

CHAPTER V.

ARRIVAL IN LONDON—PREPARATION OF THE VOLUME—CROMEK'S LETTER TO A. CONSTABLE ON THE SUBJECT—TESTIMONY TO CUNNINGHAM—CROMEK'S DEATH—CUNNINGHAM'S OPINION OF LONDON LIFE—ENGAGES WITH BUBB A SCULPTOR—BECOMES A REPORTER IN PARLIAMENT—LETTER TO HIS BROTHER JAMES, ENCLOSING NEW SONG—LETTER TO M'GHIE—LETTER TO HIS BROTHER JAMES.

CUNNINGHAM arrived in London on the 9th of April, 1810, a day never to be forgotten in the annals of England, as being that on which Sir Francis Burdett was sent to the Tower. His first experience in the great metropolis was not at all what he had anticipated. The laurel groves of which he had so fondly dreamt were nowhere to be seen. Every one seemed intent upon his own affairs, and had neither time nor inclination to regard the interests of a stranger—even Mr. Cromeck was scarcely an exception, save for his own ends. His promised influence came to nothing—he had either none to exercise, or he had no opportunity to use it. However, he entertained Cunningham at his house, while he prepared for the press the forthcoming volume of the "Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song." When it was all but ready for publication, Mr. Cromeck wrote regarding it to his friend Mr. Archibald Constable, publisher, Edinburgh, in the following terms:—

“You will rejoice with me that my volume of Nithsdale Ballads is on the verge of publication. I wish you had had it, because it should have issued from a Scotch house, and because it is a most curious and original book, and will most certainly have a very wide circulation. I have so high an opinion of it myself, that I think Mr. Jeffrey will and must say it is the most valuable collection that ever yet appeared. I have now given—what I think was never given—the real history of the Scottish Peasantry; and as far as relates to the twin districts of Nithsdale and Galloway, I have ventured to describe at some length their manners, attachments, games, superstitions, their traditional history of fairies, witchcraft, &c., &c., taken down from the lips of old cottars. One of the most interesting and valuable of these was a Margaret Corson, an old woman, aged ninety-seven. The title I send you. The whole 1000 will be printed on India paper. Pray give one, with my kind respects, to Mr. Hunter, to add to his collection, as it is a wonderful group, drawn by Stothard from the peasantry.”

Now, in the above letter there appears an amount of selfishness which detracts considerably from the character of the writer. He arrogates the doing of the whole work himself, without even hinting at a coadjutor, while the truth is he had almost no hand in the matter, with the slight exception of a passage or two. Cunningham composed the Ballads, wrote the Introduction, as well as the descriptive Notes, and corrected the proofs, toiling at the work from morning to night, and was rewarded for all his labour with—how much does the reader imagine?—a single bound copy of the volume, with the assurance that the work had been

very costly in the production, but he would get something more when another edition appeared!

We fear we have been too rash in asserting that Mr. Cromek made no reference to a coadjutor, and that only a passage or two in the volume was his own, though we have Cunningham's authority for the last statement. But surely Cunningham could not have written the following two sentences in the Introduction:—"To Mr. Allan Cunningham, who, in the humble and laborious profession of a mason, has devoted his leisure hours to the cultivation of a genius naturally of the first order, I cannot sufficiently express my obligations. He entered into my design with the enthusiasm of a poet; and was my guide through the rural haunts of Nithsdale and Galloway, where his various interesting and animated conversation beguiled the tediousness of the toil; while his local knowledge, his refined tastes, and his indefatigable industry, drew from obscurity many pieces which adorn this collection, and which, without his aid, would have eluded my research." It is possible that this was inserted at Mr. Cromek's dictation, nay, almost certain, from the character of the parties engaged in the work.

This, however, may be said in Mr. Cromek's behalf, with regard to the small remuneration which Cunningham received, that he had been all his life in pecuniary embarrassments, and scarcely a week before his death, which occurred within fifteen months after the publication of the "Remains," he wrote to Mr. Constable a very grateful letter acknowledging receipt of his benevolent assistance:—"Your letter and enclosure of Saturday relieved me from a pressure of anxiety almost insup-

portable. . . . My family are tremblingly alive to your goodness. God reward you!" He died six days afterwards, on the 14th of March, 1812. No one can surely read this letter of Mr. Cromek's, so full of gladness, gratitude, and affection, and say that all came from a selfish heart. Straited circumstances alone, we believe, prevented him from remunerating Cunningham as he deserved. It is understood that he died without being aware of the mystification wrought upon him with regard to the volume of which he was so proud. The pecuniary condition of Mr. Cromek on his death-bed, and his gratitude to a friend for relief, strongly remind us of the case of our own national poet, Burns, in similar circumstances.

