

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION.

IT has been frequently complained—Robert Louis Stevenson and Andrew Lang being amongst the complainants—that the youthful composer of “The Farmer’s Ingle,” “The Daft Days,” and “Leith Races,” has never at any time received the meed of popular appreciation to which, as a Nature poet, glowing with original fancy and humour set forth in the richest ore of the ruggedly-grand vernacular of his country, he is in all respects entitled. That the complaint is a just one, loudly calling for expression, every intimate and discerning student of Scottish poetical letters has continually been ready to admit. The fact that such has been the case, too, has been roundly and justly deplored. They have been over-zealous admirers, doubtless, and poor critics, who have attempted to set FERGUSON up as an equal, or nearly equal, light to Robert Burns. He had neither the all-captivating song-gift, the variety, the grit, nor the grasp of life and its issues to render his comparison with Burns tolerable. This admitted, it is yet true that while his Scottish poems are pregnant with the same popular elements, often as happily and seldom less graphically expressed, ROBERT FERGUSON has never attained to a height in the popular estimation anything like duly proportionate to that occupied by his later “brother in the muse.” Our “wondrous boy,” indeed, who gave Burns ever so many hints, in subject no less than form, making the

greater, to the day of his death, the eloquently-grateful debtor of the less, has in large measure been a neglected poet. The specialists have all the time, no doubt, been conscious of his true and rare value. But the misfortune that dogged every step of his sadly tragic and all too brief life has persistently dogged every step of his fame ; and if the full harvest of ROBERT FERGUSSON is ever to be stored, it has yet to be reaped. Edinburgh, whose gifted child he was, and whose life and manners in his time he caught as they rose and set in verse more graphic and true than ever before or since has emanated from within her walls, has never condescended, as she ought, to welcome her "prodigal son," so-called, and kill "fatted calf" in his honour. She has published no really choice edition of his poems. Amongst so many statues that adorn her streets and squares—some of which might not be sorely missed—no monument stands within her "causey" erected, as consistency demands, to the memory of poor ROBERT FERGUSSON. Some day the defect will be remedied, perhaps : by stimulus from without, let us hope, if not by impulse from within. But, come when or how it may, the setting up of a statue in honour of the author of "Auld Reekie," near by that of the author of "The Gentle Shepherd," will be no more than a simple act of corresponding justice already too long delayed. When the ruck of Burns clubites all over the world are able to understand, as Burns might desire, the spirit of the Bard under whose name and for the honour of whose memory they periodically combine, something really worthy in this way may be done. When the votaries of the Master-singer generally—and the clubites here are but a fraction—come in the quiet of their bosoms

to realise how tenderly in earnest Burns was when he wrote of FERGUSSON as "my elder brother in misfortune, by far my elder brother in the muse"; and how hot were his tears, how bitter was his regret over his tragic and untimely death, when, with uncovered head, he knelt and kissed the barren sod on his grave in the Canongate kirkyard, something undoubtedly *will* be done. Thus far, certainly Burns has been FERGUSSON'S most eloquent trumpeter—his only eloquent trumpeter. To the Master-poet's early and hearty recognition of his genius, as certainly, too, much of the subsequent knowledge of FERGUSSON has been due. Such, in the circumstances, is no unpleasant thought. But one would prefer to see FERGUSSON have fame—and much fame, as he deserves—by virtue of his own work, independently of how Burns esteemed it. And that he will have it that way yet—that he will come to his own entirely by his own—there is some reason for hoping. A new and complete edition of his poetical writings with illustrative notes, together with an account of his interesting career, as well as an estimate of the quality and value of his work, such as is here presented, may hasten the hoped-for day. With that issue in view, at anyrate, the work has been undertaken.

Although ROBERT FERGUSSON died as early as 1774, no even fairly adequate biography of him appeared until 1800—twenty-six years afterwards—when the Chapman & Lang (Glasgow) edition of his poems was published, embracing a "Life" and "Critique" from the vigorous and picturesque pen of Dr. David Irving, the historian of Scottish Poetry. Dr. Irving's writing, unfortunately, was even yet, however, satisfactory only in the sense of bulk. In its bearing on the social

tendencies of the poet in Edinburgh, it has been proved to be slanderously extravagant. Later biographers, including Thomas Sommers, the Rev. James Gray, Dr. Robert Chambers, and Dr. Alexander B. Grosart, taking more pains, got nearer the truth; and by fuller information, drawn from reliable sources, were happily able to present a much fairer picture. The last-named writer, in particular, even although his details of the life of FERGUSSON (in the "Famous Scots" series, where he has written at greatest length) are set in the most garrulously tiresome order, by sleepless industry, long continued, got at all the facts; and has rendered a service to the memory of the poet for which his admirers in the country have been, or should be, duly grateful. Though strenuous, and full of colour, FERGUSSON's life was one of brief stretch and narrow environment, and may be best told when set down within moderate compass. Grosart's one prime mistake was the padding of it out with irrelevant remarks and quotations to the extent of one hundred and sixty closely printed pages. Yet, as I have said, he got all the facts—he set the poet in the light of truth—and that is something to be thankful for.

ROBERT FERGUSSON was born in a confined alley of old Edinburgh, known as the Cap-and-Feather Close, on the 5th of September, 1750. Some of his biographers have named the 17th as the date, while others have given 1751 as the year of his arrival; but these are undoubtedly mistakes.* He was the fourth of a family

* 1750. Sept. 5. To William Fergusson, clerk to bailie Robert Baillie, merchant in the N.K.P., and Elizabeth Forbes his spouse, a son named Robert; born same day.—*Entry in Canongate Parish Register, preserved in the Register House, Edinburgh.*

of at least five children—Henry, born in 1742; Barbara, in 1744; John (who seems to have died in infancy), in 1746; Robert, in 1750; Margaret, in 1753—and descended from parents both hailing from the far North. His father was William Fergusson, who sprang from Tarland, in Aberdeenshire, and his mother, Elizabeth Forbes, the youngest daughter of John Forbes, tacksman and tenant of Templeton Hillockhead, and Wellhead of Kildrummy, also in Aberdeenshire. William Fergusson had served an apprenticeship to a merchant in the city of Aberdeen, in whose service he had continued, presumably, for some time after he was a journeyman. Anyway, when the merchant died, in or about 1746, it was in consequence of this event that Mr. Fergusson, already a married man with two or three children, pushed his way to the Capital in search of work. This, by bearing with him a good character, he was soon able to secure, and he held several clerkships in Edinburgh and its neighbourhood; but wind and weather seem to have been dead against him, for he was seldom able to find a situation that yielded more than a very modest salary. He was, notwithstanding, while a man of excellent character, evidently a man of ideas, remarkable at all times for taste and ingenuity. When acting as clerk to Messrs. Wardrop & Peat, upholsterers in Carrubber's Close, he framed a very useful book of rates; and he had a turn for poetry, it appears, which he exercised in satirical rhymes on occasional subjects. The elder Fergusson came to his last haven as managing clerk and accountant in the offices of the British Linen Company, in the Canongate, in 1762. He died in 1767, when his poet-son was seventeen years old. Mrs. Fergusson, no less than her

husband, was evidently a person of great moral worth ; and, it would appear, she was a busy housewife as well, for her husband, in one of his Edinburgh letters, addressed to a brother-in-law in the North, says : " My wife has had a web for several months in the stocks, which I hope will soon be launching." The web, whatever it consisted of, as Alexander Gordon remarks, must have been badly wanted in a household where the annual income, at the best, was only a few degrees higher than that shown by the following abstract of expenses, prepared by William Fergusson himself—

" ABSTRACT OF EXPENSES, ANNO 1751.

" House-rent, - - - - -	£1 10 0
Coals, - - - - -	2 12 0
Candles, - - - - -	0 19 6
Bread, - - - - -	4 6 8
Milk, - - - - -	2 4 5
Flesh and fish, - - - - -	3 6 2½
Salt, greens, and barley, - - - - -	0 8 8
. . . [torn away with wafer], - - - - -	1 10 4
Washing, - - - - -	0 13 0
Quarter-payments for children, etc.,	1 15 0
	£19 5 9½

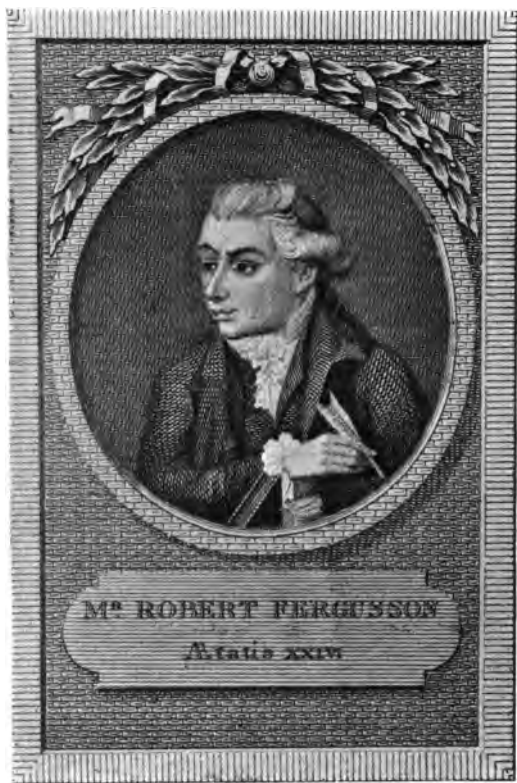
" N.B.—4s. 2½d. and chance for shoes,
shirts, clothes, etc."

