

J O H N M I T C H E L L.

AMONG the smaller poetasters of his generation there are few if any, who can show a record so marked by intelligence, perseverance, and success in the battle of life as JOHN MITCHELL. Born in 1807, and brought up in the greatest privation, he was sent at an early age as an apprentice to the shoemaking trade, after the luxury of six months' schooling. Awakening soon to

the state of ignorance he was in, and burning with a desire for knowledge, born of the discussions of the workshop, he learned to read, through the assistance of some of his shopmates. Once started, Mitchell was not the kind of man who would soon become fixed; study of one kind or another absorbed all his bye-hours, and every year found him moving onwards in self-culture. When in his twentieth year—and just on the eve of his marriage—he met with an accident which cost him the loss of a leg. He struggled on at his trade for ten or eleven years after this, but had much difficulty in making ends meet, for wages were small and his family was large and increasing. He, like many of his craft, was a keen politician, and soon became known to a pretty large circle of citizens as an able exponent of the Radicalism of Bentham. He had also before this made his *début* in literature, having written a tale which appeared in the pages of Johnstone's *Edinburgh Magazine*, and was reprinted in his volume of poems in 1840. With the advent of Chartism about 1837-8 he came prominently into public notice, and eventually threw himself into that movement with all the ardour of his earnest and enthusiastic temperament. In 1838 he left the shoemaker's bench to become a bookseller and newsagent, having opened a shop in Queen Street under the patronage of the temperance and radical reformers of the town. When the split between the Moral and Physical Force Chartists came about, Mitchell became the recognised leader of the former section, and carried on, on platform and in press, an able and persistent advocacy of both Chartism and Total Abstinence. In 1840 he published a small volume of poems, "Radical Rhymes", which went through two editions, and in 1842, a small collection of lyrics under the title of "The Wreath of Temperance". About this time there was considerable talk about starting a newspaper in Aberdeen, in the interest of the Radical and dissenting party; and in 1843 *The Aberdeen Review*, under the editorship of Mitchell, was issued from Mackay's printing office, 61 Broad Street. Its career was short, as also was Mitchell's connection with it; for though, after Mackay's death, he bought over the whole concern, and had thus in five years risen from the shoemaker's bench to be editor and proprietor of a newspaper, yet the

strain which such uphill work put upon him, was more than a frame, never very robust, could bear, and resulted in a complete break-down of his health. He died after a short illness on 10th March, 1845, in the 38th year of his age.

His little volume of "Poems, Radical Rhymes, Tales, &c.", was dedicated to Ebenezer Elliot, and contains the outpourings of a heart fired with an enthusiasm for popular liberty such as one might reasonably expect to find in a young politician of the advanced type to which he belonged. With the exception of "The Patriot Martyrs" and a bit of dramatic dialogue, "The Vision of Famine", written in blank verse—or rather prose cut into the appearance of blank verse—his pieces have enough of poetic grace to place them above mediocrity and give indications of powers which, had he reached the mellowing period of life, might have achieved something of more permanent merit than fiery rhapsodies on "The Death-Tax", "The League of Crime", "The Charter", and such like, which he indulged in. In a poem addressed to Elliot, we have probably the best sample of his political rhymes:—

Hail, patriot bard ! at freedom's call,
Justice and truth have strung thy lyre ;
At whose dread sound shall tyrants fall,
Scathed by the lightning of thy ire !

The spoilers of our land shall feel
And tremble at thy matchless might ;
Assail their craven hearts of steel—
Be strong, and heaven defend the right.

On, Elliot ! in thy bright career
Unmasked the titled locust band,
Till each oppressor, pale with fear,
Lie prostrate 'neath thy burning brand.

On, Elliot ! in thy giant power,
Tried friend of injured man thou art ;
And far, far distant be the hour
When death shall still thy manly heart.

On, Elliot ! millions spread thy fame !
The victor's wreath shall crown thy toil !
Honour and blessing to thy name !
Best patriot of our bread-taxed isle,

Some of his songs, like "My Nannie's blue e'e", "Mary Maclean", and "My ain Native Glen", are well adapted to singing purposes, and certainly indicate the lines on which the author might have made something of his lyrical gift, had he not been carried away by the fervour of his political sentiments. But such was not to be the case—and the result is that his volume is, as a whole, very uninteresting, except as an example of the tall talk and unmeasured abuse of opponents which then, as now, passed muster with a large class for political wisdom and ability.