While the volume is still in the hands of the printer, and will not be issued till December, we may turn our attention for a moment to his opinion of London life. No doubt he was greatly disappointed in his prospects, and a little exaggeration of the character of what passed before him may be palliated, if not entirely excused. When his literary engagement with Mr. Cromek terminated he did not, however, sit down in despondency, or, in moody melancholy, make the dark future darker than it was in reality. He visited the public places of amusement, examined the great sights of the city, watched attentively the various grades of society, and formed an estimate, which he thus briefly expressed in a letter to his brother James five months after his arrival:—"Amid all the bustle of existence, and the noise, the gaities, and frivolities of cities—the hue and cry which Patriotism has after her, and the hideous

rumour which Hypochondriacism awakens when she mounts the "louping-on-stane" to the other world—from all these soul-afflicting things I cast back my thoughts on my native Nithsdale, and sigh for her fair fountains and poetic vales. I enter into delightful converse with my dear friends whose kindred blood I inherit, and in whose hearts I hold a place. I feel something like that unsettled agitation of mind which might be nursed into despondency, and now and then a severe touch of that romantic and characteristic feeling which is mixed by the hand of God in every Scotchman's heart. The English have not that vehement warmth, that vigorous originality, which the Scottish peasants have. Scotland is an age or two behind in corruption, and she has hitherto preserved her ancient character from villanous foreign intermixture." So wrote Allan Cunningham, when evidently suffering from home-sickness disease.

"It's hame, an' it's hame, hame fain wad I be,
An' it's hame, hame, hame, to my ain countrie!"

In a similar strain he also wrote to his friend George, a short time afterwards, with regard to his dissatisfaction with the great city:—"I have been at all the great theatres, and I have heard the 'Messiah' of Handel, but I would prefer to hear your father singing 'Bonnie Barbara Allan.' It is only the beauteous alliance of words with music which delights or affects me. I cannot feel my heart's-blood coming warm, and my soul leaping to my lips, in any other music than that of my native country; which induces me to think, nay, believe, that our hearts

were formed entirely for the delights of our parent kingdom—for the music thereof, for the ideas thereof, and, last and dearest, for the maidens thereof. Indeed, I cannot find that dear communion of kindred sentiment, in either man or woman, which I found in Scotland. Their manners are not those of nature, but of artifice. The men are all punsters, and have no mercy on words which they can in any way hang a pun upon. They are hurried and impetuous in conversation, and unmercifully addicted to listen to themselves." We believe the reprehension here made is not necessary now, if even then, and that Cunningham afterwards saw he had been too severe.

We are informed on the best authority that it is not true, as has been hinted by one writer, that in his destitution and desperation for employment, he became a common pavier in Newgate Street. Allan Cunningham a common pavier on the streets of London! Impossible! After hanging about in comparative idleness for some weeks, with no prospect of the horizon clearing, and Mr. Cromek now listless or uninfluential, he engaged with an inferior sculptor of the name of Bubb, in Caermarthen Street, at twenty-five shillings a week, afterwards increased to thirty-two, on account of his superior skill as a workman. Nevertheless, he was greatly chagrined at having been led away on such a wild-goose chase, especially so much in opposition to the entreaties of his friends at home, and he was, therefore, desirous of concealing his position from their knowledge till better fortune arrived, if it ever should.