In the letter to which the above abstract was appended " Rob. the young one " is mentioned as " a thriving boy." He was, notwithstanding, a weakly child, and, owing to the delicate state of his health, was not sent to school until he was six years old. He was thus, as

will be seen, both a delicate child and a poor man's son. Throughout all his life, indeed, he was never free from constitutional weakness; and was never in a better condition in the world, socially, than "no very weel-aff." Although he did not go to school until he was six, it is likely that his parents gave him a good deal of private instruction before that time at home. What renders this the more probable is that he had not been six months under his first teacher (a Mr. Philp, in Niddry's Wynd), when he was judged fit to be transferred to the High School, and entered in the first Latin Class. Here he went through the usual classical course of four years (1758-1761) under a teacher named John Gilchrist. What degree of proficiency he might have attained under ordinary circumstances, it is impossible to determine; but it is related to his credit, by Dr. Chambers and others, that, though frequently absent for a considerable period, in consequence of bad health, he nevertheless kept fully abreast of his companions, a temporary application being sufficient to bring him up to any point which the class had attained in his absence. At the same time, he acquired, in the leisure of confinement, a taste for general reading, and it is stated that the Bible was his favourite book, the Proverbs of Solomon claiming his very particular attention. From his very earliest years he proved of an enquiring and must-be-satisfied disposition; and Dr. Irving records that the interrogations which he put concerning any subject which attracted his notice often puzzled those who were much older than himself. An anecdote relating to his seventh or eighth year strikingly reveals his ingenuous and susceptible mind, or his curiously erratic and impulsive nature. He had been

reading in the Proverbs one day, when he suddenly appeared before his mother in tears, and besought her to chastise him. Surprised at a request so extraordinary, she enquired the cause of it, when he exclaimed, "O, mother! he that spareth the rod hateth the child!" It forms "a noticeable illustration," perhaps, as one biographer remarks, "of the vivid impression that his reading made." But another* may be nearer the truth, when he suggests that FERGUSSON had already developed his talent for mimicry and humour, and that he was playing tricks with his pious mother. His High School master, Mr. John Gilchrist, is described by Henry Mackenzie, "The Man of Feeling," as "a good-humoured person with a good deal of comedy about him." FERGUSSON, no doubt, proved an apt pupil in comic matters as well as in construing Latin. With regard to the High School curriculum of those days, "The Man of Feeling" says: "The scholars went through the four classes taught by the undermasters, reading the usual elementary Latin books—for at that time no Greek was taught in the High School—and so on up to Virgil and Horace, Sallust, and parts of Cicero. . . . The hours of attendance were from 7 to 9 a.m., and, after an hour for breakfast, from 10 to 12: then, after an interval of two hours for dinner, the scholars returned for two hours in the afternoon." This was pretty stiff daily work for an ailing boy, and it certainly required to be lightened by a little "comedy." In those days the High School lads were a disciplined republic, sometimes given to taking the law into

* Alexander Gordon, in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for October, 1894.



From Morison's Edition of Scottish Poets. Perth. 1789.

their own hands. When the "blackguards" of the Cowgate broke out into open attack, the "puppies"—that is to say, the High School bull-dogs—were wont to arise in their wrath and growl down the attack. Many a battle was thus fought, chronicled by no muse: and the "puppies," though the superior animals, did not always get the best of it. FERGUSSON was too young, and possibly too weak, to take part in these pitched battles, but he must frequently have heard the stones rattle, and seen the fists do their work. And even if he did not take part in the fighting himself, he was no doubt familiar with those who had been taught, as Darsie Latimer was by Alan Fairford, to "smoke a cobbler, spin a lozen, head a bicker, and hold the bannets"—in other words, to break a window, head a skirmish with stones, and hold the bonnet or handkerchief which used to divide High School boys when fighting.

During his term at the High School, it is interesting to learn that Master FERGUSSON in 1758 paid 1s., and in 1761 2s. 6d., to the School Library Fund—the former being the ordinary amount, and the latter so exceptional that only a Scottish nobleman is entered for a like payment. The fact reveals not more the boy's than the parents' love for, and belief in the value of books. Besides, the lad being "quick to learn and wise to know," his father had concluded to make a scholar of him: yea, father and mother together had resolved that one day he should "wag his pow in a poopit"; and they were prepared, doubtless, to make the necessary sacrifices, such as so many poor parents in Scotland did before their day, and have done since. Happily, the Fergussons were to be helped. Through the kindness

of Lord Finlater, whose factor Mrs. Fergusson's brother was in Aberdeenshire, a presentation to a bursary, or scholarship, was obtained in favour of ROBERT at the Grammar School of Dundee. This scholarship came from a mortification, or benefaction, founded by the Rev. David Ferguson, parish minister of Strathmartine, near Dundee, in the year 1695, which assigned 6,000 merks "for the use, maintenance, and education of two poor male children, not under the age of nine years at their admission, nor above the age of fourteen years while they are at school." The quaint and austere conditions of this Ferguson bequest, as I learn from a copy of the deed quoted by Mr. A. H. Millar, the historian,* are that the recipients are "to be of my own surname, and nearest of blood to me; whilk failing, any other two poor male children, begotten of good and honest parents, in ane lawful marriage." These children were to be "maintained, educated, and brought up in the Grammar School of Dundee, and to be lodged and boarded with one of the surname of Ferguson, in case there be any can do the same; and to furnish the said children with sufficient clothes and necessaries for their bodies, head, and feet—their coats being always of a grey colour, lined, with blue sleeves." The patrons had power to send such children as showed aptitude and learning to S. Leonard's College, St. Andrews, for four years; or, if they inclined to be tradesmen, to apprentice them to learn some trade, paying their apprentice fees out of the proceeds of the fund. By an express stipulation the patrons are empowered "to deprive and exclude from this Mortification such as are

* *Roll of Eminent Burgesses of Dundee* (1887).

children of thieves, night walkers, breakers of yards, drunkards, whore-masters, swearers, liars, or otherwise scandalous in their lives," and it is provided "that both of them own the Protestant religion."

While attending school in Dundee, the yet unfledged poet boarded with a person named Peter Murray. No more than this has been gathered of his Dundee life; except that in the fall of 1764, when it was discovered that the bursar had completed his fourteenth year, and could consequently be held no longer at the Grammar School, but having signified his intention to follow out his learning and go to the College of St. Andrews, the patrons recommended the said Peter Murray to "acquaint the boy's father of his intention, and to procure from the Presbitry of Dundee a certificate of his capacity for being put to the Colledge; upon which they would present him accordingly." It was his parents' desire—more than the boy's own, perhaps—that he should proceed to college. His progress in Dundee, as earlier in Edinburgh, had been rapid and praiseworthy—Dr. Irving and other biographers designate it "surprising"—and certificates of "full qualification" were easily obtained. It fell thus, that while on the 6th of December he "compeared before the Trustees of the Mortification" and stated formally that it was his wish to "pursue his learning," on the 7th of the same month he obtained the "missive letter" of presentation to the Principal and Masters of the University. But a few months earlier—perhaps in the period of school vacation—he accompanied his mother on a visit to his uncle, Mr. John Forbes of Round Lichnot, a farm in the neighbourhood of Old Meldrum, in Aberdeenshire. In a letter written to his

wife (from Warriston's Close, High Street, Edinburgh, where the family were now living) under date 17th August, William Fergusson says: "It gives me no small satisfaction to find that you have had so agreeable a meeting with your brother and sisters, and that Rob. has held out the journey." The reference to "Rob." and the "journey" hints at continued physical weakness. Anyway, this was probably FERGUSSON'S first visit to Aberdeenshire. He was now in his parents' native region, as Alexander Gordon notes, and had opportunities of seeing the varied life of the stout-hearted country folks. It was the time when "bauks o' corn bent down wi' laded ear," of which he afterwards sang in his "Farmer's Ingle." The fields were white unto the harvest, and it is possible that he may have followed the reapers at their work, if he did not actually try his hand at binding and stooking the "bearded beir." And if he joined the workers thus through the day, he would as likely join the family at the hearth in the evening, when

" In rangles round, before the ingle's lowe,
 Frae gudame's mouth auld warld tales they hear,
 O' warlocks loupin' round the wirrikowe;
 O' ghaists that win in glen and kirkyard drear;
 Whilk touzles a' their tap, and gars them shak wi' fear!"

It was in the brief period here, or in like brief periods elsewhere, assuredly, that FERGUSSON gained his knowledge of country life—almost all he knew of it; yet several of his poems reveal such intimacy with rural ways and habits, and such a relish of country doings, that one is struck with astonishment at the quickness of his eye and the keenness of his ear.

From Round Lichnot he returned with his mother to Warriston's Close, and he resided there with his parents until February, 1765, when he proceeded to St. Andrews and became a student in the Humanity (Latin) and Greek Classes, under Professors Wilson and Morton. He does not seem, however, to have taken very kindly to the Classics; indeed, his first biographer, and intimate friend, Mr. Ruddiman, is responsible for the statement that FERGUSON asserted "that Virgil and Horace were the only Latin authors he would ever look at while he was at the University." Whether this be true or not, it is certain that he was a considerable proficient in Mathematics, and it may be supposed that Natural Philosophy was a favourite study, for he commended himself very highly to Dr. Wilkie, who held the professorship of that subject in the University. The story has come down, indeed, that Wilkie made choice of him to read his lectures to his class, when sickness or other causes prevented his own performance of the duty. Very likely, however, it is but a story. Dr. Irving ridicules the idea of a youth of sixteen "mounting," as he expresses it, "the professorial rostrum"; and "besides the inadequacy of years," as Dr. Chambers sagely adds, "FERGUSON possessed none of that gravity of demeanour which was calculated to secure the respectful attention of his compeers. His classical attainments were respectable; but for the maturer branches of scholastic and scientific knowledge he always expressed, with the petulance of a youth of lively parts, who did not wish to be subjected to the labour of hard study, a decided contempt. Dr. Wilkie's regards must, therefore, have been attracted by other qualifications than

those of the graver and more solid cast—namely, by the sprightly humour and uncommon powers of conversation for which FERGUSSON was already in a considerable degree distinguished.” The legend of his reading the lectures in public arose, perhaps, from his having been employed to transcribe them. Professor Vilant, in a letter to the poet’s nephew, James Inverarity, makes this, indeed, fairly clear. “A youthful frolicsome exhibition of your uncle,” he says, “first directed Dr. Wilkie’s attention to him, and he afterwards employed him one summer and part of another in transcribing a fair copy of his academical lectures.” That FERGUSSON would have read the lectures to the class, if he got the chance, there need, of course, be little doubt. His relish for practical joking was too keen to have allowed him to resist the opportunity. That he got the chance, however, is not likely. Dr. Wilkie “knew his man” too well. Doubtless the professor and his boy-student were on easy terms of friendship. For they were both poets*—both humorists—both great talkers and controversialists. Together they were accustomed to visit Wilkie’s farm, about four miles distant from St. Andrews, and make occasional week-end trips to Anstruther and elsewhere. The lad, indeed, had not been long at college when he distinguished himself as a versifier given to satire—a lively and impulsive boon companion—and became mixed up in occasional episodes which scarcely became the character of “Robert Fergusson, Student of Divinity.” Yet his satire and his tricks were executed ever in a spirit of true fun. One of the janitors, years

* See note to “An Eclogue to the Memory of Dr. William Wilkie,” page 67.

afterwards, described him to Mr. Inverarity, in a single sentence. He was asked if he recollected FERGUSSON. "Bob Fergusson," he exclaimed; "that I do! Many a time I've put him to the door. Ah! he was a tricky callant, but a fine laddie for a' that." "And he seemed to feel," said the poet's nephew, "great pleasure in the recollection of so amiable a boy." Amiable he was, we may be sure. ROBERT FERGUSSON'S sprightly and kindly nature could never at any time allow him to be aught else; and the "random fits o' daffin'" which he manifested, and were so well remembered by his compeers and others, were likely no more than merely "random fits" in a prevailing atmosphere of serious study and severe academic discipline. That he was a distinguished student cannot be asserted; but the fact that he had never taken very warmly to the idea of entering the ministry of the Kirk must be allowed to count for something—and for a good deal of his frolicsomeness perhaps. Be that as it may, entertaining stories of his playful humour are preserved by his biographers. While at college, the young poet, Dr. Chambers tells, used to put in practice a frolic which marks the singular vivacity of his character. Whenever he received a remittance from his friends in Edinburgh, he hung out the money in a little bag attached by a string to the end of a pole fixed in the window of his little room; and there he would let it dangle for a whole day in the wind. He is supposed to have done this partly from puerile exultation in the possession of his wealth, and partly by way of making a bravado in the eyes of his companions; among whom, no doubt, the slenderness of their funds and the failure of supplies would be frequent subjects of raillery.

