

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER XIV

ROBERT BURNS

BEFORE there appeared in Kilmarnock, in 1786, *Poems, chiefly in the Scots Dialect, by Robert Burns*, vernacular literature seemed to have become a thing of the past. Society had ceased to care for Allan Ramsay's poems, and left his *Gentle Shepherd* chiefly for the delectation of peasants; poor Robert Fergusson, dead only twelve years, was little spoken of in literary circles; his poems, full of Scots town life and humour, were neglected like his tangled grave in the Canongate kirkyard; only ballads, sung to old native melodies, preserved the Scots tongue in fashion, and ladies of birth deigned - though in secret - to compose them with fine lyric grace. That excellent man, but very mediocre poet, Dr. Beattie, whose taste had been over-refined by intercourse with well-bred society in London, in 1771 ventured to affirm that "to write in vulgar broad Scotch and yet to write seriously is now impossible. For more than half a century it has even by the Scots been considered as the dialect of the vulgar." It is true that the higher ranks, all with any pretension to social position and fashion, were learning assiduously to speak English, to free their talk of Scots phrases and their tongues of Scots tones, leaving the vernacular writing for the taste and the vernacular speech for the voices of the common people. When Burns's poems, therefore, came out, they gave a startling revelation of the power of expression which lay in the despised "vulgar dialect" - its picturesqueness of word and epithet, its capacity to give language to pathos, satire, and humour, its power to utter any mood and feeling with verve and vividness when wielded by one who was at once a master of his native speech and a poet. Very soon it was felt that what had fast been becoming a provincial patois had again become a great written language.

Robert Burns was born on the 25th of January 1759, in a clay cottage near Alloway Kirk, in Ayrshire, that crazy tenement built by his father William Burness, which fell before the winter's blast a week after the poet's birth. William Burness was gardener and overseer to a small laird, and also farmed on his own account a few acres of meagre soil. As time passed on and the family increased - Robert was the eldest of seven children - there was difficulty in paying for education out of a

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miserable livelihood, but the services of John Murdoch could be got cheap, and he was employed by several small farmers, with board and lodging in their houses by rotation, to teach their families. From this clever youth, full of literary interest, Robert and Gilbert, young as they were, learned much; Robert gaining from his teacher a skill in grammar and writing, and a taste for letters; learning scraps of Thomson and Mallet and Gray and Shakespeare from the school-books. When the father removed to the little farm, Mount Oliphant, with "the poorest land in Ayrshire," they still attended the stimulating Murdoch's class at Alloway; and when he went away the education was undertaken by the impecunious father - a hard-headed, stern-voiced, keen-thinking, and much-reading man, whose tuition by the light of peat fire or candle at nights was, owing to a very irascible temper, more strenuous than delightful. Home life was poor in the little two-roomed cottage, and toil hard on the farm, on which the family did all the work. Robert and Gilbert, as each reached the age of thirteen, would weed the furrows and thresh the corn; at fifteen they would act as ploughman and shearers, working from daybreak till late evening, when they were ready to go weary to their chaff beds. The fare, like the home life, was mean and monotonous - sowans and kail and milk, with little variation at the meals; no meat appearing on the board except when a cow or sheep died of old age or infirmity. They had few neighbours, and lived much aloof, but there was a keen life of intelligent interests among themselves. Acquaintances would find the lads at the simple food, busy reading with books spread before them. The father, with his serious face and scanty grey hairs, for he was aged beyond his years, would raise discussions over books, on geography, or science, or history - not omitting theology, though he was no Calvinist. Not able to buy books, they read with avidity all that were lent, and a curiously incongruous lot came into Robert's hands: a volume or two of Shakespeare, Taylor's *On Original Sin*, a *British Gardener's Directory*, Tooke's *Pantheon*, and Hervey's lugubrious *Meditations*, Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, and Ramsay's *Poems*, Locke *On the Human Understanding*, and a *Collection of English Songs*. It was the last which, says Burns, "was my *vade mecum*". I pored over them driving my cart or walking to labour; song by song, verse by verse, carefully noting the tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe to this practice much of my critic craft, such as it is." Then there were happy weeks when he studied Latin grammar and French under the helpful Murdoch at Ayr, returning with an inevitable *Télémaque* and a dictionary to acquire those set French phrases which he loved to air with painful frequency in his most studied letters and conversation. At home

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there was an austere existence, for the house was dominated by the presence of the father, who, with all respect for his many qualities, was somewhat feared, and by violent gusts of temper would reduce the household to silence. There was over that peasant dwelling a burdensome air, an atmosphere of care, debt, and depression.

In 1777 the father was deeper than usual in his chronic poverty and debt; his landlord had died, and the factor, exacting of rent and arrears, seemed to the indignant family a hateful Shylock, and as such was afterwards immortalised in "The Twa Dogs." But another farm was found at Lochlea, in Tarbolton parish, of 130 acres, with the fated meagre and reluctant soil. Here Robert and Gilbert became regular servants to their father, at the usual ploughman's wage of £7 a year, and they had work enough to try harder constitutions than theirs. No wonder the poet bore marks of hard toil in his slouching shoulders, and the results of that dull, drudging life in his moody, melancholy fits of temper.

Yet life had its relaxations. There was the dancing class at Tarbolton, to which, in spite of his father's stern antipathy, Robert went when he was seventeen, to improve his manners and acquaintance with young folk; there were visits to neighbours' houses, at which he was welcome, and, young as he was, he was always enslaved by some young woman - sometimes indeed by two or three at a time, for his heart was as tinder when the sparks alighted from the eyes of a goddess of the byre. His first apprenticeship in love and in verse had begun when only fifteen years old, with the girl with whom he worked in the harvest-field, whose charms he celebrated in youthful strains. With more strength he now made songs for and about his favourites - not too subtle for the hearts or too refined for the heads of damsels who were more able to enjoy the delicate humour of their select songs "She rose and let me in," or "The Kirk will not let me be" than the laborious efforts of his Muse, when it was speaking English, "I dreamed I lay where flowers were springing gaily in the sunny beam." Courtships occupied an important place in rustic life. While older folk were snoring the snores of the weary in their box-beds, youths, carrying their shoes in their hands, would creep stealthily out, and hie off to the abodes of their charmers. Then there would come the well-known inviting whistle, the tap on the window-pane, and the damsel, hastily attired, would step forth cautiously at the "chappin' oot," and among the sheaves in the harvest-field, or in the less romantic, more odorous shelter of a byre, the swains cooed their rural loves. Young as he was, Rob was an adept at wooing, especially after he went to Kirkoswald village to learn mensuration and dialling from the schoolmaster; for in that place, notorious for its smuggling and attendant devil-may-care vices, there

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were youths of freer ways than about his home.

A greater change came over his life when, in 1781, he went to learn flax-dressing at Irvine. Under the belief that he might improve his condition and be sooner able to marry by becoming a “heckler” or flax-dresser, he began to learn that business under a relation of his mother’s, whom he compactly describes as “a scoundrel of the first water.” He lodged in a poor room at a modest shilling a week, and lived chiefly on the supply of oatmeal sent by his father. Like Kirkoswald, the sea-port was given over to smuggling or “fair trading” and free living; there were “scenes of swaggering and riotous dissipation,” and the lad got in with wild spirits, who could not cope with him in wit, but could outdo him in drinking. He learned more lax principles than flax-dressing, as he owns. On New Year’s Day his master’s shop was burned during a customary carousal, and the apprentice was left without work and without a sixpence. So back he came to Lochlea, finding home restraints more irksome after his free and tumultuous life. More eagerly than ever he found his way to Tarbolton when the day’s work was over - to the masonic meetings, to whose jovial mysteries he was initiated; to the Bachelors’ Club, at which young fellows met once a month for mental improvement and bodily regalement at the frugal charge of threepence. There it was easy for Burns to out-talk, out-argue, and out-shine them all. Then there were the “rockings,” when neighbours met at each others’ houses, each girl bringing her spinning-wheel, as her mother in older days had brought her distaff or “rock” (from which these meetings still kept their name); and there they talked and sang and laughed and flirted as the wheels whirled round; and all was brought to a close by the delicious convoying home, youths carrying gallantly the wheel of the favourite of the time through the fields when “corn rigs were bonnie” in the moonlight. There were the merry Hallowe’ens and the joyous penny weddings, which relieved the monotony of rural existence. Such were the scenes of the poet’s life, of his pleasures and his songs. On Sundays Burns was at the kirk, the handsomest and gayest of all, with the only tied hair in the parish, his plaid round his shoulders in a manner of his own, discussing in the kirkyard theology with his acquaintances, sometimes from sheer perversity taking up the Calvinists’ side; at other times flaunting his wilder notions, which were hissed by his hearers. “Between sermons,” while seniors went to the inn, he and his companions went with the lassies to stroll in the fields. In such rural life he loved to reign supreme; he was “ever panting for distinction,” we are told. He was proud of his power of talk, as he was proud of his letter-writing, and he could make love, he tells, out of vanity of showing his parts in courtship. His tongue so plausible

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could speak more seductively than his pen could write, and he could make the damsels follow his lure as rats and children followed the Piper of Hamelin.

