

JOHN MILNE.

JOHN MILNE, shoemaker, soldier, postman, and poet, was born at Aberdeen, 25th December, 1791. His father, a sailor, died abroad, the vessel he sailed in being captured by a French privateer during the war. Young John, thus early bereft, was placed in the "Warkhouse" (now the Boys' and Girls' Hospital), and after being duly equipped with the education there imparted, was apprenticed to a shoemaker. Inspired by the martial spirit of the time, he disregarded the salutary adage, *ne sutor ultra crepidam*, and after serving for some time in Finlayson's celebrated squad of volunteers, he joined the regular army, and took up his quarters with his regiment at Wool-

wich. He soon, however, tired of that mode of life, and rejoiced when, at the reduction of the army, in 1813-14, he got his discharge, and found himself once more in Aberdeen at the shoemaker's bench. About this time he entered the service of the Post-Office, then an exceedingly humble establishment, giving employment to three others besides himself. With one or two breaks of very short duration, when he returned to his trade, he served as postman till 1850, when the growing infirmities of age, coupled with a growing suspicion that some of his superiors had a dislike to him, owing to something he had written, he retired, after 36 years' service, to the misery of the awl and lapstone. John had early displayed a love for literature, but though he was well known to many friends as a devotee of the muses, it was not till 1831 that his lucubrations reached the dignity of print. In that year he published "The Widow and her Son, or the Runaway, a borough tale of 1789, in four cantos", a poem in the familiar stanza of "Don Juan", and in which the author, apeing the style of that celebrated poem, succeeded in making his little story as unreadable as might be. The impression printed was a very limited one, however, and it was soon sold out, to the satisfaction and profit of the author. He now turned his attention to essay-writing, specimens of which, duly interspersed with verse, appeared in "Twelve Essays, with occasional Illustrations in Verse. 1845". In 1851 he republished his "Widow and her Son", along with other poems, prefixing a bulky autobiographical sketch, full of the *minutiae* of his career. John had a facile pen, but, unfortunately for his poetry, little of the living fire which accompanies real inspiration. He could write and digress to any extent—especially digress. The simple story of a runaway boy, the only child of his parents, who after many years' absence, returned to find his father dead, and his mother in beggary through the frauds of a lawyer who had control of her property, and who with some little difficulty set wrong things right—is spun out to the extent of over three hundred stanzas. The majority of these are mere padding, and might have been shaken from the story proper with no small advantage to both it and the author's reputation. Here, for example, is a swatch of the reflective (?) asides which occur on almost every page:—

Pity that mortal whom the wealthy proud
 Evades his presence, or denies his suit
 Because he's poor, or swells the vulgar crowd
 Of those deem'd "malcontents". He'll stand without
 Perhaps an hour; or if the *great one* should
 Chance to appear, he strikes the poor man mute!
 Brow-beats the wretch, because he's been unfortunate;
 Or if a woman, she is too importunate.

I once presented one a seal'd petition,
 Whose influence could, providing he'd been willing,
 Have found me work to suit my weak condition,
 Being then unfit for my laborious calling.
 He asked, "Who from—from you?" I bow'd submission;
 He scann'd the address, but touch'd not—how appalling—
 "Pooh!" he exclaimed, "be off! 'tis of no use;"
 And left me stooping like a strangled goose.

But all at once I stood erect, for why?
 Because I had done nought to be ashamed.
 There goes the biped, not the man, thought I;
 Nor did I think the creature much misnamed;
 And, if a borrowed simile we apply—
 In fact, there never was one better framed,
 Without hyperbole—wrinkled and pale,
 "A monkey in consumption". But to our tale.—

Now, this is the kind of thing which John called satire! We strongly suspect that his readers had a different name for it; and that, if ever the author appeared "like a strangled goose", it was when writing stanzas like the above. In his more ambitious flights, in his attempts at the sublime, we get some splendid examples of the bathetic—but we must forbear.

That John had some share of talent there can be little doubt; his autobiography is interesting in a way—but in spite of the impression which it leaves on one, in speaking of his attention to music, painting, poetry, the drama, and moral philosophy, we find the line (much humbler, no doubt) in which he might have excelled, indicated in one of his smaller pieces, "Leap Year, or the Old Maid gone a-wooing". There is a nearer approach to humour, character, and permanent worth in its homely lines than in all the more ambitious essays of his prolific pen. We give it entire:—

Miss Jane of the Shaws was a maiden of note,
 And could boast of some pedigree;
 With a portion of land and a well-stocked farm,
 A stout young man, who could keep her from harm,
 And rule over servants three.