His talents of mimicry were great, but his sportive humour was ever too exuberant, and sometimes led him to overstep the bounds of justifiable indulgence. An instance of this is recorded by Professor Tennant in the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* (No. 164), to whom it was communicated by the Rev. Dr. James Brown, FERGUSSON's fellow-student at St. Andrews, who was also a poet, and who, from having kindred delights and sympathies, enjoyed much of his society. On the afternoon of a college holiday they took a walk together into the country, and, after perambulating many farms, and tripping with fraternal glee over field and hillock, they at last, being desirous of a little rest, bethought themselves of calling at a small farm-house, or pendicle, on the King's Muir of Dunino. On reaching the house, a frank and unceremonious conversation immediately took place, in the course of which it was discovered that a young person, a member of the family, was lying ill of fever. The playful FERGUSSON instantly took it into his head to profess himself a medical practitioner, and he started to his feet and begged to be shown to the sick bed. Approaching this, he felt the pulse of the patient, assumed a serious air, put the usual pathological interrogations, and pronounced his opinions with a pomp and dignity worthy of a true doctor of physic. In short, he personated his assumed character so perfectly, that his friend Brown, though somewhat vexed, was confounded into silent admiration of his dexterity. On leaving the house, however, Brown expostulated on the indefensibility of practising so boldly on the simplicity of an unsuspecting family, and of misleading their conceptions as to the cure of the distemper, by a stratagem on which, however

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION. xxvii.

witty, neither of them could congratulate themselves. But the lecture was wasted. The impulse of the moment seems to have been at all times irresistible with FERGUSSON, without any dread or consideration of the consequences which his levity might produce. In illustration of this, there are various stories. His voice being good (he was an excellent singer, indeed), he was requested, oftener than was agreeable to him, to officiate as precentor at prayers. His wicked wit in time suggested a method of getting rid of the distasteful employment, which he did not scruple to put in practice, even although there was great danger that it would incense the heads of the college against him. It is customary in the Scottish churches for persons who are considered to be in a dangerous state of illness to request the prayers of the congregation on their behalf, which, in those days, it was the duty of the precentor publicly to intimate. One morning, accordingly, when FERGUSSON occupied the desk, and with the solemnity of tone usual on such occasions, pronounced:—"Remember in prayer, John Adamson, a young man [then present] of whom, from the sudden effects of inebriety, there appears but small hope of recovery"—any one can realize the shock such an intimation would produce, and no one will be astonished to learn that he was officially reprimanded for an act so closely bordering on profanity. It had the desired effect, however, FERGUSSON was relieved of his precentorship. In another outrage on decorum, before or after—and this time in rhyme—he was more successful. The monies bequeathed for the support of the bursars of the college were put into a common fund, which was styled Diet



Money.* Out of this were paid the class fees and the expenses for maintenance; then, such balance as remained was divided equally among the professors. The temptation to feed the bursars sparingly, or with the coarsest food, was thus considerable. Rabbits, being easily obtainable, at a small outlay, had continued for a time the unvarying diet, and all were tired of them. FERGUSSON resolved on a bid for a change. It was the custom for the bursars to invoke the blessing at meals, each in his turn; so, when it fell to the poet to be called on, he repeated these lines, which, doubtless, he had previously composed:—

“ For rabbits young, and for rabbits old,
 For rabbits hot, and for rabbits cold,
 For rabbits tender, and for rabbits tough,
 Our thanks we render, for we've had enough.”

The presiding professor, we are told, sat aghast and silent. “*Senatus Academicus* was convened, and the venerable masters of the college deliberated as to how the offender should be punished. It was ultimately ruled that the graceless poet should not only escape censure, but that the vendor of rabbits should be informed that his supplies would be required less frequently.

“ My father,” continues Dr. Rogers, “related another anecdote of FERGUSSON’s poetical sarcasm. Two young men from Forfarshire, who had been engaged in farming operations, entered the University, in which they became bursars. Their attainments were superficial,

*See *Leaves from My Autobiography*, by the Rev. Dr. Charles Rogers, where the story is told at great length, on the authority of the narrator’s aged father.

while their manners did not conciliate friendship. FERGUSSON, whom they offended, inscribed these lines on the door of their apartment :—

‘ Jamie Cobb and Will Mudie
Left the plough and came to study.’

“ Remarking the insult, they hastened to the Hebdomader, or professor in superintendence for the week, to enter a complaint. During their absence, the satirist completed his verse :—

‘ Will Mudie and Jamie Cobb
Never tried a worse job.’”

In addition to these boy-like pranks and freaks of fancy, there is a record of a row in the University one night, in which the poet bore a part, and, with other participators, had, in course, to “thole” the disgrace of expulsion. Being variously detailed, it has occasioned some controversy. But as recorded by Professor Vilant, who was teacher of mathematics in the college at the time, and remembered the particulars, the scene was no worse than may occur among vivacious students anywhere at any time. It happened in the year 1767, as Professor Vilant recollected, at the first institution of the prizes given by the Earl of Kinnoul, there was a meeting one night, after the determination of the prizes for that year, of the winners in one room of the United College, and a meeting of the losers in another room at a small distance. In consequence of some communication between the winners and the losers, a scuffle arose, which was reported to the masters of the College, and ROBERT FERGUSSON and some others who had appeared the most active were expelled. But next day, or the

day thereafter, they were all received back into the college upon promise of good behaviour for the future.

Of the progress made by him in his studies at St. Andrews we have no means of forming a very exact estimate. His time, however, does not seem to have been spent without some plans of serious application. A book which belonged to him, entitled, "A Defence of the Church Government, Faith, Worship, and Spirit of the Presbyterians," is preserved, the blank leaves of which were devoted by him to the purpose of receiving scraps of speeches, evidently the germs of a play which he meditated writing. To the extent of two acts, he had written besides a tragedy founded on the achievements and fate of Sir William Wallace, but abandoned the scheme on learning of another play on the same subject. There need be no regrets over the abandonment. It was an undertaking much too ambitious for his juvenile powers. But with the abandonment of Wallace—for what reason is not known—he abandoned at the same time the further pursuit of his academical career, and, on the expiry of his bursary, quitted St. Andrews, and returned to his mother's house, in Edinburgh. By this time his father had been two years in his grave. And now, if his prospects were not gloomy, his plans were without shape or form, and never really took any decided aim for his settlement in life. Schemes were propounded for him by interested friends—the career of a schoolmaster—the study of medicine—but neither appealed agreeably to his taste. After beating about for a time in the vain hope, as it proved, that something would "turn up," he set out on a visit to his maternal uncle, John Forbes, in Aberdeenshire, whom some four year earlier, as we have seen, he

visited in company with his mother. Mr. Forbes now, in addition to being farmer of Round Lichnot, and holding several lucrative factorships, was tenant also of the farm of Forrester Hill, in the same region, and was a man of considerable worldly substance. By his recommendation to Lord Finlater, FERGUSON got his bursarship, and he had hopes now, perhaps, of procuring suitable employment through his uncle's influence. Though he stayed six months at Round Lichnot, however, nothing came to him in this way. And then the visit ended abruptly, in a painful rupture of their friendship. The story of the rupture has been told with varying details. Dr. Irving's account of it (in 1851 rejected by Dr. Grosart, and after fuller investigation accepted by the same authority before 1898) may be taken as correct. Mr. Forbes, Irving tells, at first treated his nephew with civility; although, instead of exerting himself, as he had opportunity, to promote his interest, he suffered him to remain six months in his house, and then dismissed him in a manner which reflects very little honour on his memory. His clothes were beginning to assume a threadbare appearance; and on this account he was deemed an improper guest for his purse-proud uncle's house. It is told, plus Irving, that, on a certain day when Lord Finlater and another local magnate were guests at the factor's dinner table, FERGUSON, after an hour or two's diversion in the woods of Lichnot, appeared with his clothes showing signs of tear as well as wear, and the crisis could be no longer delayed. Indignantly his uncle ordered him from the room. The shy and sensitive youth was stung to the quick. He went forth, immediately packed up his little belongings

in a bundle, and set out for Edinburgh and home on foot. At a little solitary inn, not far off on the way of his journey, he sought shelter for a space, and procuring pen, ink, and paper, he wrote his uncle a letter full, it is said, of the most manly sentiments. After his departure, too, it seems, Mr. Forbes began to relent, and dispatched a messenger after him with "a few shillings, to bear his expenses upon the road;" the poet was in a mighty rage, says Alexander Gordon, and refused to accept a penny. Dr. Irving says "this paltry present the lowness of his funds compelled him to accept." But no matter which may be correct, the important fact remains undisturbed that he walked the weary journey all the way to Edinburgh, and the fatigues of the road, added to the depression of his mind, had such an effect upon his delicate constitution that on his arrival at his mother's house he was sent to bed for several days. Here, in a period of convalescence, he endeavoured to console his grief by composing his poems on "The Decay of Friendship" and "Against Repining at Fortune." The story goes that while at Round Lichnot FERGUSSON was accustomed to assemble the servants who were detained from public worship on the Sabbaths, and taking his stand at the mouth of the peat-stack, he would address them for more than an hour at a time, in language so elequent and fervid that they were often seen bathed in tears. As regards his uncle's treatment, it may be, of course, that the matter-of-fact farmer and factor, discerning that his nephew was addicted to the silly practice, as he would esteem it, of writing poetry, and had neither the muscle nor the will, perhaps, to fill dung, or dig potatoes, saw little excuse for his existence. He should not have forgotten,

however, that he was his sister's son, and that he was young, and poor, and not strong.