[Beware a tongue that's smoothly hung,
A heart that warmly seems to feel;
That feeling heart but acts a part -
'Tis rakish art in Rob Mossgeil.

Works, edit. by W. Wallace, i. 114.]

The sentimental was a mood dear to him as to Sterne. If we can imagine a Charles Surface having really in his heart the noble sentiments which his brother Joseph had so copiously on his lips, we should have the composite character of Burns - Rab the Ranter one day, with the emotions of a Mr. Harley, the "Man of Feeling," the next. "My favourite authors," he told Murdoch in 1782, "are of the sentimental kind - such as Shenstone, particularly his elegies; *The Man of Feeling* - a book I prize next to the Bible; Sterne, especially his *Sentimental Journey*; Macpherson's *Ossian*, etc. These are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct." To model a character on *Ossian* and the *Sentimental Journey* was surely the oddest plan on which any mortal ever tried to fashion a life. [Chambers's *Burns*, i. 64.]

The intellectual side of Burns, however, was never suppressed by the amorous. He read with avidity books of every sort, especially the poets of his day, for many of whom he preserved a persistently exaggerated esteem; for Shenstone, "whose divine elegies do honour to our language, our nature, and our species"; for the "immortal *Minstrel*" of Beattie, and for Thomson's turgid tragedies from which he was addicted to quoting fine utterances which are woefully vapid. [Chambers's *Burns*, (ed. by Wallace), vii. 22, 63, 66. He quotes from *Alfred* commonplace lines, which we trust were Mallet's, that he "repeated 10,000 times," to "nerve his manhood and steel his resolution":

Hear, Alfred, hero of the state,
Thy genius heaven's high will declare -
The triumph of the truly great,
Is never, never to despair,
Is never to despair !]

This literary taste made him live in two worlds - one the rough, squalid life of the ploughman, with the rude tone and taste of his class; the other the higher intellectual life of the poet, with the finer companionship of his books. The blending, or rather the conflicting, of these two opposite lives accounts for much of the complexity of Burns's character and career.

In the Lochlea days Burns wrote little which gave evidence of his high gifts except his "Poor Mailie" and his exquisite "Mary Morison." When using English

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models it was natural that he should give an echo instead of a voice. Rarely, if ever, at his best when writing in English, he felt to the last it was a hard exercise rather than a real gift. "These English songs gravel me to death," he wrote to George Thomson in his latest years. "I have not that command over the language as I have over my native language." That was true, but the moment he touched his native earth, used his own speech, he gained strength. From the day in 1784 that he read Robert Fergusson's poems, he saw where his true field lay. He says somewhat grandiloquently that Fergusson caused him "to string anew his wildly sounding rustic lyre with emulating vigour"; and, as results showed, did so to good effect.

Troubles came anew on the luckless father. He quarrelled with his landlord, to whom he was hopelessly in debt, and before the time came for the goods to be sold off and the household turned adrift, Robert and Gilbert had taken a small farm, Mossgiel, where they could afford shelter and a livelihood for the family. Worn out by care and worry and consumption, William Burness died in 1784. As he lay on his death-bed, he had said there was only one for whose future he had any fear. "Oh, father, is it me you mean?" said Robert, and as the old man said "Yes," his son turned to the window with tears streaming down his cheeks. His impulsive nature, his passionate will, his reckless love of pleasure, with all his powers of wild humour, made life for him a perilous game. It was fortunate that the worthy man died before a scandal arose about his son, who towards the end of the year had to do penance in the kirk. A little more reticence would have become the culprit; a little less of the bravado with which he brazened it out in his "Welcome to the Love-begotten" - which is certainly admirable as verse - where he snaps his fingers with immoral courage before decorum's face:

The mair they talk I'm kenned the better -
E'en let them clash.

Burns's attitude towards propriety was that of his brothers of the plough. What he wrote for his friends' delectation was what hinds were saying at the farm. They would appear demurely before the minister and congregation to express their penitence and to receive rebuke, and then go back to the farmyard and laugh over it all; men and women joining in loud guffaws over the elders, the minister, and the offenders. Burns had the average morals of his peasant class, with more than the average success and variety in his conquests. "Rab the Ranter," as he called himself jovially, was a rural Tom Jones, with all the good-nature which was supposed to cover a multitude of sins with that class of heroes, under the convenient but vague ethical code:

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The heart's aye the part aye
That maks us richt or wrang.

Now settled at Mossgiel, one mile from Mauchline, where the whole family lived and worked, Burns proposed to begin a new and sedater life. "Come, go to, I will be wise!" was his brave resolution, though Mauchline was dangerously near, with cronies, gossips, and taverns to entice him on long dull nights from home. Seriously he bent himself to the difficult task, gravely he studied *Wight on Husbandry*, carefully he attended markets and fairs, punctiliously he began to keep account-books. But soon these were scribbled over with more snatches of verse and song than entries of barter and sale of grain and stock. While he was working in the fields he was also composing in his mind. Verses satiric or plaintive came according to his vagrant fancy. At Lochlea he had written little; now he was discovering his true gifts and his true speech, and was becoming sensible of his real powers, though not to their full extent. At Mauchline, with the local gossip ringing in his ears, he found themes for his satire in the ecclesiastical polemics of the district. In Ayrshire, more than in almost any other quarter, both people and clergy were divided into two hostile classes - the "old lights" or the evangelicals, and the "new lights" or the moderates. Old light ministers were orthodox, austere Calvinistic; their sermons were full of soul-searching doctrines of original sin, total corruption, election and reprobation and free grace, with a strong flavour of brimstone from the bottomless pit seasoning the whole. Their oratory was unctuous and fervid, awakening to soul and body, though in prolix discourses, "three-mile prayers and half-mile graces." For these attractive pulpit qualities the people loved them, in spite of the stern discipline of the sessions over their morals and their manners. Yet these ministers usually had better claims to esteem from their earnestness and piety. The moderates, on the other hand, left dogma aside, and therefore were dubbed generally by the bigots "Arians" and "Socinians"; they preached everyday duties, and therefore were nicknamed "legalists" and "moralists"; they were tolerant and genial, and were therefore called "lax." While an evangelical preached "without paper," the moderate read his discourses, which the people pronounced "dreich" and "caudrife"; and sometimes no doubt their pulpit essays were, in De Quincey's phrase, like "cold water over slabs of marble." There can be no doubt that the moderate clergy were, whatever their defects, more educated and cultured than their rivals; they humanised divinity, softened hard dogmas, brought an air of tolerance into religion, and broke down the tyranny of the

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kirk, being men of the world without being therefore worldly men. It was with that class - favoured by the lairds and lawyers - Burns had most sympathy. Democratic though the poet was, he thought too little of the judgment of the people to believe that they should choose their own ministers. That the "sheep" should elect their "herds" was to him a paradox.

It so happened that Mr. Gavin Hamilton, the lawyer at Mauchline, from whom Mossgiel was leased, had been brought before the kirk-session on the charge of being irregular in attendance at church and negligent of family worship - by Mr. Auld, the minister, most austere of disciplinarians, and his docile elders. Later he was accused of the heinous crime of directing his gardener to dig potatoes on the Lord's Day. He was even heard to whistle on a Fast Day, and to say "damn it" before the minister's very face. Mr. Hamilton appealed against his censure to the Presbytery, which, being largely composed of moderates, acquitted him. Naturally, Burns took the side of his friend and landlord: he liked the moderates for their common-sense, having no love for an austerity from which he himself had suffered at Tarbolton, when doing penance for his fault. When two coarse "old light" ministers, named Russell and Moodie, fell out, quarrelled in the public road, and vilified each other about a parish boundary before a delighted audience in the Presbytery, with full strength of lung and language, Burns satirised the event in his "Holy Tuilzie, or the Twa Herds," and his verses passed from hand to hand, to the delight of the people and the scandal of the godly.

[Sic twa - O, do I live to see't,
Sic famous twa should disagree,
An' names like villain, hypocrite,
Ilk ither gi'en,
While new light herds, wi' laughin' spite,
Say neither's leein'!]

