAVID BREWSTER was the third child and second son of James Brewster, rector of the Grammar School of Jedburgh, a man of sterling worth, and accounted as one of the best classical scholars and teachers of his day. After completing his course at the University of Aberdeen, Mr. Brewster "gained a doctorship in the Grammar School of Dundee, merely by superior merit, in a comparative trial of half-a-dozen candidates."² In 1771 he was chosen by a large ma-

¹ This house is now a model lodging-house, having been bought by the Marquis of Lothian, and fitted up for that purpose.

² Extract from a letter, highly commendatory of Mr. Brewster, from one of the ministers of Dundee to the Rev. Dr. James Macknight, the celebrated Biblical critic and commentator, then minister of Jedburgh.

majority to be master of Jedburgh school. It had been founded and endowed by Bishop Turnbull, the founder of Glasgow University, and its endowment bestowed the title of rector on the schoolmaster, as is still the case in a few other Scotch towns. It was, however, also the parish school, and had long been one of high repute, several remarkable men having received their education there,—amongst others, at the time of the Reformation, John Rutherford, Principal of St. Salvador's College, St. Andrews; in the following century, Samuel Rutherford, the Covenanter, who was born at Nisbet, four miles from Jedburgh; and in more recent times, Thomson, the poet of the Seasons, who was born at Ednam, but whose father, when he was only two years old, was translated to Southdean on the Jed. Mr. Brewster, in whose hands the school suffered no loss of good fame, was considered a stern disciplinarian, and the common saying was, that he "was the best Latin scholar, and the quickest temper in Scotland;" yet the sterner mood did not always prevail. On one occasion, William Somerville¹ and a companion had been ordered to retire to the library, an adjoining apartment, for purposes of serious punishment. It was, however, a fine "hunting morning"—the fox-hounds were passing—the temptation was irresistible—they scrambled out of the window, and enjoyed a day's sport instead of a flogging. The rector's countenance the next day was regarded with fear and trembling—yet he was in a good humour, and had apparently forgotten the empty room and the open window. He had the exceedingly unpopular fault in a schoolmaster, of occasionally forgetting the customary

¹ Afterwards the husband of the celebrated Mrs. Somerville.

dispensation of holidays, being absorbed in his own love of study. On one occasion the shortening days and the ripe yellow harvest telling a tale of the passing away of the proper holiday time, the rector was surprised by a sheaf of ripe ears waving on his desk, placed there by a young Armstrong¹ and a Lindsay. The rector proved "quick at the uptake," the hint was understood, and the holidays at once proclaimed. He possessed, with all his sternness, much attractiveness of person and manner, more, it was always said, than was inherited by any of his family. David, however, resembled his father in expression and contour, and, though without his regular features, was an exceedingly beautiful child.²

Mr. Brewster resigned his charge on account of age and infirmities in 1803—a resignation which was received with great regret, a retiring salary being voted to him by the heritors as a marked tribute of respect. He died very suddenly in 1815, when upwards of eighty, in the beautiful Manse of Craig, the home of his eldest son, much beloved and regretted by those who in the contemplation of his holy life, patient blindness, and most gentle Christianity, had long forgotten the severities of his home and school training. He rests in "sure and certain hope" in the picturesque and rocky churchyard of St. Skeoch in Forfarshire. An amusing instance of the respect in which Mr. Brewster was held in Jedburgh is still told. An old man bought a frying-pan at the sale of the household effects which took place in 1806, when the family left Jedburgh, which frying-pan became henceforth a sacred

¹ Afterwards General Armstrong, Master of the Russian Mint.

² So much so that his old nurse used to look at him and say, "Eh, laddie, ye'll mak many a lassie sigh and set aside her supper!"

relic in his eyes. All attempts to purchase it were indignantly negatived, and he treasured it in memory of "Sir Daavid's fayther," till his death, in extreme old age, a few months after that of the subject of this Memoir.

David was only nine years old when his mother died, but ever spoke of her with that tender deference which great men peculiarly feel for their mothers. Margaret Key was the daughter of "James Key, Junior," and "Grisel Scott," who were married in Dundee about 1745. The Keys and the Scotts, who intermarried during several generations, were burgesses and shipmasters of Dundee. One son of this marriage was Dr. Patrick Key, a favourite uncle of David's, who practised as a medical man in Forfar, with much ability and repute in his profession, the arduous duties of which exhausted his constitution, and he died at a comparatively early age, much mourned by the Brewsters.¹ Margaret was the only daughter, and married Mr. Brewster of Jedburgh in 1775.

Mrs. Brewster is said to have been a very accomplished woman for the time she lived in; but some delicate broidered work, in which she especially excelled, a small book of MS. religious extracts, and the knowledge of her exceeding fragility, which carried her off soon after the birth of her youngest child, at the age of thirty-seven, are all that remain to us of her. A stone in the old Abbey churchyard records successive be-reavements thus:—"In memory of Margaret Key, the beloved wife of James Brewster, Rector of the Grammar

¹ Dr. Key married Anne Binny, daughter of Mr. Binny of Newmill, a family of staunch Jacobite Episcopalians. John Binny Key, Esq., and Thomas Key, Esq., are sons of this marriage.