A "sticket minister," FERGUSSON had now to face the urgent problem of how to get a livelihood. If he did not work to-day he might starve to-morrow. So he took the first situation that came to his hand, which happened to be the post of "writer," or copyist, in the office of the Commissary Clerk of Edinburgh, Mr. Charles Abercromby. This was poorly-paid work, and although the poet was an expert penman, and through long and weary hours did write until his fingers ached, his remuneration never rose higher than a mere pittance. But the situation brought him into contact with persons who were connected with the Law, and he formed numerous friendships. He became a theatre-goer, too, and cultivated the society of "several players and musicians," with whom he spent convivial and not unprofitable hours, in so far as dallying with the Muses was concerned. Chief among those boon companions was Mr. William Woods, then the leading and favourite actor of the Edinburgh boards; and his intercourse with this amiable gentleman soon ripened into a warm mutual friendship, which did not cease until death drove his chilly finger to the heart of the gay and wonderful stripling. FERGUSSON was now nineteen. A year earlier—in 1768—the brothers Ruddiman had started their *Weekly Magazine of Edinburgh Amusement*; and in 1771—though still working as a copying drudge—our poet began to make contributions to the pages of this popular and fairly well-conducted periodical. His first pieces were the pastorals, "Morning, Noon, and Night," which were published anonymously, with an editorial note of appreciation. Following these came

other pieces in English, equally imitative and artificial, by which he could never by any possibility have achieved fame : no such fame, anyway, as he enjoys by having it admitted to his credit that he handed Burns his poetic impulse. But, by and by, the youthful singer struck a new note. In 1772, "The Daft Days" appeared ; and this, followed by other poems of similar character, in the familiar Doric, of which he possessed such a rich vocabulary, immediately brought the whole of Scotland to his feet in worshipping attitude. Allan Ramsay had been fourteen years in his grave, and the Scottish lyre in the interval had remained silent but for a feeble touch now and again. Burns was not yet. FERGUSSON was hailed generally as Ramsay's worthy successor. Indeed, as one has said, if a Scots poet-laureateship had been vacant, he would have been voted the only worthy candidate for the bays. And the appointment, we will add, would have had more to be said for it than some laureateships with which reading has made the world familiar. In his "Leith Races," "The King's Birth-day," "Caller Oysters," "Hallow Fair," and the "Rising" and "Sitting of the Session," there are powers of humorous description exhibited which stamp their author as a poet of superior genius, even (as Chambers says) if the nervous sense of his "Braid Claith," "Caller Water," and other poems upon general subjects, and the homely grace of his "Farmer's Ingle," which describes in the most vivid and genuine colours, a scene worthy of the highest efforts of the muse, had not placed him unequivocally in that rank. By minor bardies as widely separated geographically as Berwick and Perth, his advent was hailed with enthusiasm ; and the "bucks"



R. Fergusson

From Grosart's Edition of the Works of Robert Fergusson. 1851.

of Edinburgh crowded round him, claiming his friendship, and soliciting the favour of his ever genial and rarely enlivening company. Had he not yielded to the seductions of the gay sparks of the city it had been better for him. Had he stood apart from the world as strongly as the world had so far stood apart from him, it had been a blessing. But we are not blaming him. He was young yet: only a mere stripling. Besides, he was endowed with social proclivities not easily held in check; and instead of being led, perhaps he was not infrequently a leader. And yet, by all appearance, there was no great excess after all. "The convivialities of FERGUSSON," says Chambers, "have been generally described as bordering on excess, and as characterising himself in particular, amidst a population generally sober. The sober truth is, that the poor poet indulged exactly in the same way, and in general to the same extent, as other young men of that day. The want of public amusements, the less general taste for reading, and the limited accommodation of private houses in those days, led partly to a practice, which prevailed among all orders of people in Edinburgh, of frequenting taverns in the evening, for the sake of relaxation and exercise of the intellect." The favourite haunt of ROBERT FERGUSSON, and many other persons of his own standing, was Lucky Middlemist's tavern in the Cowgate, which he celebrates in his poem on "Caller Oysters." He sings:—

“ When big as burns the gutters rin,
 Gin ye hae catch'd a droukit skin,
 To Lucky Middlemist's loup in,
 And sit fu' snug
 Owre oysters and a dram o' gin,
 Or haddock lug.

“ When Auld Saint Giles, at aucht o'clock,
Gars merchant loons their shopies lock,
Then we adjourn wi' hearty fouk
 To birl our bodles,
And get wherewi' to crack our joke,
 And clear our noddles.”

One who almost nightly enjoyed his company has given particulars respecting the extent and nature of these convivialities. The entertainment, he says, almost invariably consisted of a few boards of raw oysters, porter, gin, and occasionally a rizzard haddock, which was neither more nor less than what formed the evening's enjoyment of most of the citizens of Edinburgh. The best gin was then sold at about five shillings a gallon, and accordingly the gill at Lucky Middlemist's cost only threepence. The whole debauch of the young men seldom came to more than sixpence or sevenpence. He distinctly recollected that FERGUSSON always seemed unwilling to spend more. They generally met at eight o'clock, and rose to depart at ten; but FERGUSSON was sometimes prevailed upon to outsit his friends, by other persons who came in later, and, for the sake of his company, entreated him to join them in further potations. The humour of his conversation, which was in itself the highest treat, frequently turned upon the odd and obnoxious characters who then abounded in the town. In the case, however, of the latter, he never permitted his satire to become in the least rancorous. He generally contented himself with conceiving them in ludicrous or awkward situations, such, for instance, as their going home at night, and having their clothes bleached by an impure ablution from the garrets—a very common occurrence

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION. xxxvii.

at the time, and the mention of which was sufficient to awaken the sympathies of all present.

The same evening-associate described to Dr. Chambers the poet's personal appearance. "In stature," he says, "FERGUSON was about five feet nine, slender and handsome. His face never exhibited the least trace of red, but was perfectly and uniformly pale, or rather yellow. He had all the appearance of a person in delicate health; and, at last, he could not eat raw oysters, but was compelled, by the weakness of his stomach, to ask for them pickled. His forehead was elevated, and his whole countenance open and pleasing. He wore his own fair brown hair, with a long massive curl along each side of the head, and terminating in a queue, dressed with a black silk riband. His dress was never very good, but often much faded, and the white thread stockings, which he generally wore in preference to the more common kind of grey worsted, he often permitted to become considerably soiled before changing them."

As bearing further on the convivial and social side of his character, we should not omit to note that tradition, and every other testimony, ascribe to FERGUSON an excellent voice, as well as a captivating manner of singing the simple melodies of his native land. Recognising this, the Cape Club, when he came to join that coterie of choice spirits, enrolled him under the honorary title of "Sir Precentor." His singing of Mallet's song, "The Birks of Invermay," it appears, long survived in the recollections of his associates, as a musical gem of the first lustre. Whether, however, he ever sang his own song, "My Ain Kind Deary, O," we do not hear. But such were his vocal powers and

attachment to Scots songs generally, as Sommers tells, that, in the course of a convivial frolic, he laid a wager with some of his friends that if they would furnish him with a certain number of printed ballads (no matter what kind) he would undertake to dispose of them as a street-singer, in the course of two hours. The bet was taken, and the next evening, being in the month of November, a large bundle of ballads was procured for him. He wrapped himself in a shabby great-coat, put on an old scratch wig, and in this disguised form, commenced his adventure at the Weigh-house, head of the West Bow. In his going down the Lawnmarket and High Street, he had the address to collect great multitudes around him, while he amused them with a variety of favourite Scots songs, by no means such as he had ballads for, and gained the wager, by disposing of the whole collection.

✓ | FERGUSSON'S ever-keen relish of practical joking led him into many queer frolics. His landlord happened to be a man very much given to intemperance, while at the same time he aspired to all the honours of a saint. One night he attempted to perform family worship in a state of complete intoxication, when, to his inconceivable horror, every sentence of his prayer was echoed by some unseen being at no great distance. Confounded with drunken terror, he ordered the family to retire, and "tak' awa' the buiks." It was FERGUSSON who thus alarmed him from a neighbouring closet. Afterwards the poor man gave his family an impressive lecture on the necessity of improving their ways, as he felt certain that something serious was about to befall them. He even unbosomed his own conscience to the waggish cause of all his terrors, and received, with

marks of extreme contrition, the absolution which the poet administered to him in consideration of his repentance. Several other such frolics are recorded.

His connection with the Cape Club has been mentioned. Edinburgh in those days had numerous clubs, some of them regulated under curious orders. There was "The Crochallan Fencibles"—a club of free-and-easy wits—to which Burns was introduced in 1787, by his friend William Smellie, the founder. Then there was a "Spendthrift Club," the members of which were not allowed to spend less than fourpence-halfpenny a night; a "Boar Club," the joke of which consisted in the members choosing for themselves, their localities and intercourse, expressions referring to the habits of pigs and boars; a "Dirty Club," where no member was allowed to appear with clean linen; and so on. In the "Cape Club"—claiming apparently the literary and artistic—nearly all the members bore the mock-title of knight. FERGUSSON, after for some time previously being a frequent and welcome visitor, became a member of the Cape on the 10th of October, in the year 1772, with the club-name of "Sir Precentor," in reference, doubtless, to his pronounced qualifications as a vocal entertainer; and, in his application for membership, it is worth noting, he was recommended by David Herd ("Sir Scrape-Graystiel"), the famous song-collector and editor, his intimate and, as we discover, admiring friend. In the introduction to his recently issued and interesting work, *Songs from David Herd's Manuscripts* (Edinburgh: William J. Hay), Dr. Hans Hecht, who supplies particular information on the point, reproduces in *fac-simile* the "Cape Petition" of the poet, which on the reverse side, along with the address, bears a slight

but whimsical and interesting character sketch of "Sir Precentor" in the attitude of song, jotted in a casual moment, presumably, by his fellow-knight, "Sir Brimstone" (Alexander Runciman, the painter). Lithographed copies of this sketch, together with FERGUSSON'S signature, were, as reproduced here, put in circulation many years ago.