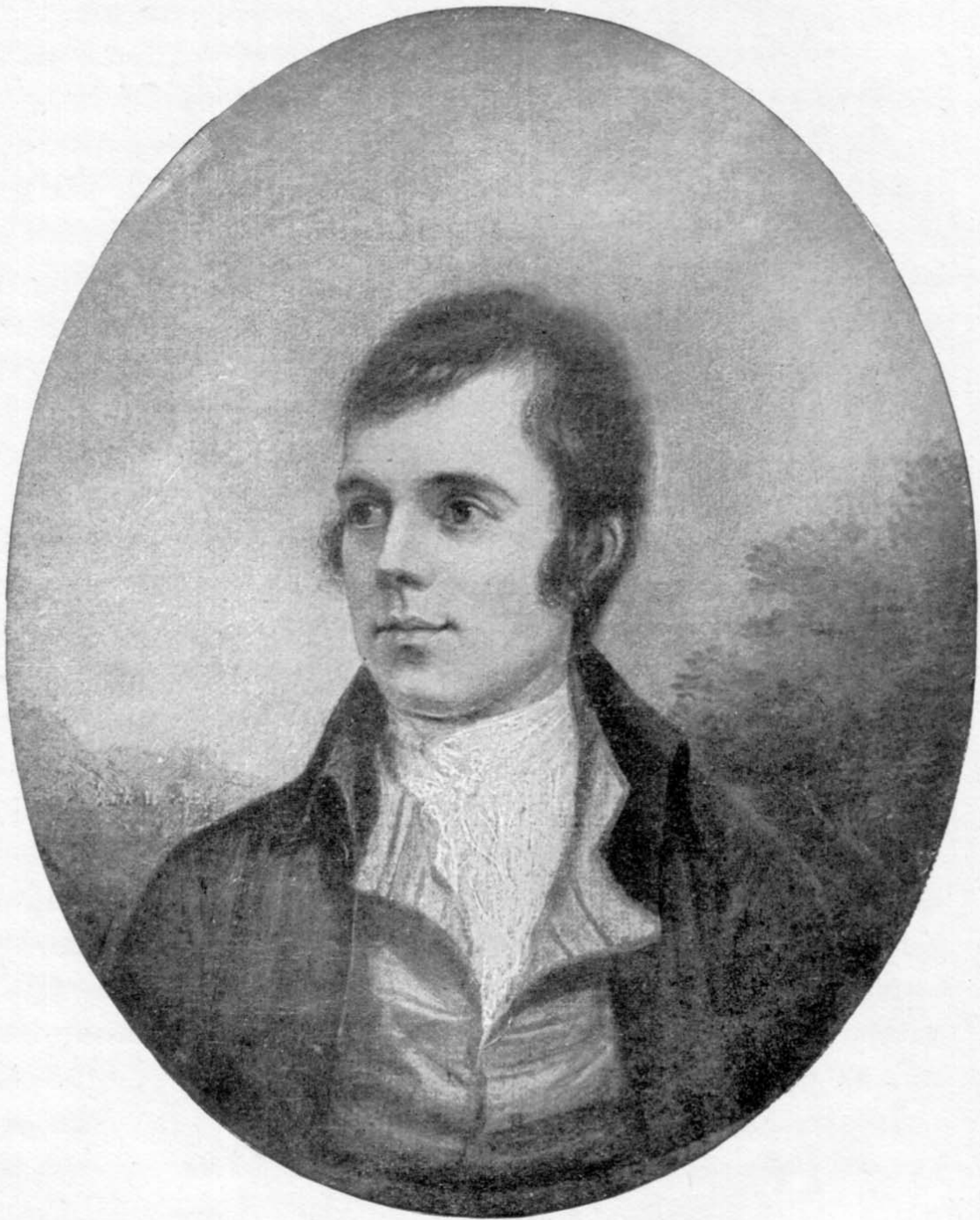
Similar success attended "Holy Willie's Prayer" - a daring travesty of high Calvinistic prayers, with deprecations, imprecations, and execrations - put into the mouth of a canting elder who had been one of Mr. Hamilton's judges in the Mauchline session. Local reputation was spreading, his verses circulated in the countryside, were roared over in every farmer's house and tavern, and chuckled over in laird's mansions and every moderate minister's manse. Such notoriety he naturally loved; indeed, it was his delight to shine, to be talked of, be it at markets or clubs, at kirk doors, weddings, or funerals.

Hamilton, a man of good position, social qualities, and ability, and Robert Aiken, the clever, glib-tongued lawyer of Ayr, now praised his verses to the skies. "I never knew there was any merit in my poems till Mr. Aiken read them into

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repute," said Burns. In rapid succession came from his pen yet more stinging satires, in which the squabbles of the clergy and the morose preaching of the evangelicals are touched with trenchant humour; and the "Holy Fair," that "joyful solemnity" in which the scandals attending the open-air communions are painted with vivid power and merciless veracity. In these satires there is not *saeva indignatio* at evils he hated, but wild humour over scandals he laughed at. In them he was merely voicing the feelings of the educated classes, and echoing the teaching of the moderate clergy in two-thirds of the Lowland pulpits of Scotland. To say that Burns, by his drastic lines, broke down the despotism of the Church, overthrew the spirit of Puritanism, and dispelled religious gloom in the country, is to speak in ignorance of the real part he played. That work had been begun effectively by others before him, and was to be carried on by others who never felt his influence.

During the winter of 1785-86 the full strength of his genius shone forth as at no other time - producing with marvellous prodigality masterpieces of humour and fancy which shaped themselves in his mind as he worked at his farm. As he follows the plough, he intercedes with the gadsman who runs to kill the little field-mouse which the plough-share had startled, and forthwith he composes the lines on the "wee sleekit timorous beastie." As he returns from a bibulous masonic meeting at Tarbolton, his eye catches the words, "Advice will be given on common disorders at the shop gratis," in the window of the impecunious schoolmaster, who kept a shop and dabbled in physic to increase his meagre earnings. Thereupon the brilliant fancy strikes him of an apparition of Death to the unconscious friend of his craft, and the "Death and Dr. Hornbook" is composed as he proceeds homewards. One Sunday evening, as they were walking, Robert repeated to Gilbert the "Cottar's Saturday Night" - a picture of his old home, of his father before the assembled household, beginning worship with his solemn phrase, "Let us worship God," and reading "the portion of the Word of God." The whole poem, owing to its attractive sentiment rather than genius, has done more than any other of his works to endear the poet to the masses of what used to be called "Bible-loving" Scotland. This winter of 1785-86 at Mossgiel was the most prolific and most brilliant period of his life. It was then he wrote "The Ordination," "Hallowe'en," "The Cottar's Saturday Night," "The Vision," the "Jolly Beggars," "To a Mouse," "The Twa Dogs," "Address to the Deil," and others, any one of which would have brought a poet fame. Now in the fulness of his powers, according to his varying moods he could write in any strain, without effort, with marvellous spontaneity, with rich enjoyment



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From the Painting by Alexander Nasmyth in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery,
Edinburgh.

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in the doing. "All my poetry," he told Mrs. Dunlop, "is the result of easy composition, but of laborious correction." His mastery over his dialect was like that of a great musician over his violin, which he makes to speak in every variety of expression - now with a merry lilt and now with mournful strain; by one movement making the feet to dance and by another the eyes to fill. It is strange to think that his finest works were not intended for the public eye, but merely pleasure-works made for the nonce, which might, for all he knew, be never heard of beyond his countryside, and might wear out of memory, as the manuscript copies wore out by use. In spite of his vast gifts of originality, he too modestly leant on others to give him a hoist on to his Pegasus, though once up none rode more superbly than he. He often needed the lead to a theme or a strain from some other writer before he began. The "Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie," the mare, would never have been written if Hamilton of Gilbertfield had not written the "Death and Dying of Bonnie Heck," his greyhound; the "Elegy on Poor Mailie" would never have been written if a century before Sempill of Beltrees had not composed his "Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan," and Ramsay or Fergusson had not copied it; his epistles "To Davie" and to Lapraik would not have been written if Hamilton of Gilbertfield and Ramsay had not exchanged rhyming letters before him. From Fergusson came further hints and helps. "Scotch Drink" follows on his predecessor's "Caller Water," the "Brigs o' Ayr" come after "Planestanes and Causey," the "Saturday Night" got suggestions from the "Farmer's Ingle," the influence of "Leith Races" is seen in his "Holy Fair," and other debts were due to a poet he called his "model." But then the distance from the suggestion to the masterpiece was worlds wide - and those pieces, like "Tam o' Shanter," which came without any literary progenitor, showed how independent and original his genius could be, surpassing all whenever he chose.