School of Jedburgh, who died on the 1st of September 1790, and of Jane Gordon, their infant daughter, who died on the 30th of May 1790, aged one year." For some little time Mr. Brewster's stepmother, of the same age as himself, a woman of considerable beauty and much kindness, was a blessing to the motherless family, but she too was soon removed, and Grisel, the only sister, three years older than David, from thenceforth filled a mother's place. She possessed much of the family talent, and was not slow in discovering the genius of her second brother. Her appreciation of it, and some natural over-indulgence, contrasted unfavourably with the severity of paternal rule. When David was but a little fellow he used to punish this indulgent elder sister for any unwonted stretch of authority, by turning the contents of her chest of drawers on the floor in confusion dire, knowing that her ruling passion was love of order. Whatever the juvenile offences of the somewhat spoiled child might be, they never occurred in connection with learning. It is recorded that though David was never seen to pore over his books like other schoolboys, yet by some mysterious process he always "had his lessons" notwithstanding; he kept a prominent place in his classes, and was frequently applied to for assistance by his school-fellows. It was in these days of childhood that a dilapidated pane of glass in an upper window of his father's house produced the inquiring thoughts which led him afterwards to search into the mysteries of refracted light. David was, however, no *rara avis* in the rector's household. Intellect and learning were the paternal inheritance shared by all the brothers. James and George possessed excellent abilities, while Patrick, the youngest, was considered to

possess a higher portion of genius and intellect than his second brother. But David had received that other and better gift than genius, the power of making use of whatever he possessed.

The Brewster family, though nurtured under the lowly roof of a Jeddart schoolmaster, were not wanting in tales and legends of the past. The step-grandmother, probably gifted with more kindness than good sense, used, we are told, "to relate by the hour tales of their ancestors," which the youthful mistress of the house eagerly devoured, and related again to her brothers in later life. Sometimes these mythical claims have greater effect upon the imagination than those which are recognised and undeniable; but nursery tales had no effect upon David Brewster, who was thoroughly "a self-made man." It would be wrong to say that he rejoiced in being so, for the thought of it one way or another never seemed to enter into his mind. He was entirely unconscious, ignorant, and indifferent as to all genealogical failures or possessions—an ignorance and an indifference which he communicated to all those within his immediate influence.¹ There have not been wanting those in more recent times who have thought it ought to be known that the nursery tales were not altogether mythical, and that had Brewster dabbled in Heralds' Offices and their occult lore, he might have proved that he was descended from a branch of an old

¹ A lady genealogist having questioned my father on this subject in his later years, he told her that while by his mother's side he was entirely Scotch, he was not so on his father's, as the Brewster family had, he believed, come from England several generations before. He added characteristically, "The books say that I come from a branch of the Brewsters of Wrentham, but I neither know, nor do I care." He might have quoted Sydney Smith's favourite saying of Junot's, "Je n'en sais rien, moi, je suis un ancêtre."

English family, whose name was undoubtedly Saxon—the Brewsters of Wrentham in Suffolk, descendants of different branches of which frequently claimed kindred with him.¹ The only hint of the kind which was not received with the greatest languor and indifference was significant of his love of liberty and religious toleration,—it was that which suggested his descent from William Elder Brewster, the Puritan postmaster, printer, and publisher, who led the noble band of English “Dissenters” in the “Mayflower” from England to America in 1610, whose interesting memoir was sent to him by some of the Brewster family long settled in New England, where the Pilgrim Fathers sought and found “Freedom to worship God.”

The Grammar School had been held in the Abbey for a considerable time, in what was in consequence called the “Latin aisle,” but the present school-house, in which David Brewster was educated, was built in 1779. The old aisle was, however, still part of the playground of the boys, and received the name of the “Howff,” an old Scotch word signifying a place of relaxation, and also of refection, for the boys used to eat their mid-day meals there, preparatory to more active diversions. Many were their exploits in dangerous climbing amongst the ruined arches and up the lofty towers, stepping across the rent or “gap” at a height of ninety feet. The choice attraction was, boy-like, the mere danger, with also an eye to the nests of owls, jackdaws, swifts, and such like, in all which exploits David and his

¹ Of these Cardinal Brewster, Esq. of Greenstead Hall, Essex, representative of the Brewsters of Hedingham, and his father, the late Joseph Brewster, Esq. of Halstead Lodge, were personal friends of my father, who much appreciated their pleasant home circles.

brothers sought to excel. A more ghostly charm attached itself to one of the vaults under the town steeple, however, in which was kept the gibbet. To enter this vault in the dark night and touch the horrible object, was considered by the boys to be the height of human daring. David used to record in after years the *one* time when he accomplished this feat, and fled immediately after, feeling as if he were pursued by the spectres of all the hanged men of Jedburgh. "Hangie," as the boys dubbed the functionary who came occasionally to fulfil the last penalty of the law (the last permanent hangman was paid off in 1666), was also an object of intense fear and attraction. David described the irresistible impulse which led him and his companions to throw stones at the door of "Hangie's" temporary abode, and their horror when he used suddenly to emerge and give them chase.

The love and fear of the superstitious which had so long reigned in Jedburgh came nearer home to David than even these localities. Behind his father's house was a little cottage, of which only the gable now remains. It was shaded by a favourite apple-tree, and was the dwelling of the old nurse of David's childhood. She was still the repository of the Brewster children's hopes, joys, and sorrows, and the favourite employment of a winter evening was to spend it with her. So many were the stories of ghosts and goblins with which she garnished the evening's entertainment, that it generally ended in the poetical justice of the old woman having to leave her easy-chair and her cosy fire, to convoy the frightened children across the garden, with her protecting apron thrown over their heads. David's recollections of the rosy

apple-tree of summer, and the fascinating "bogle" stories of winter, were very vivid; but he also related how the usual effects of such a training resulted in his suffering from superstitious fears even up to the mature years of manhood.