

JOSEPH GRANT.

AWAY on the cold, bleak, northern slope of the Grampians, where the wild, solitary grandeur of that mountain range begins to be conspicuous, lies the little farm of Affrusk, where JOSEPH GRANT was born on 28th May, 1805. His father, Robert Grant, descended from a race of crofters, was a hardy, plucky man, who struggled late and early with the stubborn soil of his little "tack," and occasionally tried to eke out the scanty means of living which it brought him by the more profitable, if risky, adjunct of illicit distilling. Joseph, in common with the other members of the family as they grew up, lent a hand at the work of the farm by day, or helped to

watch when the still was a-going at night, and got his turn as winter came round, of a short spell at the parish school of Banchory. With the slight educational equipment thus obtained, this child of the glens soon began to show signs of ability, and a thirst for knowledge far beyond the majority of those of his age and circumstances in life. How early his spirit had been touched by the legendary lore, the ballads and tales—which stood in the place of literature to the rustic mind of his generation—it is impossible to tell, but as early as his fourteenth year he had begun to embody some of them in verse. His father, plain, prosaic man, did not care much for these things, but the mother, who had strong leanings in that direction herself, saw it with a glad heart, and encouraged it as only a mother can. His reading was of that omnivorous order that devoured every scrap of printed matter which came within his reach. He had no time for selection, even had selection been required; and situated as he was—cut off from the kind of society and intercourse most congenial to his aspiring spirit—away from any centre where a supply of books could be readily obtained—he had to borrow where he could, and be thankful for the small mercies thus within his reach. This seeming disadvantage was not an unmixed evil, however, for it not only saved him from becoming a slave to books, but helped to throw him more and more on his own resources, and to catch whatever inspiration was vouchsafed to him direct from the life, legends, and natural grandeur of nature which environed him from infancy. The first fruits of his musings at this early period were given to the world in a small volume of legends, miscellaneous poems, and songs, entitled “Juvenile Lays”, printed at Aberdeen in 1828, and dedicated to Lieutenant-General Burnett of Banchory Lodge. The merit of the pieces it contains is very unequal; but, crude and premature as most of them are, no one can peruse the volume without seeing where the strength of Grant’s genius lay. Such stories as “The Ghost o’ Gellan”, “The Pedlar’s Ghost”, his character sketch of “Rachel Fullarton”, so wise in all that pertained to kelpies, mermaids, spunkies, fairies, and other more gruesome forms of the supernatural; and that of “Eddie M’Tavish”, the reputed witch of the district, with her charms for mischief,

baulked only by the counter charms of "Canny Rob"; and many fragments of weirdish ballad and song stand out in bold relief from the medley of mediocrity among which they are found. These have, at least, the true ring about them, while the others have a deadish, leaden thud. Here is the opening verses of his fragment, "Eddie M'Tavish":—

Ken ye auld Eddie o' the ferny howe?
 A wrinkled wife o' fourscore years an' twa;
 Eild's winter cauld, hath clad her palsied pow
 Wi' locks as white as wreaths o' drifted snaw:
 The fouk around, a witch will Eddie ca'—
 She's far frae chancie a' the neebors, say,
 For she can steal the yellow prize awa',
 (While lassies vainly sweat the lee lang day),
 An' smite the stirks an' sheep wi' mony a sickly wae.

They say, wi' owlet's een, a fumert's maw,
 An' foliage gather'd frae the baleful yew;
 Wi' parched beak an' spurs o' hoodie craw,
 And puff-ball powder steep'd in hemlock dew—
 They say, wi' charms, like thae, she'll witch a cow!
 Can raise the win', an' e'en (L—d keep's) the deil!
 But canny Rob, wi' cream parboil'd in rue—
 Wi' pounded flint, an' harsh untempered steel,
 Athwart the moor can gar the tortur'd wifie reel!

The figure of this "uncanny wife"—

For meikle deidly skill an' wicked wit has she—
 with the recollection of her reputed cantrips, seems to recur to him in after years when writing his ballad, "The Witch of the Grampians":—

There liv'd an auld witch 'mang the Grampian hills,
 An' a witch o' might was she—
 An' cou'd blast the cow or the cowte, I trow,
 Wi' a glint o' her gruesome ee.

At mornin' grey, when the dews waur rank,
 An' at gloamin's misty fa',
 Like a maukin, I ween, might that carlin be seen
 Hirplin' o'er dyke an' wa'.

She could sail the river in a nut-shell sae wee,
 When kelpies scaich'd at e'en—
 And she could fly through the drumlie sky
 On the stem o' the rag-weed green.

'Mid scroggs an' rocks her cottage stood,
 On a moor right bleak an' bare;
 An' on ilka last night o' the auld moon's light,
 Mony witches an' deils met there.