While engaged on the farm, which did not pay much, and composing poems, which paid still less, he had time for his favourite wooing, which paid worst of all. His relations with the "sex" were many and migratory. He was no sooner off with the old love than he was on with the new, and even for that he often did not wait. In his tastes he was not fastidious as to the position, quality, or even looks of his entrancer. "He had always a particular jealousy of people who were richer than himself, or had more consequence," says his brother Gilbert. "His love therefore seldom settled on persons of this description." A buxom barn-door beauty, a servant girl was enough, although she was as devoid of romance as of stockings. He must be the superior. A "fine woman," especially among his humble acquaintance, he could not resist; and seldom could she resist the masterful wooer, with his

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winning ways, his bewitching talk, his eyes that “glowed like coals of fire.” Not long after he came to Mossgiel he had met Jean Armour, a Mauchline mason’s daughter, at a penny ball. She was handsome and sprightly - wooing began, courtship proceeded, and it was in time apparent that a child would follow. What should he do? marry or fly? To his crony confidants of all his amours he protests that he is fixed as fate against staying at home and owning her as his wife. “The first by heaven I will not do - the last by hell that I will never do.” He did relent, from kindness if not from honour, and gave her a paper acknowledging her as his wife - a legal Scots compact. What was his dismay when the indignant “auld licht” mason forced the girl to give up the paper and packed her off to Paisley, rather than make her an “honest woman” by marrying her to a poor farmer and scapegrace poet. That he, the irresistible, should be discarded; that he, who had intended to desert Jean, should by Jean be shamefully deserted; that he, who had out of mere good pleasure and munificence of heart promised her marriage, should himself be rejected was indeed galling to his pride. To his boon companions, with whom he had no reticence, he denounced the girl’s perjury and ingratitude when rumours reached him that she was going to marry somebody else - “for never man loved more than I do her. I have often tried to forget her, I have run into all kinds of dissipation and riot to drive her out of my head.” He enjoyed himself with his companions in the Whiteford Arms, holding the free-spoken “Court of Equity.” A failure as a farmer, he had no career before him, his life was “without an aim,” and he was arranging to become overseer of a plantation in Jamaica, as a fit exile for a love-lorn man. But while protesting that his heart was wrung for lack of Jean Armour, he solaced himself with other wooings. There is one “Eliza” about whom he philanders, and to whom he sings in fine English strains, stating that “oceans roaring wide never can divide my heart and soul from thee.” [Chambers’s *Life and Works*, i. 252.] Two months after the marriage lines were destroyed there occurred the episode of a meeting by the banks of a river, when two lovers - one being the distracted adorer of perfidious Jean - stand on either bank of a murmuring stream, lave their hands in the running water, hold a Bible between them and swear perpetual love, and exchange copies of the Holy Scriptures. To her as to Eliza songs are made, in which he asserts, that though he “cross the raging sea,” while “his crimson currents flow he’ll love his Highland lassie.” There is something vague about this romantic story, on which the hero was unusually reticent. Some even dare to doubt if this “Mary in Heaven.” - afterwards immortalised in exquisite lines - ever was a Mary on earth. But she seems to have been a domestic servant quite of earth - Gavin Hamilton’s nursery-

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maid or a dairy-maid, [*Works of Burns*, edit. Scott Douglas, i. 255-57.] who died of fever in the west country the year after this scene. It is to be hoped that Jean and Eliza and Mary - the rivals - never met to compare their soft experiences and the rapturous songs of the versatile wooer.

For the scandal connected with the lost Armour, Burns had to make three several appearances before the congregation at Mauchline, with all demureness - Mr. Auld leniently letting the culprit stand in his pew instead of in the ignominious place of repentance, on condition that he should remember the poor. What could Burns now do? He was poor, his farming was a failure, he was without permanent occupation, Jean Armour presented him with twins; old Armour threatened him with pains and penalties for aliment for his daughter and the surreptitious offspring, which he could not pay. In dread of jail he skulked off to Kilmarnock, seeking shelter in the house of his aunt, with his chest ready for him to sail for the Indies. But he had no money to pay his passage. Evidently his companions and brother confessors in every amorous scrape could not; certainly his richer friends, Hamilton and Aiken, did not offer the requisite money - only nine guineas. They, however, urged him to make money by publishing his poems, and this idea he readily caught up - the wonder is they had never urged it before. "I weighed my productions as impartially as in my power," says Burns: "I thought they had merit, and it was a delicious idea that I should be called a clever fellow, even though it should never reach my ears - a poor negro-driver - gone to the world of spirits perhaps, a victim to that inhospitable clime. I was pretty sure my poems would meet with some applause; but at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would deafen the voice of censure, and the novelty of West India scenes make me forget my neglect." Never, surely, was poet more modest. [Even when in his full glory in Edinburgh he talked modestly of Ramsay and Fergusson as his models (Lockhart's *Scott*, i. 187).] He was overawed by the genius of a Dr. Beattie, bowed before the pre-eminence of Allan Ramsay, praised lavishly the verse of other people, and his own matchless work he threw out as unconsidered trifles, to please a mood, to praise a girl, to amuse a friend, and enliven a tavern supper.

Soon Wilson's little printing press at Kilmarnock was wheezing out 600 copies of his poems. Friends and patrons had subscribed for 350, and quickly the rest were sold, and the poet was ultimately richer by a poor £20. Success was immediate; his book was received with acclaim in farm and cottage, in mansion and manse in the whole south country, and copies were thumbed out of existence. The local reputation of a "clever fellow," who paid little regard to farming or to morals, the frequenter of taverns, with a knack of verse-making, changed in a month. His

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poems were a revelation of the man, for range of motive and subject, for sentiment and satire, such as had not been seen in Scots before. In Catrine House Professor Dugald Stewart had him as his guest, full of kindly attentions to the new poet; Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, whose heart was touched by the "Cottar's Saturday Night," sent post haste to Mossgiel for six copies of the volume, with a request that the author would call upon her; and from that time began the intercourse and correspondence of long years - the clever lady somewhat didactic, prolix, and exacting; the poet respectful, circumspect, yet independent, for he would do much because he was obliging, though nothing because he felt obliged. Others of rank and consequence recognised him and brought him into their society - strange to a man whose highest associates had been chiefly young drapers, teachers, farmers, clerks, and shoemakers. His new acquaintances scanned him critically. His manners were "simple, manly, and independent, but without anything that indicated forwardness, arrogance, or vanity. If there had been a little more of gentleness and accommodation in his temper he would, I think, have been more interesting; but he had been accustomed to give law in the circle of his ordinary acquaintance, and his dread of anything approaching to meanness or servility rendered his manner somewhat decided and hard" - such was the impression made on Dr. Stewart, the urbanest of gentlemen. There was about him the boldness of a shy man, anxious to seem at his ease; but it was difficult for a man brought up in the social familiarity of the rustic and village coteries to know how far to go in that more fashionable and formal company.

The gathering fame might elate him, but it could not satisfy a man with an aimless life. He had failed as a farmer, he could not live as a poet. The bookseller would not print another edition because the author had no money to supply him with paper. He protested that he had to endure "pangs of disappointment, the sting of pride, with some pangs of remorse, which never fail to settle on my vitals like vultures when attention is not called away by the calls of society or the vagaries of the Muse. Even in the hour of social mirth my gaiety is the madness of an intoxicated criminal under the hands of the executioner." In these moods exile seemed the only resource, and with his money he took out a passage for the Indies. Then occurred the event that changed his destiny.

Not far from Mossgiel, in the manse of Loudoun, lived Mr. George Laurie, one of the most genial and cultivated of the moderate clergy; intimate with men of letters in Edinburgh, and numbering among his friends Principal Robertson, Dr. Blair, and Dr. Blacklock. He had nineteen years before brought "Ossian"

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Macpherson to the notice of Dr. Blair. He had a family consisting of several daughters, accomplished and beautiful, a son, afterwards his assistant and successor in the living, who, with the minister's benign wife, all made a charming household. In the evenings the sons and daughters of neighbouring lairds would often come over in coach or on horseback, and after supper there was the dance, when the minister, little and fat and paunchy, his kindly face surmounted by a cauliflower wig, would join in the country dance, his nimble, short, silk-stockinged legs twinkling like expert black knitting-kneedles to the music of the spinnet. Gavin Hamilton and Burns would sometimes ride over to dinner, join the dancing, and occasionally stay all night. Burns had paid his last visit to the manse previous to his departure for the Indies; he had bid farewell, leaving in the bedroom the lines beginning, "O thou Dread power," and as he strode over the moor in the sultry, darkening autumn evening, with pelting showers, he composed what he expected would be "the last song he should ever measure in Caledonia," "The gloomy night is gathering fast." [Chambers, i. 302.] His box was on the way to Greenock, when a letter was handed to him from Dr. Blacklock - the blind poet - to Mr. Laurie, who had sent to him a copy of the poems, to get his opinion of them - for though a poor poet himself, he was a literary arbiter in Scotland. It was full of enthusiasm, urging that a second edition should be published. The opinion of one of the literati, who seemed to the Mossgiel farmer as gods of Olympus, too high to hear, too great to approach, was with Burns decisive. "Dr. Blacklock belonged to a set of critics for whose applause I had not dared to hope. His opinion that I could merit encouragement in Edinburgh [Dr. Blacklock in his letter says nothing about that. Chambers's *Burns*, i. 305.] fired me so much that I posted off for that city without a single acquaintance, or a single letter of introduction."