And her serving-man was a *sensible* man,
 Yclep'd "wise John of the Shaws";
 Of effect and its cause, or of cause and effect,
 He could speak, and a flaw he at once could detect
 In any of Nature's laws.

Miss Jane went round her poultry-yard,
 On an April morn went she;
 When the brood-hens 'gan crowing and clapping their wings,
 And the veriest pullets seemed walking on springs,
 As they joined in the minstrelsy.

"Now John, now John! come tell me", she said,
 "What the meaning of this can be,
 When the bantam cock 'gan scraping his wing
 How a dozen of pullets would around him cling,
 And crow with such wonderful glee"!

"*Leap-Year*, my Lady", and John made a bow,
 "In accordance with Nature's Laws,
 There's not a maiden in all the land
 Needs blush to extend in wedlock her hand,
 Not even Miss Jane of the Shaws".

"Indeed"! quoth the lady, and she muttered the while;
 "Come May-Day I'm just thirty-three;
 You'll saddle the grey, John, by break of day,—
 Yourself on the back—I'll have something to say
 To the young laird of Ochiltree".

John made a low bow, as in duty bound,
 But he looked so sagaciously,
 That his lady retired with a sigh and a moan,
 And she wished, more than once, that her serving-man, John,
 Had been laird of Ochiltree.

Now John and his lady had both left the Shaws,
 Ere the sun was an hour i' the lift,
 Five miles of a moor they accomplished, when John
 Gave the hint to the lady, in an audible tone,
 He could make out her ladyship's *drift*.

But a banner was seen on the old castle walls,
 And there were sounds of some revelry :
 Ere John could announce that Miss Jane of the Shaws
 Had come, in accordance with Nature's Laws,
 To confer with young Ochiltree.

The young laird appeared, with a blooming young bride,
 For a blooming young bride had he ;
 And both took it kind that Miss Jane of the Shaws
 Had come, in accordance with Nature's Laws,
 To proffer them courtesy.

Miss Jane looked behind her, but John looked before,
 As a tear seemed to start from her e'e ;
 "Oh, John, take my hand, for the fetlock band
 Has entrapped my train, and I cannot withstand
 Such a sight's this at Ochiltree".

John spread out his arms, and the lady fell in,
 With a sigh and a sob fell she ;
 But John was a stout and a vigorous man,
 And the cause and effect he could readily scan,
 For a sensible man was he.

He bore her off softly, and whispered her low,
 With a look, and a sigh, and a *pause* ;
 "You have proffered your hand in the wedlock band ;
 Such a look and an offer, how can I withstand ?
 'Twould be against Nature's Laws".

A wedding was held at fair Ochiltree,
 And another was held at the Shaws ;
 While the young men and maidens have made up their mind,
 That whatever seems wrong must be right in its kind,
 And according to Nature's Laws.

This we take to be John's high-water mark as a poet, and in spite of occasional metrical defects is a bit of genuine pleasantry closely approaching the humorous. His "Murderer's Last Dream", "Euphemia, or the Libertine's Victim", "The Fatal Debauch", and some others are in his favourite high-pitched key, strongly prosy, and written with the express purpose of pointing a moral,—an end the author ever had in view in all he did, and which grew more pronounced with advancing years.

After his retirement from the Post-Office he resumed his calling of shoemaker—a done trade even then—and had con-

siderable difficulty in keeping the wolf from the door. His family had all grown up and were scattered, some here some there, and with quite enough to do for themselves had little to give towards the maintenance of their father. A few citizens interested in the old man's welfare approached the Town Council, who granted him a small annuity, but he did not live to enjoy it beyond the first six months, for he died 31st December, 1865.

We have often thought how different the man must have appeared to those who knew him in the flesh than he does to those who become acquainted with him through his autobiography and writings. To the former he was known as a man of few airs, unassuming to a fault, communicative, happy and contented. To the latter he seems a man of considerable vanity—a kind of local Admirable Crichton, at least in his own eyes—blessed with no small share of cheek and self-sufficiency. We need not add that the former is the true character of the man, and that he appeared the latter only on paper, and through the distorting medium of a faulty style. He was fairly well read on many subjects, had little appreciation of Nature, but found great attraction in the problem of life, and in morals, and was, moreover, a keen observer of whatever was going on around him.