

Burns and Beggar-Life.

“ I have seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar.”—*Shakspeare.*



WID Burns, the national bard of Scotland, to whose name every Scottish heart warms as it warms to no other, contemplate being reduced to beggary? Did he whose talent for scattering money, or rather lack of talent for saving it, which he thought would leave him unprovided for in old age, contemplate spending the evening of life as a beggar? There is, alas! only too much reason to fear that he did, prior to his appointment as an exciseman at least. The prospect that so much worth should ever have been reduced to contemplate such straits is to us very unpleasant. To think that the man whose ditties and odes enhance our pleasure and condole with our grief, who touches the heart as no other ever did with his songs of love and tenderness, or sends the hot blood coursing through our veins with the fires of heroic patriotism, should expect to ultimately become a beggar! But the beggar of Burns's time, be it remembered, was different from the beggar of to-day. He expected to merit his quarters and alms by something more than the mere exposition of his distresses. Scott says: “ He was often a talkative, facetious fellow, prompt at repartee, and not withheld from exercising his powers by any respect of persons, his patched cloak giving him the privilege of an ancient jester. To be a *gude crack*, that is, to possess talent for conversation, was essential to the trade of a ‘ puir body ’ of the most esteemed class; and Burns, who delighted in the amusement their discourse afforded, seems to have looked forward with gloomy firmness to the possibility of becoming one day or other a member of their itinerant society.” Then there were such documents as begging licences, which still further enhanced the position of their possessors in the ragged ranks. Witness how Burns commences his fourth epistle to Graham of Fintray:—

“ Late crippled of an arm, and now a leg,
About to beg a *pass* for leave to beg.”

The life of these olden time beggars was, as we have said, very different from the beggar-life of the present day. A lodging, generally in some outhouse, was readily granted them, and an "awmous" of a "gowpen" of meal was never denied them even by the poorest. At gentlemen's houses they had much better fare; there they got numerous scraps of broken victuals, and often a coin or two besides. "In fact," says Scott, "these indolent peripatetics suffered much less real hardship and want of food than the poor peasants from whom they received alms."

In 1785, while Burns was yet in his twenty-seventh year, we find many references made to beggar-life. In his "Epistle to Davie, a brother poet," he says:—

" Mair speir na, nor fear na,
Auld age ne'er mind a feg;
The last o't, the warst o't,
Is only but to beg."

Then come the following lines on the vicissitudes of aged beggardom:—

" To lye in kilns and barns at e'en,
When banes are craz'd and bluid is thin,
Is, doubtless, great distress."

But even then such a life he considers would not be altogether devoid of its pleasures:—

" Yet then *content* could make us blest;
Even then, sometimes we'd snatch a taste
Of truest happiness."

Then the Poet proceeds to draw comfort from the fact that once reduced to that state they would be freed from apprehensions of falling any lower. Then, like "commoners of air," they would be free to admire and revel among the beauties of Nature—a by no means slight consideration to a mind like his. In summer their life would be of the most enjoyable order.

" On braes when we please then
We'll sit and sowth a tune;
Syne rhyme till't, we'll time till't,
And sing't when we hae dune."

That Burns viewed the life of an aged beggar with horror is beyond doubt. In September of the same year he says:—

" But see him on the edge of life,
With Cares and Sorrows worn,
Then Age and Want, O ill-matched pair!
Show Man was made to mourn."

That he dreaded a similar fate might be his own is borne out by the following written in October:—

“ . . . I backward cast my e’e
On prospects drear,
An’ forward, though I canna see,
I guess an’ fear.”

In the same year—in the same month, we believe—Burns wrote the “Jolly Beggars”—that inimitable description of a certain phase of beggar-life. “His early associates, James Smith, John Richmond, and William Hunter,” says Win. Scott Douglas, that prince of Burns’s editors, “used to tell that in their company, the poet incidentally dropped in, at a late hour, to the humble inn or beggars’ lodging-house kept by Mrs. Gibson, *alias* ‘Poesie Nancy,’ at Mauchline, and there witnessed scenes very similar to that described in the poem. The most important person in this strange drama is undoubtedly the bard,” says the same authority, “and there cannot be a doubt that Burns took an inward glance at himself when he sketched the character.”

In March of the preceding year the following remarks on such vagabonds as are described in the above cantata occur in his first “Commonplace Book:” “I have often observed in the course of my experience of human life that every man, even the worst, has something good about him; though very often nothing else than a happy temperament of constitution inclining him to this or that virtue. For this reason I have often courted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of ‘blackguards,’ sometimes further than was consistent with the safety of my character. Though disgraced with follies, nay, sometimes stained with guilt, I have yet found among them, in not a few instances, some of the noblest virtues—magnanimity, generosity, disinterested friendship, and even modesty.”

Though the above references were all written mostly within twelve months of each other, and before the Poet had completed his twenty-seventh year, we find that he had gloomy forebodings at a much earlier date. In a letter written to his father, William Burness, in 1781, he says: “I am altogether unconcerned at the thoughts of this life. I foresee that poverty and obscurity probably await me, and I am in some measure prepared, and daily preparing, to meet them.” A truly remarkable reflection for a young man who had not yet attained his twenty-second year—a period of life

when "vaulting ambition" is buoyed up by the strongest hope, and everything appears bright and beautiful.