In December, he set off on a borrowed pony, entering the city with strange interest - the crowded High Street, the dark, densely-peopled wynds, the tumultuous taverns. He shared a bed in Baxter's Close with an old Mauchline acquaintance, Richmond, who had a lodging at three shillings a week. He found some Ayrshire acquaintances - gentlemen whom he had met in his neighbourhood - and he was introduced to Lord Glencairn, whose handsome form and exquisite face were matched by a noble and charming nature. Through this nobleman the members of the Caledonian Hunt subscribed liberally for the new edition, which that sleek and learned bookseller, Mr. William Creech, who had formerly been tutor to his lordship, had undertaken to publish. Henry Erskine, full of wit and good-nature, took him under his wing. Dr. Blacklock welcomed him to his little breakfast-room

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with gentle effusiveness. Dr. Blair was gracious and patronising, admiring his sentimental poems, and conscientiously trying to appreciate his humorous verse, though the prosaic critic had not a notion of humour. The kindly “Man of Feeling,” Henry Mackenzie, received the admirer who had worn out two copies of his book by devoted use, and praised his poems in the *Lounger*, that weekly paper formed after the model of the *Spectator* - or rather the more ponderous *Rambler* - with snatches of poetry, criticism, mild romance, and character-painting by literary lawyers, who aimed at originality and always missed it. The masonic body received Brother Burns with acclaim, and the Grand Master gave the toast “Caledonia and the Caledonian Bard” amid vociferous enthusiasm. The doors of aristocratic flats and mansions were open to receive the poetical ploughman; the tables of literati had a place for him; ladies were entranced by his manner, his deferential address, his grave face, that dark eye of his, which we are told literally glowed. “I never saw such another in a human head,” said Walter Scott, who as a boy had seen him one memorable evening at Dr. Adam Ferguson’s. [Lockhart’s *Scott*, i. 185. “Nothing in the literary way has occupied Edinburgh for some weeks past so much as the poems of Robert Burns, an illiterate ploughman of Ayrshire. His poems are many of them extremely good, both those in Scots dialect and in the English. He is thought to be equal, if not superior to Ramsay in original genius and humour. I am not certain of that. But he surpasses him in sensibility. We, you may believe, with the prejudices of the Scotch, are ready to believe that the productions of the milkwoman of Bristol are mere whey compared to Burns; and that the poems of Stephen Duck, the thresher, are but like chaff in comparison. Lord Glencairn is his patron. A new edition of his poems is printing. But I hear he has not been so advisable as to suppress some things that he was advised to suppress” (MS. letter of Dr. Carlyle to Duchess of Buccleugh).] The Duchess of Gordon, from whose pretty lips came Scots as broad and words as free as his own, protested that “this man carried her off her feet.” The Ayrshire poet was the theme of universal conversation. There was the man, tall, strong, gainly, without clumsiness, though his shoulders had the slouch of a man who had followed the plough, dressed like a farmer in his Sunday best, in his top-boots and buckskins, blue coat and waistcoat, striped with blue and buff, the costume of Charles Fox and the livery of his admirers; his black hair without powder, tied behind and spread over his forehead; his dark eyes, with a gleam of melancholy in them, kindling up with wonderful animation; his talk vigorous and full of intelligence, expressed in strong Scots accents, but in good English words, with a voice “sonorous and replete with the finest modulations.” The manner was manly, and the opinions were spoken with self-confidence by this young peasant-farmer before gentry whom he had never met on terms of equality before; before literary patriarchs and legal magnates. He was no “illiterate ploughman” but a well-read man. The dignified Principal Robertson owned he scarcely ever met any man whose conversation displayed more intellectual vigour.

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Had Burns been born forty years earlier, when town and country manners were more alike, when classes high and low had less difference in living, when laird and merchant, lawyer and shopkeeper were of kindred blood, all speaking broad Scots, all with frugal incomes and simple ways - had Burns lived in Allan Ramsay's time, the disparity of rank and manners between the Ayrshire farmer and the Edinburgh citizen would have been less marked. By 1786 a wide distinction had arisen between classes, and side by side with remains of quaint Scots simplicity there was a modern air of fashion as different from the ancient ways as the fine New Town was from the squalid Old Town. When the poet appeared, therefore, he found manners, talk, interests in which he had no part, and that though in society he was not of it. It was not so long since he had been for the first time in a room with a carpet, at John Rankin's at Adamhill, when he went gingerly round it, afraid to put his hobnails on a covering so dainty. He had lived in a "but and a ben," and a few years before had lived on a ploughman's wage of £7 a year. That he should now bear himself with dignity and fine self-possession in the highest society in Scotland was in itself a great achievement. Regarded with interest, treated with courtesy, he yet felt that there was an air of condescension in it all, and that gentlemen raised their eyebrows under their capacious wigs or powdered hair when he ventured to hold his own. He imagined, as weeks went by and curiosity was sated, that some who had caressed him passed him by, and he writhed when he saw persons of rank or wealth preferred to himself. It galled him to see Lord Glencairn pay deference to a man of higher station, and he wrote in his commonplace book: "He showed so much engrossing attention to the only blockhead at table that I was within half a point of throwing down my gage of contemptuous defiance!" It was mortifying to him "to see a fellow, whose abilities would scarcely have made an eightpenny tailor, and whose heart is not worth three farthings, meet with attention and notice that are withheld from the son of genius and poverty." It was no doubt pleasant to be taken by the hand in friendly grasp as an equal; it was hateful to him to be "taken by the hand" as an interesting protégé. The men of letters, who in the distance had seemed so great, whom since a boy he had read of with awe, seemed small men when he met them at table, separated only by a few feet of mahogany - their talk, their wit, their humour he no doubt thought inferior to that of Willie Nicol the teacher, and William Smellie the printer, in Dowie's tavern. The literati were ready with their advice, but he cared little for it. As he said to Ramsay of Ochertyre, who asked him if they had mended his poems by their criticism: "Sir, these gentlemen remind me of some spinsters in my country, who spin the thread so fine that it is

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neither fit for weft nor woof.” [The only advice he adopted from Dr. Blair was to alter the words in the “Holy Fair” from “tidings of salvation” to “tidings of damnation.” Dr. James Gregory, to whom he submitted his “Wounded Hare,” wrote plainspoken, pedantic, niggling criticism, which must have proved as nauseous to the poet as his critic’s own “Gregory’s mixture.” With infinitely more courtesy and kindness Burns wrote his suggestions to Helen Maria Williams on her flimsy verses, praising generously wherever he could (Chambers’s *Burns*, i. 266, iii. 44).]

So the months passed, with dinners in society, meetings at taverns at night with congenial bottle-companions, the writing of songs for the engraver Johnson’s *Musical Museum*. At Smellie’s printing-office he would turn up, pacing the composers’ room, cracking his long whip, as his pages passed through the press.

[Kerr’s *Life of W. Smellie*, ii. 256-59.]

In May 1787 he left Edinburgh, the scene of his triumphs. The second edition of his poems, consisting of 2800 copies, was published by Creech, enriched by “The Ordination,” “Death and Dr. Hornbook,” the “Brigs o’ Ayr,” and the “Address to the Unco’ Guid.” It became a problem among his admirers what should be done for this poet, who had neither money nor a career. A commission in the army was spoken of. Adam Smith, who was one of the first to acknowledge his genius when the poems appeared, suggested he might become a “salt officer.” When the Chair of Agriculture in Edinburgh University was founded, Mrs. Dunlop and others thought that post would fit him - for that a man should fail as a practical farmer has never disqualified him for teaching with confidence the theory of farming. [*Correspondence between Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop* (edit. by W. Wallace), pp. 15, 10, 167.]