Sir Precentor



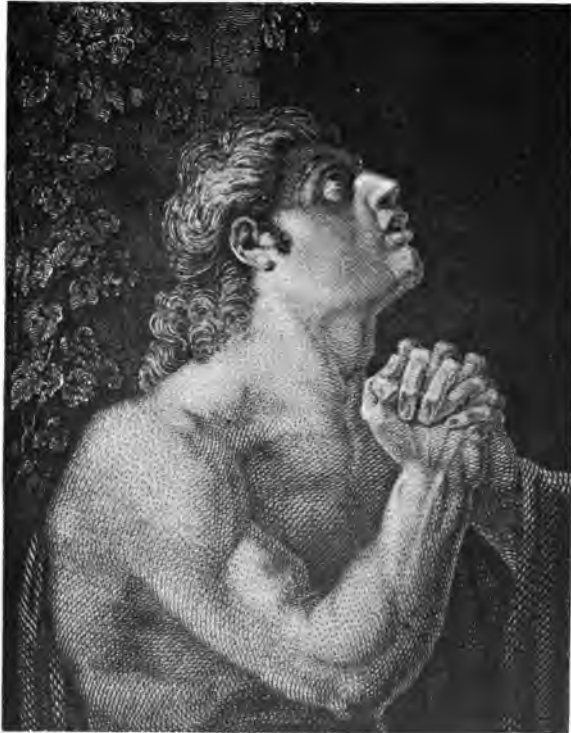
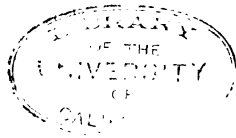
Fergusson

Dr. Hecht deserves thanks none the less for the *fac-simile* of the Petition, obverse and reverse, which shows the drawing in its original place, as well as for the Cape song by FERGUSSON (see page 212), rescued from the papers left by David Laing, and never before seen in print. The moral of the song, as Dr. Hecht mildly hints, does not commend itself to modern taste, but stomachs were stronger a hundred and fifty years ago.

A welcome figure in every social gathering, and appearing in many, and taking his glass freely—sometimes too freely—FERGUSSON was yet not neglecting his poet-craft. Every succeeding number of *Ruddiman's Magazine* had its poem from his pen. And he was standing stoutly to his office drudgery, and standing no less stoutly by his widowed mother, between whom and his sisters and he the most tenderly affectionate relationship was constantly maintained. Coffee-houses and club-rooms rang with the talk of his successive poems, and Walter Ruddiman seems to have fairly rewarded him for his contributions to the Magazine. If he did not receive large he received regular payment, with the addition of two suits of clothes—one every-day and one Sabbath suit—each year. Mr. Ruddiman himself further testifies that the profit, to the author, upon a little volume of his collected poems, published by subscription in 1773, was about £50. Dr. Chambers and others following his lead, were thus wrong in saying that probably FERGUSSON “never realised a single shilling by his writings.” Equally wrong, and cruelly slanderous, was Dr. Irving, by leaving the impression, as he did, that the £50 proved a curse rather than a blessing, in that the “drouthy” and “dissipated” poet spent it in “riotous living.” When, many years after,

Dr. Grosart read the passage to Miss Ruddiman (the publisher's daughter) her eyes, he says, filled with tears—she was then nearing ninety—and rising, to her feet, she said with emphasis, "No, sir, it is most untrue. I see Mr. Robert before me at this moment at the close of 1773, and I remember clearly the dear boy's delight as he tinkled the guineas and said, 'My poor good mother shall have her full share.'" "And so it was (Grosart adds), as Mrs. Fergusson with a full heart after her son's death, told them all."

What FERGUSSON most of all required about this time—we might say deserved—on behalf of his muse and himself was relief from "the daily drudgery of the desk's dead wood," by the influence or assistance of a wealthy patron. Success in letters, generally speaking, was a vain effort in those days without such. But his cry, "Oh, sir, anything to forget my mother and these aching fingers!" fell on deaf ears. There is evidence that, unaided, he contemplated escape from the "aching fingers." His brother Henry, who was eight years older than himself, had before this period been obliged, on account of some youthful indiscretions, to go to sea. Henry was a youth of considerable acquirements and ingenuity, and, in particular, had an extraordinary taste for fencing, which, indeed, he taught for a time. Some letters are extant from the young sailor to his mother and brother, and they certainly display powers of mind and habits of reflection which (as Chambers remarks), if discovered on ship-board, must have astonished his superiors. Whether it was the perusal of the letters that suggested the sea to the poet, we may not know, but that he contemplated the course of life pursued by his brother is certain. His



"THE PRODIGAL SON"

From Gray's Edition of the Poems of Robert Fergusson. 1821.

mind indeed had been pretty well made up when he wrote—

“ Fortune and Bob, e'er since his birth,
 Could never yet agree ;
 She fairly kick'd him from the earth,
 To try his fate at sea.”

He was not destined, however, to execute the resolution. As to a patron ; well, he did ultimately find one, *virtually*, though not *actually*. A Mr. Burnet, one of his early associates in Edinburgh, having gone to the East Indies, soon found himself on the road to affluence ; and remembering, or perhaps learning by letters from home, about the less fortunate situation of his gifted and esteemed friend, he sent a pressing invitation to FERGUSSON to come out to India ; and at the same time enclosed a draft for £100 to defray the expense of his outfit. This single ray of sunshine came, however, alas ! too late. Oh, the pity of it !—arriving only a few days after his death, which came about in a terrible and quite unexpected way.

Early in the year 1774, when his generally indifferent health was rather poorer than usual, he was induced to accompany some gentlemen, who were interested in the business of an election in one of the eastern counties of Scotland. Some time shortly before he had received “ serious impressions of religion,” and in a season of mental and physical prostration following the riot and excitement of the election, these “ serious impressions ” returned with such increased force and power that his reason was threatened. There is a story besides, which tells that, while in this disordered state, he happened one day to wander into the churchyard at Haddington, where he forgathered with the

venerable Dr. John Brown, the author of many well-known works in divinity, who at the time exercised the very respectable functions of a dissenting minister in that town. Dr. Brown was led by the scene to advert to the mortality of man, observing that they, too, in a short time, would be laid in the dust, and it was wise, therefore, that they should prepare for eternity. Dr. Brown, it is assumed, did not know to whom he spoke. As likely FERGUSSON did not know his well-meaning interlocutor. But on a mind so prepared, the accidental remarks of the pious divine sank as deep as if they had been imprinted in characters of fire, and ROBERT FERGUSSON returned home so sadly altered as to be in a state of despair. In the quiet of his mother's house, aided by the gentle ministrations of her who of all loved him best, he partially recovered. But ere long his mind received another shock from the following incident :—

“ In the room adjoining to that in which he slept, was a starling, which being seized one night by a cat that had found its way down the chimney, awakened Mr. FERGUSSON by the most alarming screams. Having learned the cause of the alarm, he began seriously to reflect how often he, an accountable and immortal being, had in the hour of intemperance set death at defiance, though it was thus terrible, in reality, to an unaccountable and sinless creature. This brought to his recollection the conversation of the clergyman, which, aided by the solemnity of the midnight, wrought his mind up to a pitch of remorse that almost bordered on frantic despair. Sleep now forsook his eyelids ; and he rose in the morning, not as he had formerly done, to mix again with the social and the gay, but to be a

recluse from society, and to allow the remembrance of his past follies to prey upon his vitals. All his vivacity now forsook him ; those lips which were formed to give delight, were closed as by the hand of death, and on his countenance sat horror plumed." *

Henceforward he read no book but the copy of the Bible which his mother gifted to him when he set out to attend school in Dundee. The Rev. Dr. Erskine of Greyfriars was his constant and kindly visitor. He ceased to write poetry, and burned all his manuscripts. Invitations came asking him to join his old associates in the clubs, or at their houses ; but all, with an accusing look, were resolutely refused, until at last, when reason was again partially recovered, he yielded to an invitation more pressing and seductive than usual. Now fell the finishing blow. On leaving to return home, his feet caught in a stair carpet, and he was thrown to the bottom of the steps, receiving such injury about the head that he bled profusely. When borne home to his mother's house he could give no account of what had happened, being in a state of total insensibility. His reason was now to an almost hopeless degree destroyed. He passed days and nights in total abstinence from food, sometimes muttering dolefully to himself, and at other times becoming so outrageous that it required the strength of several men to keep him in his bed. Occasionally he sang his favourite melodies. In particular, he chanted "The Birks of Invermay," but now in such a style of pathos and tenderness that those who heard the notes could never forget the sound, From the

* Life by Mr. Inverarity, in Gleig's *Supplement to the Encyclopædia Britannica*.

distress into which his poor mother was plunged, and her inability to render him the attendance his condition demanded, she was obliged to take steps for his removal to the public asylum. His conveyance thither was effected by a kindly stratagem. On pretence of taking him on an evening to visit a friend, some of his more intimate acquaintances placed him in a sedan chair, and conveyed him to the place which he had long feared would be his final abode.

The poet's friend, Thomas Sommers, assisted by Dr. Chambers, and others, must be allowed to tell the rest.

"During the first night of his confinement," says Sommers, "we slept none; and when the keeper visited him in the morning, he found him walking along the stone floor of his cell, with his arms folded, and in sullen sadness, uttering not a word. After some minutes' silence, he clapped his right hand on his forehead, and complained much of pain. He asked the keeper who brought him there. He answered—'Friends.' 'Yes, friends, indeed,' replied ROBERT, 'they think I am too wretched to live, but you will soon see me *a burning and a shining light*.' 'You have been so already,' observed the keeper, alluding to his poems. 'You mistake me,' said the poet; 'I mean, you shall see and hear of me as a bright minister of the Gospel.'"

How the "sweet bells" were "jangled" and "out of tune" is revealed by various anecdotes that are related. On one occasion, when he had been reading, a cloud suddenly overshadowed the moon, and he started and exclaimed loudly, "Jupiter, snuff the moon!" as if the heavenly constellation had been

some vast candle. At another time, having plaited a crown very neatly from the straw of his cell, he put it on his head and strutted around proclaiming himself "a king! a king!"

"FERGUSSON," says Chambers, "continued about two months to occupy a cell in this gloomy mansion. Occasionally, when the comparative tranquility of his mind permitted it, his friends were allowed to visit him. A few days before his dissolution his mother and sister found him lying on his straw bed, calm and collected. The evening was chill and damp; he requested his mother to gather the bed-clothes about him, and sit on his feet, for he said they were so very cold as to be almost insensible to the touch. She did so, and his sister took her seat by the bed-side. He then looked wistfully in the face of his affectionate parent, and said, 'Oh, mother, this is kind indeed.' Then addressing his sister he said, 'Might you not come frequently, and sit beside me; you cannot imagine how comfortable it would be; you might fetch your seam and sew beside me.' To this no answer was returned; an interval of silence was filled up by sobs and tears. 'What ails ye?' inquired the dying poet; 'wherefor sorrow for me, sirs? I am very well cared for here—I do assure you. I want for nothing—but it is cold—it is very cold. You know, I told you, it would come to this at last—yes, I told you so. Oh, do not go yet, mother—I hope to be soon—oh, do not go yet—do not leave me!' The keeper, however, whispered that it was time to depart, and this was the last time that FERGUSSON saw those beloved relatives."