In the midst of his dissatisfaction he began casting in his mind what other employment, more congenial to his taste, he should look out for instead. While thus ruminating, he says—"I now thought of Eugenius Roche and the *Literary Recreations*, a work which I never could persuade myself died from want of the breath of genius. I found him in Carey Street, a husband and a father, and as warm-hearted and kind as his correspondence had led me to imagine. He was well acquainted with foreign, as well as with English literature; wrote prose with fluency, and verse with ease and elegance; and was in looks and manners, and in all things, a gentleman—tall, too, spoke with a slight lisp, and was of a fair complexion. He had in other days expressed a desire to serve me, and pointed out the newspapers as a source of emolument to an able and ready writer. As he was now the conductor of a paper called the *Day*, he told me he would give me a permanent situation upon it as a reporter as soon as the Parliamentary sessions began, and in the meantime he would allow me a guinea per week for any little poetic contributions which I liked to make. What the duties required of me were, I could form no opinion, but as I concluded that Roche must know I was fit to fulfil them, I was easy on that point. I was now well off as to money matters, and in a position to indulge in a wish dear to my heart, namely, to bring my lass of Preston Mill to London, and let her try her skill as a wife and a housekeeper."

That Cunningham, who knew nothing of shorthand, and had never learned grammar in his life, should

undertake the heavy and responsible duties of a reporter in the Houses of Parliament, is almost beyond our belief; but yet he did so, until he was obliged to surrender the occupation on finding it prejudicial to his health.

We have just seen that, despite his desultory and uncertain employment, he had serious thoughts of taking a wife, as he deemed it impossible to live economically otherwise, and, notwithstanding his mind had been long made up on the subject with the lass of Preston Mill, he now, cunningly, writes to his brother James, desiring him to look out for a proper helpmate among his acquaintance:—

“ London, September 8th, 1810.

“ My beloved James,— . . . I am glad to find you all so well, and I am ‘unco weel mysel,’ God be blessed for it, and praised too. I have got four shillings a week added to my wages. We had designed a general *strike*, and many are yet out of employment. One of our men was turned off, and I am now considered the soul and nerve of the shop, and the master has taken a great regard for me, so I live very well and happily. I have left my old lodgings, and a young man called Thomas Lowrie, a Cabinetmaker from Dumfries, has joined me in taking a neat room, where I will be cheaper and more heartsome. Indeed, London is in no way suitable to any but a married person. I breakfast in one house, dine in another, sup in a third, and go to bed in a fourth. In every one of these places extortion must have in her accursed hand. The thing is, everybody must live, and we buy one another like other vermin. So, it would be no wonder were I found married in some letter or another

soon. The truth out is, I want you to 'look owre' the register book, and choose me a wife from among the mid-leg kilted daughters of Caledonia. I cannot admire the City English, nor do I care for spoiling the proverb of a certain prophet, 'and, behold, thou shalt take unto thee a daughter of whoredoms.' O fie! It is the Scripture says so, and not I.

"Well we have at last printed that volume of 'Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song.' It is beautifully printed and hot-pressed in octavo, and contains 400 pages. I am convinced it will edify you greatly, but it may not be made public until December. I will try to send you a copy, so don't buy one. The thing which pleases me in it, every article but two little scraps was contributed by me, both poetry and prose. You will see what the *Edinburgh Review* says about it, for it must be noticed and highly too. You must send me, with Peter, a little twopenny book of old songs in the handwriting of my beloved Mrs. Copeland. I forgot it, I dare say, among my papers in my chest.

"Peter will find Thomas just at the entrance into the new London docks, half a mile below the Tower, and only a quarter a mile from Miller's wharf, where the *Edinburgh* smacks anchor at. I am sorry to find that Mrs. Copeland is poorly. I had a letter from her a week ago, and she complains of indisposition. Burns certainly thought of her when he wrote—

'Nature made her what she is,
And never made anither.'

"You inquire about Cromek. Why, my dear James, he speaks as generous words as you would wish to hear from the pulpit. O! the bravery of the lips, and the generosity

of words, are the current coin with which naked bards are ever paid; and as a specimen of his critical discernment, I wrote a queer song, ycleped, 'A Song of Fashionable Sin,' beginning—

'My ladie has a golden watch—
 On my ladie's breast's a diamond broach—
 Her hair premt in a rubie knot,
 And siller-tasselled petticoat.
 But my lord can quat thae siller bobs,
 Thae costly jukes wi' trinkets laden,
 For petticoats of hodden gray
 An' laced jimps of hamely plaiden,' &c., &c.