After an excursion in the southern counties with his new friend, Robert Ainslie, the law-clerk, he returned to Mossgiel, after six months of flattering enough to turn the head of a man less assured of his rightful place. He had left home skulking from a sheriff’s warrant for a bastard’s aliment, he went back with his fortunes raised, his fame established. People, who a few months before had despised him in his obscurity, looked up to him now in the hour of his glory. Bitterly he wrote to William Nicol, that hard-drinking, cross-grained, High School teacher: “The stateliness of the patricians of Edinburgh, and the civility of my plebeian brethren since I returned home, have nearly put me out of conceit of my species.” Equally he felt the “mean and disgusting compliance” of the Armour family, who, having despised him as a bad farmer, with a character as dilapidated as his fortunes, were complacent when he came back a great man. It would have been well if Jean had proved less “compliant” and Burns with her been less persuasive.

Evidently his part in farming Mossgiel was given up. For the next few months were taken up with visits to the Highlands - now with the humorous, ill-

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conditioned Nicol, now with Dr. Adair, brother of Mrs. Archibald Laurie of Loudoun, and a relation of Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop - and he was received with honour at Gordon Castle, and Blair Castle, and Ochertyre, taking his place with dignity among dukes and gentry, with what Mrs. Riddell described as the almost "sorcery of his fascinating conversation," to which the brightness of his eyes gave power.

In December he is found again in Edinburgh, staying with his friend William Cruickshank, the High School teacher. Mr. Creech is slow of paying the money, about £500, for his poems. He had many an interview with that courteous bookseller, so carefully dressed in powdered hair and his velvet breeches, at his Luckenbooth shop. But though he lingered out the winter months, this second visit, like most literary sequels, was a failure. It lacked the freshness, it had none of the glory of the former. Where now were the caressing flattery of ladies of rank and fashion, the suppers with literati, the dinners with the great, the many gilt-edged invitations that shed a splendour in the poor lodging in Baxter's Close? These now were few and far between. Instead, there were meetings in the taverns, where drink was copious, songs were merry, jokes were as broad as the nights were long; the gatherings of the Crochallan Club, with its wild, free mirth, where Burns and rough-tongued Smellie bickered jovially. It is true, the coarse humour of Nicol and Smellie and Robert Heron, the topping literary man-of-all-work, over a collop, a rizzared haddock, and whisky in John Dowie's or Douglas's tavern was vastly more amusing than Lord Monboddo's whims or Dr. Blair's platitudes. Here, at least, Burns met no superiors: he could be king of the company, say what he liked, and drink as much as he pleased. It was better to reign in a tavern than to serve in a drawing-room.

Then came the flirtations with the angelic, though portly Clarinda. Burns had met at a friend's house Mrs. M'Lehose, whose incompatible husband was abroad, leaving his wife and his children to live in a poor flat at General's Entry, in Potterrow. She was a "gloriously amiable, fine woman," as he told her, and the poet was ever enamoured of a "fine woman." He was charmed at the first interview with the sumptuous, sentimental dame, and she with the poet, with the dark glowing eyes and seductive manners. By the over-turning of a hackney coach, Burns was disabled by a bruised limb from calling on her for "six horrible weeks"; during which time he was attended by his friend Dr. James Gregory, whose opinion was considered equally valuable on poetry and physic. He beguiled the weary days by writing songs for Johnson's *Museum*, and with a rapturous correspondence with the grass widow

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- he taking the name of Sylvander, she that of Clarinda. Marvellous letters they are - love and piety, passion and theology, devout apostrophes to heaven, violent protestations of devotion to Clarinda jostle each other in oddest incongruity in those voluptuous letters, sent from his lodgings in 3t. James' Square, all written in his best English and finest falsetto sentiment - the most pious of them being penned "at midnight," probably after a merry evening with his friends. She was a gushing, warm-hearted soul, with religious scruples, which were safeguards for affections which might go beyond the Platonic with a too ardent, and not too refined, lover. When she is troubled by rumours of his ridiculing religion, for Calvinistic theology was her "darling topic," he can assure her that "devotion is the favourite employment of his heart." When she has qualms at loving another while she is a married woman, he can pacify his "dearest angel" by showing she owes the faithless M'Lehose nothing. How can she distrust herself or him, when her adorer can beautifully write, in a sweet conjunction of piety and passion: "I love you and will love you, and will with joyous confidence approach the throne of the Almighty with your dear idea." What rapture to read: "I admire you, I love you as a woman beyond any one in all the circle of creation"! And the interviews, which required to be stealthy as friends were ill-naturedly talking, confirmed the ardour of the daily letters. Amazing reading are these adoring epistles of the two amorists: Clarinda's ring true though foolish; Burns's, we have an uncomfortable feeling, often ring false and foolish.

The time for leaving Edinburgh arrived; he had settled terms with the slow-paced Creech, his parting with solemn vows from Clarinda was over, and he returned to Mauchline.

He deceiving,
She believing,
What can lovers wish for more?

Jean Armour was again in trouble. In winter she had been driven out of her home by the enraged father. She got shelter with a female friend of Burns in Kilmarnock; but he now brought her to a lodging in Mauchline as the time drew near when she should be confined of twins - for her misfortunes did not come single. In a letter to a friend, not all printable, he narrates coarsely his sordid arrangements with and for Jean; ["I have taken her to my arms, I have given her a mahogany bed, I have given her a guinea.... I swore her never to attempt to claim me as her husband. She did all this like a good girl." - *Works of R. Burns* (edit. Scott Douglas), iv. 95.] and in similar style, also unquotable, he wrote to another friend

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ungallantly concerning his wife by law. In February Clarinda is informed: "I am disgusted with her. I cannot endure her." To compare her to his angel is profanity: "*Here* is tasteless insipidity, vulgarity of soul, and mercenary fawning. *There* polished soul, good-sense, heaven-born genius," and so on. "I have done with her," he protests; and the letter ends in subtle humouring of the pietistic Clarinda: "At eight o'clock I shall be with the Father of Mercies, at that hour on your own account," for he made assignations in prayer as in passion. [*Works of R. Burns* (edit. Scott Douglas), iv. 114.] This mixture of devotion to God and to Clarinda is disconcerting - some may use a stronger word. Life has its surprises. One day in March Sylvander writes to the angelic Clarinda, promising "to love her to death, through death and for ever," and devoutly winding up by saying: "I am going to remember you in my prayers." A fortnight later Robert Burns and Jean Armour met in Gavin Hamilton's chambers and were made formally man and wife! The poet was honestly paying a debt of honour. Poor Clarinda! When aged, wrinkled, and plain, she would speak of those old days when she was a "gloriously fine woman"; she treasured the letters, yellow with years, full of rhodomontade which she took for passion, and pietistic phrases she took for piety; and the old eyes would light up with venerable love and pride for the faithless, unromantic, unchivalrous Sylvander - dead in his grave those many years. When, in 1793, they resumed their correspondence and interviews, the sentiment of that song "Ae fond kiss and then we sever" must have consoled her:

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met - or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Was he making love or was he only making a song? The next year they finally parted. Clarinda died fifty years after.

There are foolish persons who will not allow one depreciatory word spoken of any thing or being that they admire: fond parents who are indignant at a flaw suggested in their offspring; devoted citizens who get hot at any aspersion on their town - its skies never rain too much, its streets are never dirty, its people have the warmest of hearts and the purest of accents; infatuated patriots will not hear a word spoken against their native land, its climate, or its history, or its inhabitants - all are the finest. To such persons it is a sin and shame to say anything against a national bard. If he had faults - "we all have" - we are referred from his personal acts to his brilliant productions. We are bade to think what beautiful poems he wrote, what fine

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lines he penned, what noble sentiments he uttered; and he is justified by his works - which are literary. A poet's faults are condoned because he wrote beautiful poems; though a preacher's faults are not usually condoned though he writes beautiful sermons. Enthusiasts are like Théophile Gautier, who said that if he had the bad taste to find any verse of Victor Hugo's poor, he would not dare to confess the fact to himself even quite alone in a cellar without a candle. We can imagine how vastly amused, though terribly bored, Robert Burns would be if he heard the magniloquent eulogies and festive oratory of adorers, and their laudations of his being "so human"; for he had an exceedingly keen sense of humour.