Sommers thus describes his last interview with the poet, which took place in company with Dr. John

Aitken, another friend of the unfortunate lunatic. "We got immediate access to the cell, and found Robert lying with his clothes on, stretched upon a bed of loose uncovered straw. The moment he heard my voice he arose, got me in his arms, and wept. The doctor felt his pulse and declared it to be favourable. I asked the keeper (whom I formerly knew as a gardener) to allow him to accompany us into an adjoining back court, by way of taking the air. He consented. Robert took hold of me by the arm, placing me on his right, and the doctor on his left, and in this form we walked backward and forward along the court, conversing for nearly an hour: in the course of which many questions were asked both by the doctor and myself, to which he returned most satisfactory answers; but he seemed very anxious to obtain his liberty. The sky was lowering, the sun being much obscured. Led by curiosity, and knowing his natural quickness, I asked him what hour of the day it might be. He stopped, and looking up with his face towards the south, while his hands were clasped, paused a little, and said it was within five minutes of twelve. The doctor looked his watch and exclaimed, 'It is just six minutes from twelve.' . . . Having passed about two hours with him on this visit, we found it necessary to take our leave, the doctor assuring him that he would soon be restored to his friends, and that I would visit again in a day or two. He calmly and without a murmur walked with us to the cell, and, upon parting, reminded the doctor to get him soon at liberty, and of mine to see him next day. Neither of us, however, had an opportunity of accomplishing our promise, for in a

few days thereafter, I received an intimation from the keeper that ROBERT FERGUSSON had breathed his last."

This melancholy event took place on the 16th of October, 1774, when he had only a few weeks completed his twenty-fourth year. Verily, "it was not a life, but only a piece of childhood thrown away!" Three days afterwards—being followed thither from Bristo Port by a large company of sorrowing friends—his poor wasted body was laid to rest in the Canongate churchyard. In this humble and confined spot—yet not unmeet situation, lying as it does in the very heart of "Auld Reekie," the life of which pulses in every line of his Doric verse—FERGUSSON'S "lone house of clay" remained without a mark for thirteen years, until Robert Burns, at his own expense, and acting on his own initiative, set up the simple monument which to this hour "directs pale Scotia's way, to pour her sorrows o'er her poet's dust."

As early as during his "heckling" days in the town of Irvine, the Ayrshire bard had been stimulated by his "elder brother in misfortune." Rhyme then he had all but abandoned, but meeting with FERGUSSON'S Scots poems he strung anew, he tells, his "wildly sounding lyre with emulating vigour." In his first "Epistle to Lapraik," he refers to him as "Fergusson, the bauld an' slee," and in his "Epistle to William Simson," the Ochiltree schoolmaster, he exclaims with biting vigour :—

" O Fergusson ! thy glorious parts
 Ill suited law's dry, musty arts !
 My curse upon your whunstane hearts,
 Ye E'nbrugh gentry !
 The tythe o' what ye waste on cartes
 Wad stow'd his pantry !"

On a later date (19th March, 1787), when he presented Miss Carmichael, a young Edinburgh lady, who herself wrote verses, with a copy of FERGUSSON'S poems,* he repeated the above sentiment in more elegant form, in the following lines, inscribed partly above and partly below the frontispiece portrait :—

“Curse on ungrateful man, that can be pleas'd,
 And yet can starve the author of the pleasure !
 O thou, my elder brother in misfortune,
 By far my elder brother in the muse,
 With tears I pity thy unhappy fate !
 Why is the Bard unfitted for the world,
 Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures ?”

When, in the end of November, 1786, Burns made his first visit to the Scottish capital, he was not long in the city, we are told by Cunningham, who had special opportunities of knowing, until he found his way to the old churchyard in the Canongate. The bleak aspect of the unmarked grave, in a day of nipping cold, moved his big heart to tears, and he sobbed as he stood over it with uncovered head. Yea, kneeling down, he even embraced and kissed the sod. It was a beautiful and touching tribute. But his regard did not end with this emotional outburst. On the 6th of February following, Burns applied by petition to the churchyard managers of the Barony of the Canongate, craving permission to mark and render sacred for ever the spot where FERGUSSON'S remains are laid. His petition is worth quoting: “Gentlemen,” he wrote, “I am sorry to be told, that the remains of ROBERT FERGUSSON, the so justly celebrated poet, a man whose talent for ages to come will do honour to our Caledonian name, lie in

* Now in the possession of the Right Hon. the Earl of Rosebery.



FERGUSSON'S GRAVE IN THE CANONGATE CHURCHYARD,
EDINBURGH.

your churchyard among the ignoble dead, unnoticed and unknown. Some memorial to direct the steps of the lovers of Scottish song, when they shed a tear over the 'narrow house' of the bard who is no more, is surely a tribute due to FERGUSSON'S memory; a tribute I wish to have the honour of paying. I petition you, then, gentlemen, to permit me to lay a simple stone over the revered ashes, to remain an inalienable property to his deathless fame."

The managers, at their next meeting, held on the 22nd of the same month, "in consideration of the laudable and disinterested motion of Mr. Burns, and the propriety of his request," resolved formally to grant permission. Burns accordingly employed his namesake, Robert Burn, architect, to provide and erect the very substantial memorial, which has been kept in the finest order through a well-conceived bequest by the widow of Hugh Williams, the distinguished painter of "Views in Greece."

The inscription on the face of the stone reads:—

HERE LIES

ROBERT FERGUSSON, POET.

Born September 5th, 1751.

Died October 16th, 1774.

"No sculptured Marble here, nor pompous lay,
 'No storied Urn nor animated Bust';
 This simple Stone directs pale Scotia's way
 To pour her Sorrows o'er her Poet's Dust."

While on the back is inscribed:—

"By special grant of the Managers to
 ROBERT BURNS, who erected this stone, this
 Burial-place is to remain for ever sacred
 to the memory of ROBERT FERGUSSON."

The wrong birth-date will be noticed—1751, instead of 1750.

It deserves to be pointed out, as well, that two additional stanzas to the one on the monument were found in Burns's manuscript book of early poems, supposed to have been transcribed for Mrs. Dunlop, which read:—

“ She mourns, sweet tuneful youth, thy hapless fate ;
 Though all the powers of song thy fancy fire,
 Yet Luxury and Wealth lay by in state,
 And, thankless, starv'd what they so much admired.

“ This tribute, with a tear, now gives
 A brother Bard—he can no more bestow ;
 But dear to fame thy Song immortal lives,
 A nobler monument than Art can show.”

Further here—although there are other interesting particulars—I will only tell, as has been told frequently already, that Burns did not discharge the account for FERGUSSON's monument until February, 1792, and for the very good reason which he states. Writing to his friend, Peter Hill, bookseller, Edinburgh, he says:—“I send you by the bearer, Mr. Clarke, a particular friend of mine, £5 10s. for acct. I owe to Mr. Robt. Burn, architect, for erecting the stone over poor FERGUSSON. He was two years in erecting it after I commissioned him for it, and I have been two years in paying him after he sent his account, so he and I are quits. He had the hardness to ask me interest on the sum ; but considering that the money was due by one Poet for putting a tombstone over another, he may, with grateful surprise, thank Heaven that ever he saw a farthing of it.” But that the architect would enjoy the poet's humour, if it was read to him when he got payment,

we need not doubt, for when sending the account he had facetiously appended the note :—" I shall be happy to receive orders of a like nature for as many of your friends that have gone hence as you please."

On an earlier page of this writing I have given a brief sketch of the personal appearance of FERGUSSON as it was communicated to Dr. Chambers by one of his evening-associates in Edinburgh. Sommers's account is somewhat more minute, and perhaps more reliable. "As to his external appearance," this faithful friend writes, "I have never yet seen a *like* portrait of him, excepting the one painted by Mr. Alexander Runciman. He was in person about five feet six inches high, and well shaped. His complexion fair, but rather pale. His eyes full, black, and piercing. His nose long, his lips thin, his teeth well set and white. His neck long and well proportioned. His shoulders narrow and his limbs long, but more sinewy than fleshy. His voice strong, clear, and melodious. Remarkably fond of old Scots songs, and the best singer of 'The Birks of Invermay' I ever heard. When speaking, he was quick, forcible, and complaisant. In walking, he appeared smart, erect, and unaffected. I passed many happy hours with him, not in dissipation and folly, but in useful conversation and in listening to the more inviting and rational displays of his wit, sentiment, and song; in the exercise of which he never failed to please, instruct, and charm."

Forming in some measure, as it does, a complement to the above, I am constrained to add the obituary notice of "ROBERT FERGUSSON, well known in the literary world for his poetical abilities," which appeared in *Ruddiman's Weekly Magazine*, written by Mr. Ruddi-

man, Jun., and which is of further interest as, slightly extended, it forms substantially the Life usually prefixed to the early editions of the Poems. "To attempt a character of this youthful bard," says the writer, "must be a vain essay, as it would be equally difficult to do justice to his merit. No colours but his own could paint him to the life, and we know none in his line of composition capable to sketch him out. His talent of versification in the Scots dialect has been exceeded by none, equalled by few. The subjects he chose were generally uncommon, often temporary. His images and sentiments were lively and striking, which he had a knack of clothing with most agreeable and natural expression. Had he enjoyed life and health to a maturer age, it is probable he would have revived our ancient Caledonian poetry, of late so much neglected and despised. His 'Hallow Fair,' 'Edinburgh Election,' 'Leith Races,' are master-pieces in this style, and will be lasting monuments of his genius and vivacity. For social life he possessed an amazing variety of qualifications. With the best good-nature and a great degree of modesty, he was always sprightly, always entertaining. His powers of song were very great in a double capacity. When seated, with some select companions, over a friendly bowl, his wit flashed like lightning, struck the hearers irresistibly, and set the table in a roar. But, alas! these engaging, nay, bewitching qualities, proved fatal to their owner, and shortened the period of his rational existence. So true is that observation of the poet—

'Great wit to madness sure is near ally'd,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.'

Yet he found favour in the sight of Providence, who was pleased speedily to call him from a miserable state of being to a life of early immortality."