"Now, I inserted this in a newspaper, and it was printed among a great number of offices. I was at Mr. Cromek's, and a lady was praising it highly. He did not know it was mine, and condemned it as a base thing, and of bad Scottish! I never heeded him, but marked it down as a precept, that a man may talk about the thing he does not understand, and be reckoned a wise fellow too.

"I expect to publish a volume of old ballads if I once had them collected. For this purpose I have composed a ballad called 'The Battle of Cheviot Wood,' on the popular story of Chevy Chase. It is 129 verses long, and the finest poetry I ever composed. I could cheat a whole General Assembly of Antiquarians with my original manner of writing and forging ballads. Indeed, the poetry of our ancestors is become all the cry. Romance and chivalry will again begin their adventures—distressed damsels relieved—unaccomplishable exploits of knighthood—and a whole Lapland winter of heathen darkness will overspread the land! from which may the Lord deliver us! and let Scotland 'hae

ae blink' of true poetic sunshine. Here's the song you wanted—

“THE THISTLE'S GROWN ABOON THE ROSE.

“Full white the Bourbon lily blows,
Still fairer haughty England's rose;
Nor shall unsung the symbol smile,
Green Ireland, of thy lovely isle.
In Scotland grows a warlike flower,
Too rough to bloom in lady's bower;
But when his crest the warrior rears,
And spurs his courser on the spears,
O there it blossoms—there it blows—
The Thistle's grown aboon the Rose.

“Bright like a steadfast star it smiles
Aboon the battle's burning files;
The mirkest cloud, the darkest night,
Shall ne'er make dim that beauteous sight;
And the best blood that warms my vein,
Shall flow ere it shall catch a stain.
Far has it shone on fields of fame,
From matchless Bruce to dauntless Græme,
From swarthy Spain to Siber's snows;—
The Thistle's grown aboon the Rose.

“What conquered aye, and nobler spared,
And firm endured, and greatly dared?
What reddened Egypt's burning sand?
What vanquished on Corunna's strand?
What pipe on green Maida blew shrill?
What dyed in blood Barossa hill?
Bade France's dearest life-blood rue
Dark Soignies and dread Waterloo?
That spirit which no tremor knows;—
The Thistle's grown aboon the Rose.

"I vow—and let men mete the grass
 For his red grave who dares say less—
 Men blither at the festive board,
 Men braver with the spear and sword.
 Men higher famed for truth—more strong
 In virtue, sovereign sense, and song,
 Or maids more fair, or wives more true,
 Than Scotland's ne'er trode down the dew;
 Unflinching friends—unconquered foes,
 The Thistle's grown aboon the Rose.

"I now and then get a guinea for writing a song, which helps me to live and array myself. I have laid out a great deal of money on tools, &c., &c. I enclose you Peter's notes, which he will, I dare say, need much. You once mentioned to me that Captain Miller was wishing to write to Porry concerning my songs, &c. Now, I do not know a better hand I could make of my songs than get a guinea a piece for them. I will likely apply to Porry. I know he is a lover of Scottish song, and I hope he is a judge.

"Present my love to my dear mother, to my sister-in-law, and to Jenny, &c.; also to Dr. Patie. I had a letter to-day from Miss Harley. She says that she has written to James Dalzell, and she hopes he will soon get a situation. Direct to Cromek's, for I am not yet stable enough for direction.—I remain, dear James, yours through good and evil times, while

"ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

"I have delayed writing, or rather, as you will see, of sending my letter, hoping that by this Peter will have some permanent hope of a place, as it is a risk to come to London in uncertainty.

A. C.

"Monday Morning.

"Mr. James Cunningham, Dalswinton."

The song contained in the above letter, "The Thistle's grown aboon the Rose," appeared in the *Scots Magazine* of February, 1811, with the signature "Hidallan," which he had used in his poetical contributions to the *Literary Recreations*.

It seems the "Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song" has been published, but marriage is in the ascendant, though both subjects are in his head and his heart, and in the exuberance of his joy he writes to his quondam companion, George, respecting both. It would appear that he had to *purchase* presentation copies of the volume:—

"London, 10th December, 1810.

"Dear George,—I write in a most unfriendly-like hurry, because I am writing post-haste, against both wind and tide, and coach-time to boot. O man, you pleased me in your last letter. I want folk to write me as much as you do—sly, humorous, and enthusiastic. Why, it gives a lift to my mind, and makes me more merry and conceited. I am going to be married soon. My weel-faured lass will hang like a tassel of gold on a shepherd's plaid, only for the dogs to bark at.