Before leaving Edinburgh Burns had got a commission as officer of excise, which he retained in case of emergency, for he had also arranged to take the farm of Ellisland, near Dumfries, which Mr. Miller of Dalswinton had leased to him on favourable terms. It was in May that he settled on the farm and the dilapidated house was put to rights. Mrs. Burns arrived with her surviving pre-nuptial twin (the others had died), to whom were afterwards to be added two children by his wife, and a child by somebody else, whom the good - natured, not too fastidious Jean nursed with her own. Before her arrival at Ellisland the poet had written in her praise the charming "Of a' the airts the wind can blaw," and it is perhaps true that she was then "the lassie he lo'ed best," - though where was Clarinda? Yet there were several second "bests," as we know - each of them in scholastic phrase *proxime accessit*. But, after all, as Matt Prior says: "Odds life! must one swear to the truth of a song!" He describes her genially as possessing "a warm heart, gratefully devoted to me, with all its powers to love me; vigorous health, sprightly cheerfulness, set off to the best advantage by a more than commonly handsome figure" - thus he appraises her to Mrs. Dunlop. And to Miss Chalmers - to whom, too, he had boldly made love - he owns "this marriage was not perhaps in consequence of the attachment of romance. I have no cause to repent it. If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsomest figure, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the county." And then she could sing and did sing his songs, "for she has the finest wood notes wild I ever heard." This, of course, was very true, though it is not usual in more refined circles to describe the "points" of a spouse. Clearly he had made a suitable marriage. He had wedded a kindly soul, a thrifty wife, with a "handsome figure" - qualities in a young woman which, however, mature prosaically into a "decent body." Refinement would have been irksome to him - too much delicacy of

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feeling would have been galled by his peasant nature and tastes. Much sympathy has been expended on his fate in passing his life among his own people - that he got no lucrative post, where he could have lived in a higher social sphere. If he had, Jean Armour would have kept him fatally down: her antecedents, her homely nature would have made her socially impossible; and her husband must have left her behind when he entered society - like Thomas Moore's much loved, much deserted "Bessy," to whom the little poet of fashion wrote so copiously of the brilliant company he met which she could never share.

Ellisland is beautifully situated on the banks of the Nith, about six miles from Dumfries, opposite to the woods of Dalswinton, which clothe the opposite side of the river. Probably the happiest months of Burns's life were spent here. He was busy with his farm and his markets; friends came in, and there was jovial talk; gentry asked him to their houses and he was genial with lairds, whom he could fascinate with his brilliant, lively talk over their claret and their punch. But from the gay, noisy companionship, however, he would often return ill satisfied with it all. There would follow a reaction and moody depression, and then he would vent his feelings in verse, which gave him unflinching relief. He loved to walk by the river-bank, along the Scaur, where the rocks descend precipitately into the water, both in the sunshine and in the storm, when the winds were beating furiously and rain swelled the current below. The aspects of Nature touched him as responsive to his own moods. "I never heard the loud solitary whistle of the swallow on a summer's morn, or the wild noisy cadence of a troop of grey plovers on an autumn evening, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry." It was so he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, to whom he oftenest revealed the better side of his character. It is to ladies of pure tone and sympathetic soul - like Mrs. Dunlop and Miss Chalmers - that he writes with feeling, and evidently with sincerity - uttering what was highest and deepest in a nature possessed of fine impulses. At other times and in other moods, and to men of his class, Smiths, Browns, Rankins, he cast restraints away, and showed himself a master, in epistles and verse, of that style we may call "the unquotable." He could pass from one note to another with curious rapidity in harmony with his correspondent. Ever since his uncle bought him at Ayr a collection of "Letters by Eminent Hands" when he was a boy, he tried to "excel in letter-writing," and there are many we read with a strain, for the trail of the "Complete Letter Writer" is over them all. Yet no man had more skill than he, when he was natural, in writing letters, with masculine, vigorous, admirable English - and his brother Gilbert was not far behind him.

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With strange transition of temperament, as the mood fell on him, he wrote, now rollicking in humour, now in deepest feeling, to-day words which made Dowie's tavern roar with laughter, to-morrow songs and lines which made Mrs. Dunlop's eyes fill with tears. One day his wife heard him crooning to himself, then breaking out into wild gesticulations and joyous excitement, tears rolling down his cheeks as he spoke out the words as they came to his mind:

Now, Tam, O Tam, had thae been queans
A' plump and strappin', in their teens, -

"Tam o' Shanter" was being made. Another day - it was a September evening in 1789, the anniversary of Mary Campbell's death - he walked up and down the farmyard looking to the clear starry sky, and then lying down on the straw, Mrs. Burns found him with his eyes fixed upwards, and on coming indoors he sat down and wrote that exquisite lyric to Mary in Heaven - "Thou ling'ring star, with less'ning ray" - immortalising an episode which time had idealised so much that there was no need for jealousy in his wife's capacious bosom.

At Ellisland some golden months were spent, but they were doomed to be few. At home he lived for a while a douce quiet life; he was a kind husband, a devoted father, a genial neighbour, and a generous master. He worked in the fields with his stalwart form among his men; he conducted worship with his family and his servants; he was to be seen on Sundays at Dunscore kirk, listening wearily to Calvinistic discourses. But farming schemes were failing, difficulties were increasing, his spending was lavish, his returns were meagre, and when autumn came he was forced to apply to Graham of Fintry to get him employment as an exciseman. Now were conjoined the two occupations of farmer and of gauger. "I am now a poor rascally gauger, with a salary of £35, condemned to gallop 200 miles every week, to inspect dirty yards and yeasty barrels," he wrote bitterly. When he came to a village the "good fellow" rose above the Government official, and a hint to the alewife as he entered her tavern would give her time to remove beyond reach her nefarious casks. As he reached an inn, however late at night, the servants would get up to listen to his wondrous talk. There were convivial temptations in that life of his, for as he passed from house to house in all weathers he must go through prolonged refreshments; for the punch-bowl was full, the company were thirsty, and they acted on the jovial motto of bibulous days: "Be ours this night, who knows what comes to-morrow?" That way, however, lay bankruptcy. Money went out, bills

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came in, harvests were poor, and workers lagged at home when the master excised abroad.

By December 1791 the stock was sold; Burns removed to Dumfries, to which district he was attached as gauger; the household and its gear were carted off from the lovely land of Ellisland to the narrow Wee Vennel. Burns had been anxious to get the post of port officer at Greenock or Port Glasgow, but had to content himself with a “foot-walk,” which was a district where no horse was required. [*Corresp. between Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop* (ed. Wallace), p. 245.] Dumfries in those days was an ideal residence for a man who wished to indulge convivial tendencies - it was then the worst place for a man who wished to overcome them. Diligently as the poet did his work, carefully as he kept his books, there were temptations in that society of young clerks, small lawyers, drouthy shop-keepers, who met at the King’s Arms at night, and jovial farmers who went to “wet” their bargains at the Globe on market-day. Among them Burns went too often and stayed too long, wasting his glorious company on inglorious comrades, over whom he reigned as king. If he was gay, he went to indulge his humour; if he was in a black mood, he went to drive dull care away. Topers sent for him to entertain their friends, who were eager to see the famous poet; and sometimes it may be feared that he made sport for the philistines, though a proud flash of the eyes, a keen stroke of the tongue, would warn them that to take a liberty was a dangerous thing.

There were friends of a higher order, and if he lost them it was his own fault. He could have no warmer friends than the Riddells at Friars’ Carse - at whose house he met the corpulent antiquary Captain Grose, for whose pages he wrote “Tam o’ Shanter.” At Woodley Park lived Mrs. Walter Riddell, a clever and charming woman; but she had a refinement which Burns forgot when on leaving the dinner-table with a company half-drunk like himself, he took a liberty she never forgot, and was slow to forgive. When, in spite of his apology, the friendship stopped, his wounded pride stirred his coarser nature, and in rancid lampoons and epigrams, vulgar, brutal, and unpardonable, he insulted the lady and her husband, who were his loyalest friends. [Burns’s *Works* (ed. Scott Douglas), iii. 178. Among them are lines “Pinned to Mrs. Walter Riddell’s carriage”:

If you rattle along like your Mistress’s tongue,
Your speed will outrival the dart:
But a fly for your load, you’ll break down on the road,
If your stuff be as rotten as her heart.