We have been seeing how Burns esteemed FERGISSON, what pity he felt for him in the poverty and coldness of his human surroundings, and how tenderly eager he was that the fame of his "elder brother in the Muse" should enjoy loving lodgment for all time in the hearts of his countrymen. The attitude was altogether most agreeably honest, as was every attitude in which Burns was ever found. That the graphic Doric verse of the young Edinburgh poet struck his Ayrshire successor and after-master with irresistible power there is ample evidence, the appreciative reference in the noble preface to the first edition of his poems, printed at Kilmarnock, not being the least convincing. Lockhart is of opinion that it was the accidental meeting with FERGISSON's works, and a personal sympathy with that poet's misfortunes, that largely determined the Scottish character of Burns's writings. Burns himself says as much. Sir Walter Scott thought, however, that the ploughman poet, with twenty times the ability of Ramsay or FERGISSON, talked of these poets as his models with too much humility. Sir Walter was right. He doubtless owed a good deal to both, as he owed something to every capable singer that ever sang in Scotland before his day; just as Shakespeare owed something to every worthy dramatist that ever wrote in England before his time. He was debtor often, and to many, certainly, for hints and suggestions; for the poetry of Burns is a stream fed by many streams. But he was the servile imitator of no man; and to whomsoever he was at any time in debt, it was but to the

extent of having that poet in his eye when writing, with a view to kindling at his flame. To Ramsay he owed little. To FERGUSSON he owed more in the way of hints and suggestions, alike in subject and form and figure of speech, than to all else; and the influence which is marked on some of the best known of his Poems and Epistles is worth pointing out. The most obvious of all is "The Cottar's Saturday Night," as clearly suggested by "The Farmer's Ingle," as ever one poem was by another. And if the one poet ever measured himself on a level with the other, besides, it was here; for although Burns approached his subject with a higher and more passionate ideal than FERGUSSON, as has been remarked, we may yet agree with Andrew Lang in thinking that the "farmer" is a more realistic personage than the "cottar." It is not extravagance to say, indeed, that no artist working with words—and FERGUSSON'S estimate of the value of words was at all times wonderful, while his vocabulary was large—has excelled this youth of twenty in the descriptive quality of the following two stanzas. No marvel they inspired Burns to emulation. Supper is over in the house:—

“The fient a cheep’s amang the bairnies now,
 For a’ their anger’s wi’ their hunger gane:
 Aye maun the childer, wi’ a fastin’ mou’,
 Grumble and greet, and mak an unco mane.
 In rangles round, before the ingle’s lowe,
 Frae gudame’s mouth auld warld tales they hear,
 O’ warlocks loupin’ round the wirrikow;
 O’ ghaists, that win in glen and kirk-yard drear;
 Whilk touzles a’ their tap, and gars them shak wi’ fear!

“For weel she trows, that fiends and fairies be
 Sent frae the deil to fletch us to our ill,

That kye hae tint their milk wi' evil ee,
 And corn been scowder'd on the glowin' kill.
 O mock na this, my friends, but rather mourn,
 Ye in life's brawest spring, wi' reason clear ;
 Wi' eild our idle fancies a' return,
 And dim our dolefu' days wi' bairnly fear ;
 The mind's aye cradled when the grave is near."

The poems, it will be noted, are in the same measure—no common one. They open each with a corresponding look out on external nature—they close each with a patriotic apostrophe. As palpably "The Holy Fair" was suggested by "Leith Races." The measure is again the same—they open not unlike, and the main idea in each bears striking features of relationship. Compare these two verses :—

(*Burns.*)

" My name is Fun—your cronie dear,
 The nearest friend ye hae ;
 An' this is Superstition here,
 An' that's Hipocrisy.
 I'm gaun to Mauchline ' holy fair '
 To spend an hour in daffin ;
 Gin ye'll go there, you runkl'd pair,
 We will get famous laughin
 At them this day."

(*Fergusson.*)

" I dwell amang the caller springs
 That weet the land o' Cakes,
 And aften tune my canty strings
 At bridals and late-wakes ;
 They ca' me Mirth ; I ne'er was ken'd
 To grumble or look sour,
 But blyth wad be a lift to lend,
 Gif ye wad sey my power
 An' pith this day."

Of course, we are referring here particularly to the matter of hint, or suggestion. Burns's poem fills by far the greater space, and discharges by a long way the larger function. FERGUSSON's is a mere fragment of idle rhyme by comparison. Then further in the way of suggestion — and suggestion merely — the immortal "Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson" bears quite evident traces of being moulded on the "Elegy on the Death of Scots Music," as no less "The Brigs of Ayr" appear to have been suggested by "The Mutual Complaint of Plain-Stanes and Causey." Burns, in addition, received many minor hints, in familiar words and phrases, from FERGUSSON. But for all, surely no poet was ever more grateful, and no writer in the world ever put his borrowings to better use. It has all along been allowed to FERGUSSON, as the highest compliment the critic could pay him, that he handed Burns his poetical impulse, and that Burns took hints from him, and was ready on every suitable occasion to acknowledge him his peer in the realm of vernacular verse.

He was certainly not Burns's peer—in one realm or another. And though it may be pled for him that he died young, it is doubtful yet, although he had lived to be a hundred, whether he could ever have filled anything like the space in the heart and the mind of humanity that has been occupied for more than a century by the one and only singer entitled to the honourable designation of Scotland's National Poet.

While saying so, however, William Pitt's characterisation of Burns applies not inappropriately to FERGUSSON—if his Scots poems only are kept in view; and I lift it and lay it to his credit here without reserve, and say:—"I can think of no verse since Shakespeare's that

has so much the appearance of coming sweetly from Nature." Of no poet anywhere may it be said with more truth that "he did but sing because he must, and piped but as the linnet sang." His verse gushed from him, indeed, without effort. And how marvellously ripe was his thought for his years—how wide his range of knowledge—and with what magical effect did he conjure with Edinburgh's "brave metropolitan utterance." He says himself, referring to his muse:—

"At times when she may lowse her pack,
I'll grant that she can find a knack
To gar auld-warld wordies clack
In hamespun rhyme;
While ilk ane at his billy's back
Keeps gude Scots time."

His knack, forsooth, was the gift of true genius. Hence the influence of his verse on Burns, as well as, perhaps, on Scott and Leyden and Hogg; though on the three latter in lighter measure than on the first; and hence its continuing power to charm and delight the minds of the poet's not too susceptible countrymen.

Mention has been made of the ripeness of his thought, together with the wideness of his knowledge. It has been common to remark on FERGUSON as if he saw Nature only from some lofty garret window; but such as rate him so narrowly surely write without the volume of his poems at their elbow. He was very emphatically a city poet, to be sure—the laureate of Auld Reekie—but he looked at nature and country life, nevertheless, with an intimate and loving eye. His poem of "The Farmer's Ingle"—the best rounded and most complete picture from his pen—is swelling in every line with the very air of country life, and is embued from first to last

with genuine country thought and feeling. Two particular stanzas have already been quoted ; but when outside of these one lights on phrases like—"divots theekit frae the weet and drift"—"wi' butter'd bannocks now the girdle reeks"—"the cheering bicker gars them glibly gash"—"in its auld lerroch yet the deas remains"—and, "lang may his sock and cou'ter turn the glebe, and bauks o' corn bend down wi' laded ear"—it is realized that the subject is in the hands of one entirely to the manner born. And his knowledge of and sympathy with country life, and its ways and manners, are not manifest only in "The Farmer's Ingle," but are revealed quite as conspicuously in the odes to the Bee and to the Gowdspink, and in the "Eclogue to the Memory of Dr. William Wilkie," every line of which is marked with a Burns-like familiarity with all the objects of farm-life. Take but two brief examples from the Eclogue :—

"Though Summer's gane and we nae langer view
The blades o' clover wat wi' pearls o' dew,
Cauld winter's bleakest blast we'll eithly cower,
Our eldin's driven, an' our hairst is owre.
Our rucks fu' thick are stackit i' the yard,
For the Yule feast a sautit mart's prepared."

And:—

"Ye saw yoursel' how weel his mailin thrave,
Aye better faugh'd an' snodit than the lave ;
Lang had the thistles an' the dockens been
In use to wag their taps upon the green,
Where now his bonny rigs delight the view,
An' thrivin' hedges drink the caller dew."

Then, as to the ripeness of his thought, one is struck with admiration when lighting on such lines as—

"Till death slip sleely on and gie the hindmost wound,"

and—

“The mind’s aye cradled when the grave is near.”

Or, by finding such luminous pictures in a few words as—

“Upon the tap o’ ilka lum
The sun began to keek,”

and—

“Now morn, wi’ bonnie purpie-smiles,
Kisses the air-cock o’ St. Giles ;”

or—

“Cauld blaws the nippin’ north wi’ angry sough,
And showers his hailstanes frae the castle cleugh
Owre the Greyfriars.”

It needs only to be asked for FERGUSSON that he be read. So long as he is read he will surely not lack for ardent admirers. And Edinburgh people, above and beyond all, should cherish their laureate, for the grand old grey capital of the North has bred no more devoted son ; and none, assuredly, who has so eloquently set in moving verse the love he bore for the town and her citizens. To him the city was not merely his “own romantic town.” She was “the canty hole,” and

“Auld Reekie ! wale o’ ilka toun
That Scotland kens beneath the moon.”

Following here is the epitaph which his much esteemed and admiring friend, William Woods, the actor, composed for the poet immediately on hearing of his death. It has neither the melting fervour nor the poetical beauty of the one composed at a later date by Robert Burns, but it touches nervously on many particular features of the subject’s character, alike as a poet and a man, and may be allowed, not inappropriately, to close this writing :—

“Sacred to the memory of ROBERT FERGUSSON, who met a fate from which the possession of humble talents might have secured him. But with Nature’s most spontaneous gifts, he displayed, both in his poems and his conversation, strength without labour, and ease without affectation. To these shining qualities he added nobler; he was manly in his manners, open in his actions, sincere in his attachments, generous in his resentments; a good-humour’d satirist of folly, an enthusiastic lover of merit. But, thus adorned, wanting that persevering fortitude which often obtains patronage from the great, to Fortune’s lofty favours the child of nature was denied. His feeling soul, unable longer to sustain the impressions made on enlarged sensibility, and limited means, burst from its narrow prison of this world, to gain a better.”

PORTRAITS OF FERGUSSON.

THE various portraits of ROBERT FERGUSSON which have appeared, each in turn claimed to be authentic, present, when ranged together as in this volume, a face of such widely differing aspect, that comment on them individually is almost unavoidable. To say emphatically at this time of day which affords the correct, or most nearly accurate presentation of the poet, were, of course, no easy matter. While that is so, reconciliation of all, on the other hand, is obviously out of the question. Were the Grosart portrait, at page xxxiv., removed from the catalogue the difficulty would be greatly lessened. But Dr. Grosart, in 1851, held so stoutly for this being—by sanction of Miss Ruddiman—"the alone authenticated" and "only faithful" likeness, that even although it does not agree with contemporary accounts of the attractive nature of FERGUSSON'S appearance, and has no feature really in common with the quite fascinating and undisputed Runciman portrait forming the frontispiece here, one hesitates to cast it utterly aside. If we would hesitate about casting it aside utterly, however, we would hesitate yet more about accepting it as a portrait (*vide* Dr. Grosart) that "*literally* represents the poet." It shows a face so weak and unattractive—so destitute of any suggestion of genius or character—and it bears so little resemblance, in nose, and mouth, and chin, to *any* of the other portraits—that one is all but forced to regard it as a caricature, and not a portrait at all.