Two years later he thus wrote to Mr. Murdoch: "If I have to answer for the present hour, I am very easy with regard to anything further. Even the last, worst shift of the unfortunate and wretched does not much terrify me: I know that even then my talent for what country folks call a sensible crack, when once it is sanctified by a hoary head, would procure me so much esteem that even then I would learn to be happy." Viewing beggar-life in this, his lighter mood, in his "Dedication to Gavin Hamilton" he says:

" And when I downa yoke a naig,
Then, Lord be thankit! I can beg."

And again—

" But by the Lord, though I should beg
 Wi' lyart pow,
I'll laugh, an' sing, an' shake my leg,
 As lang's I dow!"

In even lighter vein is the following verse—

" And when those legs to gude, warm kail,
 Wi' welcome canna bear me,
A lee dyke-side, a sybow tail,
 And barley-scone, shall cheer me."

But gloomy forebodings again supervened, and in a letter to Miss Chalmers, written in December 1787, he says: "I can't say I am altogether at my ease when I see anywhere in my path that meagre, squalid, famine-faced spectre, poverty; attended, as he always is, by iron-fisted oppression and leering contempt; but I have sturdily withstood his buffetings many a hard laboured day already, and still my motto is—I DARE." There is, however, a vein of hardihood and bravado in the foregoing extract which may be said to fling the gauntlet to Fate. The following extract is also marked by a degree of consolation: "I was born a poor dog; and however I may occasionally pick a better bone than I used to do, I know I must live and die poor; but I will indulge the flattering faith that my poetry will considerably outlive my poverty."

Perhaps the worst phase of the hardships of beggar-life is contained in the following fine verse from "A Winter Night"—

" Oh! ye who, sunk on beds of down,
 Feel not a want but what yourselves create,
 Think, for a moment, on his wretched fate,
Whom friends and fortune quite disown!

Ill-satisf'd keen Nature's clam'rous call,
 Stretched on his straw he lays himself to sleep,
 While through the ragged roof and chinky wall,
 Chill, o'er his slumbers, piles the drifty heap !”

But, as if in compensation for such a gloomy picture, Burns, in another effusion, after setting forth the total inability of riches to serve the wicked worshippers of Mammon in the life beyond the grave, says—

“ The cave-lodged beggar, with conscience clear,
 Expires in rags, unknown, and goes to Heaven.”

How ubiquitous is the pen of Burns! What is the matter, substance, or feeling it has not delineated! In what sombre colouring has he arrayed the Workhouse—that bugbear of the poor!—

“ A Workhouse! Ah, that sound awakes my woes,
 And pillows on the thorn my racked repose!
 In durance vile here must I wake and weep,
 And all my frowsy couch in sorrow steep;
 That straw where many a rogue has lain of yore,
 And vermin'd gipsies littered heretofore.”

We find that Burns gave expression to almost all his fears respecting ultimately becoming a mendicant while in the enjoyment of single blessedness. It must not be supposed that he left his sorrows behind him when he entered the married state. On the contrary, in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop, he says: “ There had need to be many pleasures annexed to the state of husband and father, for God knows they have many peculiar cares. I cannot describe to you the anxious, sleepless hours these ties frequently give one.” No; his fears of ultimate penury were only removed by his obtaining a position in the Excise, the emolument connected with which he regarded as a safeguard against utter destitution. True, after his appointment as “ gauger ” he made mention of semi-begging, semi-hawking professions in a poetic epistle to Dr. Blacklock, but there is nothing to indicate that he then seriously feared being reduced to these vagrant occupations.

“ I hae a wife and twa wee laddies,
 They maun hae brose and brats o' duddies;
 Ye ken yoursels my heart right proud is:
 I needna vaunt,
 But I'll sneed besoms, thrav saugh woodies,
 Befors they want.”

Poor Burns! the companion of the peer as well as the beggar—what feeling or phase of life was unknown to your giant mind? You had your joys and you had your sorrows: if the former were many and sweet, the latter were your constant companions, looming up in front of you when least expected, and strewing your path with thorns and briars. The dread of ultimate want was never far distant from you, and the thought of leaving your wife and children totally unprovided for must have caused you many a keen pang at the end. We cannot do better than close the above brief and disjointed remarks by an extract from a letter of the Poet to Mr. Peter Hill, written in 1791—about five years before his death—which for sublimity of language and depth of expression can scarcely be equalled:—

“Poverty, thou half-sister of death, thou cousin-german of hell! where shall I find force of execration equal to the amplitude of thy demerits? Oppressed by thee, the venerable ancient, grown hoary in the practice of every virtue, laden with years and wretchedness, implores a little—little aid to support his existence, from a stony-hearted son of Mammon, whose sun of prosperity never knew a cloud; and is by him denied and insulted. Oppressed by thee, the man of sentiment, whose heart glows with independence and melts with sensibility, only pines under the neglect, or writhes in bitterness of soul under the contumely of arrogant, unfeeling wealth. Oppressed by thee, the son of genius, whose ill-starred ambition plants him at the tables of the fashionable and polite, must see, in suffering silence, his remarks neglected and his person despised, while shallow greatness, in his idiot attempts at wit, shall meet with countenance and applause. Nor is it only the family of worth that have reason to complain of thee; the children of folly and vice, though in common with thee the offspring of evil, smart equally under thy rod. Owing to thee, the man of unfortunate disposition and neglected education is condemned as a fool for his dissipation, despised and shunned as a needy wretch when his follies, as usual, bring him to want; and when his unprincipled necessities drive him to dishonest practices, he is abhorred as a miscreant, and perishes by the justice of his country.”

D. G.