These rival in coarseness the lines on the dead Mrs. Oswald.] This cost him other friendships in the class which could best have raised him, and he consorted more with a poor herd. It is true, all his follies were exaggerated by local gossip - all that was done was seen,

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all that was seen was retailed, and much that neither was seen nor done was told by scandal, which never sees a man make a false step, but it reports that he has fallen down a whole flight of stairs. For the proud man to be ignored and eyed askance by others; for the man conscious of rare intellectual powers to be despised by those, be they rich or noble, whom he felt his inferiors, was galling. Republicanism was then in the air - the spirit of democracy which had sprung up with the revolt of America had become stronger with the revolution in France; the political trinity - "liberty, equality, fraternity" - was welcomed by great numbers in Scotland who read Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, by weavers at their looms, tailors cross-legged on their benches, cobblers at their lasts, and ploughmen loitering round the smithy when the horses were being shod, talking wildly, incoherently of the "rights of man." Burns had fallen in, as he winced under social inequality, with this fashion. Years before Dr. Blair had, with unusual shrewdness, said "his politics smelt of the smithy." His democratic spirit, though chiefly due to a generous feeling of philanthropy, had something in it of personal grievance that he himself should give way before "yon birky ca'ed a lord." "A man's a man for a' that" was not entirely a cheap maxim to voice the equality of man - it was also an assertion of jealous revolt against the empty rank and fortune which society honoured. In this mood his good sense and prudence sometimes failed him. His sympathies with the French Revolution and political reform were too pronounced, and his opinions were too outspoken not to come to the ears of authorities, and the Excise Board began inquiries into his conduct as of one disaffected to the Government. Dreading lest he should be dismissed, and his wife and family left destitute, in full alarm he besought his patron Graham of Fintry, who was one of the Commissioners of the Excise, to intercede "to save me from that misery which threatens me, and which - with my latest breath - I will say I have not deserved." [Chambers, iii. 274.] This was a humiliating position for such a man. Fortunately, with a rebuke and a warning, the storm blew by, and the poet-turned-politician, the exciseman-turned-democrat had cause for thankfulness that he escaped so easily, seeing that those were days when "Friends of the People" received drastic treatment at the hands of Tory judges. Yet even after this trouble his feelings in hot moods were shown, to the scandal of quiet citizens. When at a large dinner, after the toast of William Pitt was drunk, he left in high dudgeon because he was not allowed to give his toast: "To George Washington, a better man." When at another, he proposed the sentiment: "May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause" - which brought upon him an affront which he would have challenged had he not feared to risk the peace

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and welfare of his wife and family on a drunken squabble. Not yet was forgotten his act of fatuous braggadocio a year before, when, after seizing a smuggling vessel as exciseman, he bought four carronades as politician, and packed them off to the National Convention as a mark of his sympathy - which gift, with his letter, was intercepted at the Dover Custom-House. This action of presenting four guns valued at £3 from a gauger to a foreign state was chiefly faulty for displaying a curious lack of humour. All these escapades were forgotten and forgiven when, after war with France broke out, none proved more loyal and enthusiastically patriotic than he.

It is a sad truth that the last years of his life showed a woeful declension in social esteem and self-respect. Friends looked doubtfully askance at him, great folk, lairds and ladies, no longer welcomed him as of old. When a gentleman, meeting him one day in Dumfries, proposed that he should cross the street to join a group of ladies and gentlemen, "Nay, nay," he bitterly replied, "my young friend, that is all over now," and he quoted the lines of Lady Grisell Baillie with the pathetic refrain: "And werena my heart licht I wad dee."

The best proof, however, that the stories of his dissipation and drunkenness in these last years must have been exaggerated consists in the wealth of lyrics he contributed to literature. His power for composing great works was either dead or dormant, but his lyric gifts were still splendid in these last days. To the volumes of Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, of which he had been virtual editor, he had contributed one hundred and eighty-four songs since 1787; for George Thomson's collection he contributed sixty-four, original or adapted - all sent without money and without price. Devoted to Scots music and minstrelsy, he had a patriotic enthusiasm for their preservation; and he refused payment for any one of those songs which he lavished with bewildering prodigality on Johnson and Thomson. He was even full of gratitude at Thomson's munificence in sending a shawl for his wife, and a little picture by Allan to himself. Never was there a less mercenary soul than he, having nothing in common with Dr. Johnson, who said a man was a blockhead who did not write for money. To many old airs there were only snatches of the original songs surviving - if any part was good, he would retain a verse or a line; if they were coarse or poor, new words were written. With unerring touch and tact he would change some poor catch into a lyric, which for light grace, pathos, or humour was matchless. A phrase changed here, a verse transposed there, and, as if by magic, the crudity, the grossness vanished, and a work of perfect art was made.

[Literary taste is a capricious thing, as is exemplified in a story by Aubrey de Vere: " 'Read the exquisite songs of Burns,' Tennyson exclaimed, 'in shape each of them has the perfection of the berry; in light the radiance of a dew-drop! You forget for its sake those stupid things, his serious pieces.' The same day I met Wordsworth and named

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Burns to him. Wordsworth praised him even more vehemently than Tennyson had done, as the great genius who had brought poetry back to Nature, but ended: 'Of course I refer to his serious efforts, such as the "Cottar's Saturday Night"; these follow little songs of his one has to forget.' I told the tale to Henry Taylor that evening; but his answer was: 'Burns's exquisite songs and Burns's serious efforts are to me alike tedious and disagreeable reading'" (*Memoir of Tennyson*, i. 211).] He was not thinking of fame, still less of gain, when he wrote; it was only to give new life to old music, new beauty to old songs. It is true that closer research has shown that many lyrics which were supposed to be entirely original were really founded on ancient words, which had a lively originality of their own - like "Whistle, and I'll come to you my lad," whose initial verse he takes from old work. It is true that "Auld Lang Syne," like many others, is but a mosaic of his own and some long dead singers; but so far from seeking credit for making it, he even pretended to George Thomson that he had heard it from an old man's lips. All this may diminish the claim made for him - not by him - to marvellous originality. But it is worse than foolish to speak of these fragments he wove into his verse as "pilferings." [Henley's *Essay on Burns*, *passim*.] A man cannot be said to steal verses and phrases from others, when he is really giving to them his own infinitely finer skill and art, to inform them with fresh life and to shape them to perfect form. Long before his poems were published, he had been composing songs, rhyming epistles, satires which he never dreamt would meet the public eye. Even the "Jolly Beggars," that splendid achievement, he never printed, even forgetting what he had written in it after that night John Richmond and he looked into the boosing-ken of Poesie Nansie, with its tramps, tinkers, and scoundrels. Yet this, which was almost the best work of his genius, he cast aside, to be surreptitiously published after his death. If in these works, as well as in his songs, there are forms of verse and words which he had met with in the course of his reading, it was due to a curious carelessness. It was not to deceive the world by decking himself in borrowed plumes, for they are poorer feathers than his own, and he never thought the world would see his lines or know his name. He invented no new measure, but used the traditional forms of stanza, and that was natural. It does not matter who made a mould, it is only of importance what metal is put into it - others had run in lead, Burns poured in pure gold.

Step by step came the inevitable end. Troubles had increased in 1795; his only daughter, to whom he was devotedly attached, died; his melancholy, which came through all his life in fitful moods, hovered over him; he was troubled with debt, [Chambers estimated that Burns's income, including his salary of £50, which was usually increased by extra allowances to £70, would, with perquisites, be equal to about £90 (iv. 124). Though he could have made money by publishing poems that were passing from friend to friend in manuscript, he would not consent, fearing to lessen his reputation.] burdened with rheumatism, and his careless living made his ailments

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worse. Hardly had he recovered from a fever, when, on coming home drunk from a jovial party at the Globe Tavern, at three o'clock in the morning, he fell asleep in the snow, and all his troubles came back redoubled - at every debauch he knew he parted with a "slice of his constitution." With shattered health he was taken to Brow, a village on the Solway, emaciated and worn, and there Mrs. Walter Riddell, who also had come there for her health, met the poet, to whom she was reconciled. As he called on her his salutation was, with a sad smile upon the wan face: "Well, madam, have you any commands for the other world?" She saw "the stamp of death impressed on his features, seeming already on the brink of eternity." He spoke as a doomed man, with regrets for the past, with anxiety for his family, with fears for the letters and papers written with unguarded freedom, which might be unearthed after his death to damage his name. Worry and anxiety vexed his dying months. A lawyer, demanding payment to a client of a wretched £7, price of his volunteer's uniform, put him in dread of being sent to jail, and in agony of mind he for the first time sent for £5 to Thomson in Edinburgh, to whom he had been sending packets of priceless song for which he would accept no return. "Do, for God's sake, send me that sum, and that by return of post. Forgive this earnestness, but the horrors of jail have made me half-distracted. I do not ask all this gratuitously, for upon returning health I hereby promise to furnish you with five pounds worth of the neatest song-genius you have seen."

In July the dying poet was back at Dumfries, worse than when he left it. Tended by the daughter of a friend, he died on 21st July 1796, while his wife was on child-bed in another room - his last thought being the bitterness of the fear of prison. [Chambers's *Life and Works*, iv. 205.] When the company was attending the funeral, his wife was giving birth to a child.

The tragic close came with all the inevitableness of fate. Only one end was possible to the broken career of that genius, with generous heart, independent spirit, strong passions, and a faulty life. Death to him was not the "last enemy," but now his best friend.