"You will find some songs on her weel-faured face in that volume of Nithsdale and Galloway Songs, where the poets of the last century have, by the divine gift of inspiration, anticipated and commemorated the beauties of this. It will make me proud, thinking that my songs in her praise will drop from the lips of a dear friend, and from one too who can appreciate their worth, and modulate his voice to suit the rapture and enthusiastic admiration of beauty which pervaded the poet when he wrote them.

“I could have wished to have sent you a volume, but I had so many to give that even gratitude itself gave way at last to the necessities of want, and my means ran short, but not my inclination. I will sometime soon, perhaps, find means to get you one; and if you correspond with our James, you will find him proud in lending you what he most dearly values.

“Read, then, my volume through, with a most acute and critical eye, and combine your own ideas of it along with those of James M’Ghie, my dear old friend, and the friend of my father. He will tell his mind, and tell yours. Let me know what things please you, and tell your reasons for being pleased, because I want to learn.

“I will write you more at leisure, sometime after you have answered this. I am very well. I have left my old trade, and engaged for two guineas and a-half per week to write along with my friend Mr. Roche. Do not say ought about this to anybody but to my brother (James), for I do not want it to be known.

“Give my respects to your sister, Rachel. Tell her to sit down seriously and learn some of these songs. I know she will lilt them like a starling. Your brother James, too, claims my regard in being in love with my Jean; but tell him to bide in Kirkmahoe and admire her, as I would be jealous were he to go to Kirkbean. . . . Give my respects to your father and mother. I think often on the pleasures I enjoyed at their fireside. Let them remember in their prayers one who is happy in saying how much he esteems them, and values their children. In break-neck haste. Write me soon.

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Mr. George Douglas M’Ghie.”

Time wore on. He contributed poetry at a guinea a week, and did other things besides, which were absolutely necessary for a man with marriage in view, and the exchequer at a low ebb. He was determined to be married, and, as we shall by-and-by see, he carried his purpose into execution. But, in the meantime, what we are most concerned about is, his ability and success as a Parliamentary reporter, without the qualifications now considered indispensable for informing the public of what nightly takes place in the great House of the nation. In these times, however, reporting had not attained its present high state of efficiency. The substance only was given, and not the *ipsissima verba*, except by a very few. Others besides Cunningham had to depend entirely upon a good memory, and as many long-hand notes as they were able to take. From these two sources they had to frame speeches as they best could, so as to give the gist of what had been said. We understand that some of the best summaries of what takes place in both Houses of Parliament at the present day, are written by parties who trust to a retentive memory and a few notes, without calling in the aid of stenography. In the following letter, addressed to his brother James, Cunningham tells us his experience and appreciation of the Reporters' Gallery:—

“ London, December 29th, 1810.

“ My beloved James,—I have placed myself down to write at what Shakspeare calls ‘the witching time of night.’ The seasons unto me are now changed. I owe my allegiance to the moon and to the stars. The blessed sun of heaven

himself I count now no more on than on an oilman's greasy lamp. I gain nothing by his light. My new business has completely overturned that ancient system of prudential economy recommended by the precepts and examples of our ancestors, to observe the great order of nature, by sleeping in the evening, when nature slept, and wakening when the sun, coming gloriously forth, quickened the world into life, and resumed all the functions of awakening nature. However, as I do not believe in predestination, I do not deem it probable that our Creator thought of reporting speeches of certain men for newspapers, else He would have made some little provision in the economy of nature for their benefit, to show they were not utterly neglected. Thus, had He contrived a blink of sunshine to have dropped down in this wicked metropolis, peradventure about three in the morning, I should have adored Him, and prayed ere I went to bed. Now this is, in plain words, that I go to bed mostly at three in the morning, but I took this pompous way of telling you about it to show you how I can perplex a plain tale into bombast and extravagance, and go to the utmost limits of comprehension. To this I am humbly indebted to my new system of education, wherein I have to varnish with mighty words the fierce and uncourtly language of political iniquity. Now, you will perhaps lift up your voice against this wicked way of life. I pray you have mercy, and consider me as a person who has already half-forded a deep and dangerous river, where there is equal danger in turning back as in proceeding, so let me wade through.