I. The Runciman portrait, a lithographed copy of which faces the title-page in this volume, prepared at second-hand from the original painting in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, can scarcely be denied the credit of being authentic. The late Dr. Grosart even, in February, 1897, when Mr. William Drummond Young, the well-known Edinburgh photo-artist, was preparing his justly celebrated photogravure from it, was constrained to proclaim it "beautiful as a work of art, and *true to the very life*." The painting came into public knowledge only shortly before the issue of Mr. Drummond Young's photogravure, when it was given on loan for exhibition in the institution named. It is the property of Miss Raeburn, the granddaughter of Sir Henry Raeburn—Scotland's Sir Joshua Reynolds—to whom it was presented by the artist. Where it had "lain" or "hung" unobserved in all the intervening years has not been explained. But it was at Chesterfield, the house of Raeburn's grandson, when Dr. John Brown wrote his prefatory note to the series of photographs from engravings after Raeburn, about thirty years ago. Dr. Brown says:—"At the fireside [in the dining-room] is a small head of FERGUSSON the poet, by Runciman—intense and painful, the eyes full of perilous light and coming frenzy—in colour dingy beside the glow of Raeburn. It is not the same portrait as the one engraved in his works, also by Runciman." That it is not the same is clear. But apart from the "Sir Precentor" sketch (see page xl.) there was evidently a "drawing" of the poet by Alexander Runciman; and it is probably to this that FERGUSSON himself refers, in the "Codicil" to his "Last Will," when he writes:—

" To Walter Ruddiman, whose pen
 Still screen'd me from the dunce's den,
 I leave of phiz a picture, saving
 To him the freedom of engraving
 Therefrom a copy, to embellish
 And give his work a smarter relish."

This "picture" appears to have been delivered over to Mr. Ruddiman, indeed, and David Laing, of the Writers to the Signet's Library, was able to supply Dr. Grosart with some interesting particulars regarding it. Mr. Ruddiman, Laing said, had entrusted the portrait to Mr. James Cummyng; and while the second edition of the poems was in the press, in 1782, he addressed this card to Mr. Cummyng:—"Tho. Ruddiman's compliments to Mr. Cummyng, begs he would look among his papers for a quarto book of drawings which T. R. left with Mr. C. some months ago. It contains a sketch of the likeness of R. FERGUSSON, whose works T. R. has nearly ready for publication, and wishes to have his head engraved with all speed. If Mr. C. will leave the book with his son, T. R. will send for it this afternoon, *Tuesday, 7th May, 1782.*" In a postscript to another letter to Cummyng, Ruddiman says:—"The want of FERGUSSON's head is an infinite loss to me at present—*14th May, 1782.*"

The volume was issued without a portrait, so that Cummyng must have mislaid the drawing. But it turned up later, as we will see immediately. And taking that with the "Sir Precentor" sketch and the Runciman painting, it should be fairly evident to anyone with half an eye in his head that the portrait so highly lauded by Dr. Grosart in 1851 can have little claim to credit as "the alone authenticated" and "only faithful" likeness.

II. This (see page xviii.), was the first portrait of FERGUSSON that appeared in any volume of his poems. It is the one, besides, on which most of the subsequent portraits were based. In all likelihood it was prepared from the Runciman drawing. Where else could it come from? It was given as a frontispiece in the first part of *Poems on Various Subjects*, by ROBERT FERGUSSON, published by Morison & Son, Perth, in 1788. "I may state," says Dr. Grosart, "that Miss Ruddiman, Professor Vilant of St. Andrews, Mr. Howden, jeweller, and Mr. Spence of Edinburgh, all recognised a likeness in the portrait of Morison & Son, and its re-engravings. Still there was a something unsatisfactory, which is easily accounted for by the *improving* alterations made."

III. The Grosart portrait, a reproduction of which appears at page xxxiv., has been frequently referred to here. I call it the Grosart portrait, because it appears alone in the edition of *The Works of Robert Fergusson*, edited by the Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, LL.D., and published by Messrs. A. Fullarton & Co., London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, in 1851. Recommending it to the public in that work, the reverend editor remarks:—"The portrait which is given in the present edition is carefully and faithfully re-engraved from a private copper-plate, which belonged to Mr. Walter Ruddiman, Jun., and with which I was favoured by my venerable friend, the late Miss Ruddiman. An impression from this copper-plate of Mr. Ruddiman was framed and hung above the parlour mantel-piece, and it was regarded by the family as a correct portrait of the poet. The editor is of opinion that the 'drawing' referred to in Mr. Ruddiman's note to Mr.

Cummyng must have been subsequently recovered, and the copper-plate engraved therefrom. It is the alone authenticated portrait, and there cannot be a doubt that it faithfully—*literally* represents the poet." That in 1851. So in 1897, Dr. Grosart surely became his own severest critic when, referring to the Runciman painting, he wrote:—"All others have been put aside by the recovery of Runciman's second long-hidden portrait—beautiful as a work of art, and true to the very life." The one presents actually no feature in common with the other; and if the "drawing" referred to in Ruddiman's note to Cummyng was subsequently recovered, it was the Perth portrait that was engraved from it, we may feel assured, and not the copper-plate over the Ruddiman mantel-piece. A comparison of the three noses should alone make that clear.

IV. In the *Life of Robert Fergusson*, by his friend Thomas Sommers, there is the following somewhat romantic account of a portrait of him taken by Runciman. "That artist," says Sommers, "was at this time [1772-3] painting in his own house in the Pleasance, a picture on a half-length cloth, of the 'Prodigal Son,' in which his fancy and pencil had introduced every necessary object and circumstance suggested by the sacred passage. At his own desire I called to see it. I was much pleased with the composition, colouring, and admirable effect of the piece, at least what was done of it; but expressed my surprise at observing a large space in the centre, exhibiting nothing but chalk outlines of a human figure. He informed me that he had reserved that space for the prodigal, but could not find a young man whose personal form and

expressive features were such as he could approve of, and commit to the canvas. ROBERT FERGUSSON'S face and figure instantly occurred to me : not from an idea that FERGUSSON'S real character was that of a prodigal ; by no means ; but on account of his sprightly humour, personal appearance, and striking features. I asked Mr. Runciman if he knew the poet. He answered in the negative, but that he had often read and admired his poems. That evening at five I appointed to meet with him and the poet in a tavern, Parliament Close. We did so, and I introduced him. The painter was much pleased both with his figure and conversation. I intimated to FERGUSSON the business on which we met ; he agreed to sit next forenoon. I accompanied him for that purpose, and in a few days the picture strikingly exhibited the bard in the character of a prodigal, sitting on a grassy bank surrounded by swine, some of which were sleeping and others feeding ; his right leg over his left knee, eyes uplifted, hands clasped, tattered clothes, and with expressive countenance bemoaning his forlorn and miserable situation ! This picture, when finished, reflected high honour on the painter, being much admired. It was sent to the Royal Exhibition in London, where it was also highly esteemed, and there purchased by a gentleman of taste and fortune at a considerable price. I have often expressed a wish to see a print from it, but never had that pleasure, as it exhibited a portrait of my favourite bard which, for likeness, colouring, and expression, might have done honour to the taste and pencil of Sir Joshua Reynolds."

Mr. James Gray of the High School, Edinburgh, when, in 1821, he came to issue his edition of the

poems of FERGUSSON, explained in a prefatory note that the picture, of which Sommers gives the above curious account, had disappeared. But "the interesting engraving," he continues. "that is prefixed to the present volume [see page xliii.] is taken from a painting by the same artist, in which the return of the Prodigal is represented: and there is every reason to believe that the portrait of FERGUSSON was faithfully copied by Runciman from the former picture. This is now in the possession of David Steuart, Esq., of the Customs, Edinburgh." Of said picture, Mr. Steuart gave the following account:—

"It is five feet five inches broad by three feet eleven inches high; and was purchased by me in the year 1798 at the sale of the collection of medals, coins, and other articles, belonging to the late Mr. Cumming, secretary to the Antiquarian Society. I was informed at the time that the picture was originally intended to be placed in the English Chapel in the Cowgate, which is likely, as it is painted on a thick piece of copper to resist the injuries of time and weather, and is done with great care, being one of the most highly finished works of this much esteemed master. The subject seems to have been a favourite one with him, for, besides the drawing in my possession, he executed four, if not five, paintings of it, all differing from each other. The one in my possession is dated 1774. As Runciman was a long while before he met with a countenance to his liking for the Prodigal Son, there is every probability that being once satisfied he would again introduce the portrait of the poet in this picture. It is full of expression, and is a study that an artist of feeling would adopt *con amore*."

Perhaps. But, unless by the scantiness of its attire, the figure engraved from the picture affords almost no other suggestion of a Prodigal down in his luck. Fat and full of flesh as he is, he offers no idea of a person reduced to the condition of eating the husks which were the common feeding of the swine he had been appointed to herd. And that the physical weakling, ROBERT FERGUSSON, was the model either for this picture, or the one on which it was based, I cannot believe. Look at the neck and the shoulders, and the arms and muscles of that figure. If there was a model for it at all, and he was of any service to the artist, the person selected to pose was either a champion Border wrestler, or one fit to establish a position for himself within the prize ring. He was not ROBERT FERGUSSON, the poet, painted in one character or another by Alexander Runciman, the artist.

V. The "Sir Precentor" sketch (page xl.), slight as it is, being hurriedly executed for the diversion of the moment on the night (presumably) of FERGUSSON'S admission to the Cape Club, is of very considerable interest, and is valuable besides as a help in the way of determining the true aspect of the poet. It agrees with the Runciman painting. It does not jar in any pronounced fashion with the face in the Perth portrait. Already in the introduction to this work, explanation has been made of how it was jotted by Runciman on the reverse side of the poet's petition for membership of the Cape, in October, 1772. "The drawing," says Professor Hecht, and we thoroughly appreciate his remark, "is exceedingly interesting. In all probability it is by Alexander Runciman, who, as we know,

was of the club Sir Brimstone, and it gives FERGUSSON'S emaciated features in a well-chosen moment of animation, without the idealizing touch of Runciman's more elaborate oil portrait now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery."

VI. Prefixed to Alexander Peterkin's edition of *The Works of Robert Fergusson*, printed by S. A. & H. Oddy, London, in 1807, there is a portrait which is not reproduced here, and because it is of no value or interest of any kind. It was prepared, Dr. Grosart tells, from the face of the sister of the poet, Mrs. Duval, who was supposed considerably to resemble her brother, and was induced thereby to sit.