His second publication, "Kincardineshire Traditions", was issued at Aberdeen in 1830, and shows a remarkable advance in literary skill over the crude little volume of 1828. The fourteen pieces which make up its contents are for the most part founded on local legends of love, war, and witchcraft, which had been familiar to his mind from his very infancy. The wealth of home-grown stories that simmered in his brain for so many years had begun at last to take proper shape in the ballad form—exactly the kind of dress suited to their old-world character. That he was more than fairly successful in catching the spirit of romantic simplicity and tender pathos which belong to this early form of versification is evident from almost every page of his little volume; while, in most of the pieces which involve an unearthly, elfish, or supernatural element, there is a play of fancy which augured well for his future work in that line. Here, for instance, is a fragment, "Song of the Fairy King", from an unpublished tale:—

I am the chief of the Elfin band—
 And none more bold than me
 Has ever led their ranks so grand
 Through the shades of the moonlit lee.

My cloak is the leaf of the birk tree high,
 My vesture the green fly's wing,
 My shield is the hide of the grasshopper's thigh,
 And my lance the brown ant's sting.

We hunt the gnat through the leafy dell
 And over the broomy hill,
 And steer our barks of the acorn shell
 Through the waves of the silvery rill.

And O when the storm-beat steeple quakes,
 When the deer in covert quail,
 And the sprite of the blast from his dark wing shakes
 Around the rattling hail,

Gleefully then we dart abroad
 On the whirlwind's viewless wing,
 And in the halls of the dark dark cloud
 Our songs of battle sing.

And when morning's ruddy banner glows
Wide over the eastern sky,
In the fragrant folds of the snow-white rose
We hide from human eye.

Shortly after the publication of this volume, he went (1831) to Stonehaven as an assistant to a merchant there, but did not remain long. From thence he went to Dundee (1832-3), and was employed first as a clerk in the *Dundee Guardian* office, and afterwards in the same capacity with Mr. Miller, a writer. He soon made up acquaintance with Robert Nicoll, after that promising young poet had settled in Dundee as bookseller and circulating library keeper; with David Vedder, then stationed there in connection with the Custom House, and other poets and literary aspirants who frequented Nicoll's shop. Though he still continued to court the muse, he had of late begun to write the series of prose stories ultimately published as "Tales of the Glens", and had already contributed several sketches to *Chambers's Journal*. His intercourse with Nicoll had a highly inspiring effect upon him, and the prospect of a literary career was opening before him with considerable promise. He began to regret that he had published the two little volumes we have noticed above, and wished to forget them. He set about gathering his prose tales and sketches and a few of his ballads and songs, with a view to publication. His health broke down, however—the close confinement at office work, conjoined with the general insalubrity of city life, could not fail to tell on one predisposed as he was to pulmonary disease; and it soon became evident to his friends that the tall, thin form of the young poet was stooping over an early grave. He was persuaded to return home in hopes that his native air might again recruit him, but he went home with his death upon him. He died, under the roof-tree where he was born, on 14th April, 1835, and was buried in the churchyard at Strahan, where a plain headstone, bearing an inscription by his friend and brother-poet, Laing, of Brechin, marks his last resting-place. The volume of stories and poems—"Tales of the Glens"—on which he was working at the time of his death, was seen through the press by Mr. M'Culloch, of the *Dundee Journal*, and a memoir of his life was prefixed to it, from the pen of his friend, Robert Nicoll.

The poems which appear in this posthumous volume have been truly characterised as “the outpourings of a pure and exalted spirit”, a statement, no doubt, in a certain sense, more true of them than of any of his earlier poems. They lack, however, the native-glen flavour of the best of his younger work, and are superior to them mostly in being more cosmopolitan in subject-matter, and wrought off with a higher literary finish. We get no bits of the quaint folk-lore which, like a secondary religion, overawed the spirits of his rustic contemporaries—few glimpses of those forms of nature which, in the silence of the woods by day, or on the mist-clasped mountains by night, touched his spirit with a weird charm which overflowed into his verse. When we look back to each of the three volumes he gave to the world, we begin to see clearly how they mark stages in his mental growth, and how they indicate more distinctly than may be seen in most young poets’ work, the transition from being a poet of nature and human life pure and simple—a picture-painter, who weaves whatever poetic wealth he possesses round something outside himself—to the thoughtful, reflective, self-conscious kind of poet, with an ever-growing interest in his own mental states more than in anything else. This tendency to subjectivity—he did not live to develop it—grew upon him when, shut out from the influences which, amid nature’s surroundings, tend to draw man away from self, he was cooped up in Dundee at the work and studies which were telling on his general health. As an example of his more finished productions, probably the best he ever penned outside the region of ballad poetry, we may quote the following:—

HOPE.

O Hope’s like a little minstrel bird
 That sings by the path o’ a child,
 Ay loupin’ frae bloomy bough to bough
 Wi’ an air sae merry and wild;
 An’ maist within grasp o’ his gowden wings
 He lats the bairnie creep,
 Syne aff bangs he
 To a high, high tree,
 An’ the wee thing’s left to weep.

O Hope’s like a maiden o’ fair fifteen,
 Wi’ an e’e as dazlingly bright