“ I have written a number of speeches for both Lords and Commons. I find it quite easy, for I collect notes for one hour from what is said, just, I mean, as the speaker delivers it. This outline I have to return to the newspaper office with, and write out into three columns of debate. These

columns will take me four or five hours, and then I return to my home. Now, this is pretty severe work, but I have so many days of leisure to sweeten all this that I enjoy my situation with much satisfaction.

“I am proud to find you are in such brisk employ, and that you have the prospect of more in future. There is one thing which pleased me, though, perhaps, it may not be so edifying to yourself, which is, that you have got into the Captain’s business, who, I doubt not, will employ you for his farming transactions for the future. Now, this will rub off that indolence, that diffidence, that rust of the mind, which belonged to you, nay, to us all, so much. Impudence, I mean genteel impudence, is so very necessary for pushing us through life that I wonder it is not laid down as a precept of education in our public schools.

“I was so extremely bashful when I came to London that I really could not utter a known falsehood above three or four times a day. Now, I could assert in the face of a congregation that the sun derives his light from the moon, and make the dullness and paleness of her evening Majesty a leading proof of it. Nay, I could, if required, almost make oath on’t.

“I am pleased with your remarks on the ‘Nithsdale and Galloway Songs.’ They were very short, but I mean not to let you escape this way, for you must write me a long letter on purpose, showing wherein I have erred or done according to my duty. Choose out all your favourites, and write fully about the songs of the two rebellions. Now, you must mind one thing, and I beseech you mind it, that these songs and ballads being written for imposing on the country as the reliques of other years, I was obliged to have recourse to occasional coarseness, and severity, and negligence, which would make them appear as fair specimens of the ancient

song and ballad. This being considered, I beg you will not visit me as I would deserve had they been my avowed productions.

“I am glad Peter has got himself thrust into a place. I am much afraid he will never make a great figure in the polite business of surgery. He can do nothing for himself unless he has the “drawn dagger” of necessity at his back, pushing him to adventure. I do not argue this from his conversation, but from his writing. A man may have so much diffidence or natural modesty in his composition as will prevent him from being eloquent in conversation; but if there be anything like genius in his composition, it will break out in a letter, where he has the free and unhampered exercise of all his powers, and time for studying propriety of expression, and the proper use of his own feelings. Now, Peter, however stupid and vulgar in conversation, is ten times duller and more perplexed in his letters. His thoughts seem like a printer and types before they are adjusted—a heap of confusion and misplaced beauties; for this, that if counsel could have amended or corrected it, he would have been a master of conversational eloquence, and a proverb unto all the sons of Nithsdale. Counsel can correct but cannot bestow genius, it is a gift of God; and many a person has reason to be thankful for the little he has got, for that little might have been less.

“With regard to the books I want—Blair’s Lectures on Elocution—Dryden’s Virgil’s *Æneid*—Burns’ Poems—Sir William Wallace—Ossian’s Poems—and the two volumes of ‘Elegant Extracts.’ Now, pack them up, and direct them to lie at the office until called for, else the expense of bringing them by a porter is equal to the charge of a waggon. Now, you will write to me when you send them off, and I will know when to call for them.

“I must not forget to tell you that I have planned and begun a work of Poetry and Criticism. I mean to restore all our Scottish songs to their uncorrupted purity, to alter and amend others, where correction is necessary, and to produce upwards of a hundred original ones of my own to be sown among them. Along with all this, notices will be given to elucidate manners, customs, and opinions which belonged unto our ancestors, or which at present may exist. The name of every author will be printed at the title of the song, and, where accounts of them can be got, such things will be given. Now, what think you of this?

“Three volumes in the style of that I sent you, and closer printed, will hardly contain them. Mention this to none! else it will ruin the work. Give my love to my dear mother, and to my dear sister-in-law. I am glad the bairns are ‘gush, and ramp, and ranting.’ When you see Jenny present my respects to her. Do the same to William Miles, and to Adam Ferguson; and, my dear brother, accept of the united wishes of my heart, head, and soul, for your welfare. God bless you. Direct to Cromek’s; I am going to shift.

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Mr. James Cunningham.”