

JAMES MERCER.

SHORTLY after the settlement of the American War of Independence, there returned, to his native shire, a military gentleman with his wife and two daughters; who, having come into possession of some money on the death of a brother, built himself a little villa to the north of the town, and at Sunnybank, as he called it, settled down to the cultivation of *belles-lettres* and the friendships of his earlier years. This was JAMES MERCER, the author of "Lyric Poems, 1794", of whom Dr. Beattie said that, "with more learning than any other man of my acquaintance, he has all the playfulness of a schoolboy, and unites the wit and wisdom of Montesquieu with the sensibility of Rousseau and the generosity of Tom Jones". To meet with the conjunction of poetical and military talents in the same individual is not a very common event now-a-days. Things have changed considerably since the time when the men of war were the men of wit, equally facile in swordsmanship and songcraft. In these latter days verse-writing is looked upon as so much the plaything of mere milksops that we rarely dream of any but the veriest carpet soldier, who may have smelt powder at a review or shamfight, dedicating the product of his midnight-oil-burnings to the Muses. But James Mercer was neither a milksop nor a carpet soldier, but

a kind of far-off descendant of the knight-lyrists of the days of "good Queen Bess". His father, a gentleman of Aberdeenshire of small fortune, had followed the bigger lairds "wi' Charlie", in the rising of '45, and, like many others, had to run to France after the decisive blow at Culloden. His son, born 27th February, 1734, was then at the Grammar School, after which he entered Marischal College, passed through the usual course of study there, and then joined his father in France. His mixing thus early in the gay and polished society of Paris is said to have given his manners the fine courtesy, and his tastes that culture, which was ever after highly characteristic of all he said and did. His tendency lay, however, towards a military life, and, on the death of his father, he entered a regiment of British infantry then in active service in Germany. He studied hard, got promotion to a lieutenancy in a battalion of Highlanders, and during some years of arduous service in the field distinguished himself for military skill and bravery in many situations, especially at the memorable battle of Minden. Returning at the peace of 1763 he married Emma (not Katherine, as Sir William Forbes says in his "Life of Beattie"), a daughter of Mr. Douglas of Fechil, and sister of Lord Glenbervie; and during the few years he then remained in Aberdeen formed friendships with and became the intimate associate of Reid, Beattie, Campbell, and others, members of "The Wise Club". Rejoining the army he went to Ireland, where he remained for about ten years, when he returned to Aberdeen, but had to leave shortly after for France on account of his wife's health. On the Duke of Gordon raising a regiment of fencibles for the Government in 1767 Mercer was made major, but on the settlement of the war which called these out he again retired to Aberdeen, as mentioned in our opening sentence. Though he had long devoted a considerable portion of his leisure hours to poesy, he was exceedingly shy in letting his friends know that he did so, and it was only after much solicitation that the most intimate of them prevailed on him to allow the publication of a small collection anonymously, which he ultimately did, and in 1794 "Lyric Poems" appeared, dedicated to his wife, by her brother, Lord Glenbervie, who

acted as editor and saw them through the press. On the death of his wife, which took place after many years' indisposition, his health speedily gave way. The shock which he sustained at this bereavement he never recovered, and though some years prior to that event he had led a kind of semi-recluse life, it now became more so than ever, and after lingering for about a year, during which all the sprightly vigour of his body and mind slowly left him, he passed away 18th November, 1804, in his 71st year. He had just lived to see the second edition of his poems through the press, to which he had allowed his name to be attached. In 1806 a third edition was called for, to which Lord Glenbervie contributed a memoir of the diffident but cultured author.

The first thing that strikes one in perusing Mercer's poems is how inadequately they represent the extent of his reputed acquirements. Every one who knew him personally speaks in the highest terms of the wide knowledge, rich taste, and mental grasp which he displayed in conversation; yet we are safe to say that none of his poems exhibit these qualities in any marked degree. That they are the work of a cultured, refined, and amiable mind is unmistakable from first to last; but there is not that originality, either in form or matter, which one would be led to expect from the high opinion of his powers spoken to by his contemporaries. The main quality of his poetry is its steady inculcation in pleasant forms of the wisdom and prudence which a wide experience had taught him lay at the roots of human felicity and well-being. If his intellectual plummet never reaches depths beyond commonplace, he, with considerable gracefulness, recalls to our notice matters that lie so close about us that they are not only apt to be forgotten, but practically trodden under foot. How, for instance, the desire for novelty (a wisely implanted stimulus to the young, while acquiring a wider experience) is as nothing compared with Habit in bringing us to the final possession of peace and contentment; or how the toils and ambition of youth, if subservient to sociality and the kindly offices of domestic life, repay a hundred fold at the final reckoning; or the incessant liability of men to mistake serious trifles for the more abiding and important work of life. These and a

hundred other truisms, readily granted but as readily forgotten, are the main chords of his Muse. Many of his pieces were the outcome of real occurrences to either himself or friends; and these bear marks of the keen sensibility which, in the midst of all his gay sprightliness, was a leading feature in his character. We have no doubt his verses would have been more generally read, had they not been modelled after masters whom it was utterly hopeless for him ever to equal; for who can ever hope for immortality by treading closely in the footsteps of Horace? As a sample of his matter we may take two of the concluding stanzas in his poem "To Novelty". Apostrophising this personification he says:—

Heav'n still is kind—When thou art fled,
Comes gentle Habit, in thy stead,
With silent pace—nor comes in vain—
For, growing with declining years,
The good man's comforts she endears,
And softens ev'ry pain.

Where she, sweet sober maid, abides,
Contentment at the board presides;
No vagrant wish her votary stings—
In his own grounds he loves to tread;
Nor envies, on his household bed,
The couch of eastern kings.

Now this is very pleasantly said, and very true, but at the same time, very commonplace; and, unfortunately for those who found in his pages marks of his "possessing much original genius", the same remark will be found to fit all round. That the author's diffidence about bringing his musings before the public eye, was grounded on a pretty sound judgment of their merits, few who read them now will doubt; and although there is much in them that any man of culture need not be ashamed to own as having been the amusement of his vacant hours, yet we suspect that the literary reputation and memory of James Mercer will be carried down to a late posterity, more through his connection with Dr. Beattie and the notices which contemporaries take of him than by any of his own poetical efforts. One of the best things in the volume is probably the stanzas entitled "Home", which, as the whole collection has fallen into much neglect, we feel sure will be new to many readers:—

The Bandit whom the laws pursue,
The Soldier, and the Gypsy crew,
Arabs, and Tartars, ever doom'd to roam—
Whate'er their place of shelter be,
A tent, a cave, or hollow tree,
Thither they hie with joy, and call it HOME.

There if a doxy, or a wife,
Receive the wretch escap'd from strife ;
If there his tatter'd brood around him cling—
His features catch a bright'ning smile,
He rests him from his sordid toil,
And in his narrow confines reigns a king.

While thus the poor and wretched find
Th' asylum for a wounded mind,
Distemper'd men there are, estrang'd from home,
Cold to an angel's kind embrace,
Cheerless amid a blooming race,
And dead to comfort in a princely dome.

Men in the lap of Fortune nurst,
With all her froward humours curst,
And teas'd by wishes ever on the wing ;
Who, wand'ring still through Folly's maze,
In search of bliss consume their days,
Nor taste her genuine draught at Nature's spring.

Yet such the men who lead the gay,
The pride and patterns of the day,
Whose high-priz'd friendship fools and strangers boast,
Blush, thou ! to court their barren fame ;
Let HOME, sweet HOME, thy presence claim,
And those enjoy thy smiles who love thee most.
