

PETER STILL, JUNIOR.

FEW who followed the remains of the author of "The Cottar's Sunday" to the grave on that bleak March day of 1848 would have guessed, had they guessed at all, that the little chief mourner, his eldest boy, then barely over twelve years old, had any other career before him save a similar one of toil and drudgery to that which his father had just laid down. Young as he was, he had already started the life of servitude, earning his own penny-fee away from the parental roof, and had shown signs of an inborn pluck and determination which augured well for his future career. If his father had not much of world's wealth to bequeath him, the friends he had secured among men of literary tastes, were exactly of the kind which would not see those he had left behind, struggle unaided in the battle of life. So it eventually came about that young Peter was the one selected out of the family to receive that educational equipment, the lack of which his father had felt so much, and to which the boy had already shown decided leanings. Through the influence of Principal Jack he was gifted a bursary at Fordyce Academy, tenable for five years ;

but so rapidly did he advance in his studies there, that at the end of three years time he was ready to enter the University. One year had to be let slip ere a presentation bursary became vacant, but it was just so much time lost, for the position he took in the competition would have entitled him to one of the open bursaries, of exactly equivalent value to the one to which he was presented. During his college career poetry began to occupy most of his spare time; for, although he always stood above the average in the more special studies of his class, there can be little doubt that he was more intent on the formation of the literary character in him, than of the scholar pure and simple. That poesy should have had peculiar charms for him was not to be wondered at—he was cradled and nursed in song—or as he puts it himself:—

. . . born in poesy, by the Muses fed,  
And through my childhood by a poet led.

He began to rhyme early, but the first verses that we are acquainted with, of any worth, which made their way into public print, appeared in our local papers, while as a student he lived at Orchard Cottage, Old Aberdeen. He was also for some time a contributor in prose and verse to the *Scottish Journal* and other periodicals of the day. After closing his college career he entered the Divinity Hall, but his health, never of a very robust type, gave way, and with great reluctance he had to give up hope of the ministry, and turn his attention to something less trying to his frail health. Fortunately, the tutorship in a gentleman's family on Deeside was offered to and accepted by him, and in a short time he recruited strength sufficiently to open a school at Inchmarlo. Here he probably spent the happiest days of his life—got married in 1858—wrote some of his best verses—and latterly collected the whole of his poems for publication.

His little volume of "Lays and Lyrics" appeared in May, 1859, and bore on the face of it a culture, a literary and poetic merit, seldom found in what is called provincial poetry. Some of the local newspapers spoke of it very favourably; but as time passed on, its complete failure to catch the public eye became very manifest. The greater part of the impression lay on the publisher's shelves, involving the unlucky author in no small

pecuniary loss. Keenly sensitive, the fate of his first-born cut him to the quick, and almost soured him for ever against poetry. We have often asked ourselves the question—Is there anything in his poetry which would account in any measure for the apathy with which it was received? and we think there is. In so far as structure, rhythm, selection of language, appropriateness of imagery, and all things pertinent to poetry which culture can achieve, his work is excellent. The fire and spirit which he frequently infused into his numbers—yea, the tenderness and pathos which dwell in many of his lines—are unmistakable marks that his spirit was cast in a true poetic mould. But all these things seem to have been forgotten when once it was seen that he had modelled his style frequently on Macaulay, sometimes on Hemans, and sometimes probably on Poe; and the general conclusion was jumped at that he was an imitator, a second-hand reflector of poets then in considerable popularity. Few can peruse his volume without feeling that it would not be difficult to make a kind of justification for this verdict, though we think he has never got so fair a hearing, as he is justly entitled to, on his own personal poetic merits. We have always thought that Mr. Still appears to most advantage in those sweet little lyrics which he grouped under the title “Occasional Pieces”, rather than in such lengthy poems as “The Death of Leonidas”, “Complaint of Meliades”, and “Glencoe”, which occupy the first part of his volume. As an example we can quote nothing better than “Our Home among the Hills”, written shortly after his marriage, and quite characteristic of the poet in his brightest mood:—

OUR HOME AMONG THE HILLS.

’Tis a faëry spot—’tis a wild sweet glen,  
 And the Dee goes dancing by,  
 And the stars at even beyond our ken,  
 On the hill-tops seem to lie.  
 They smile so soft, and they shine so fair,  
 That the heart with their influence fills—  
 ’Tis a magical sweetness that comes to us here,  
 In our home among the hills.

'Tis a glorious dell—'tis a grand old land,  
 With its ridges of mountains blue ;  
 They rise all round, like a brother band,  
 All clad in their azure hue.  
 They rise to the clouds—to the sweet blue skies—  
 Dark source of foaming rills,  
 And they bind us now, with stronger ties,  
 To our home among the hills.

The ocean old has its beauties soft,  
 When it trembles beneath the tinge,  
 That reflected comes from the clouds aloft,  
 With the glow in their golden fringe ;  
 Or, when beneath the clear lone stars,  
 Its bosom to rest it stills ;  
 But, ah, its storm the peace never mars,  
 Of our home among the hills.

Dark-heaving afar to the sky's blue edge,  
 The ocean hath grandeur wild,  
 When winds their strife on its bosom wage,  
 And its waters are upward piled ;  
 I own them all, and his charms I love,  
 And my soul to their power oft thrills,  
 But they want all the charms that my bosom move  
 In our home among the hills.

The dark green pines—the mountains blue—  
 The birch's weeping bough,  
 The heathy slope's rich vermil hue,  
 And the tints of the valleys low.  
 The evening song in the leafy grove,  
 The music that each spray fills,  
 It wants them all—and it wants the love  
 Of our home among the hills.

It hath beauties grand—hath our mountain home,  
 The thunders waxing roar,  
 When the dense clouds gathering upwards come,  
 Round the far off summits hoar.  
 And the lightnings flash on the mountain's brow,  
 And foam the swollen rills,  
 Till the hills seem each to the storm to bow,  
 Round our home among the hills.

The minstrel moon, from her throne so soft,  
 Looks down so sweet from above ;  
 And her every beam that glides from aloft  
 Brings breathings of deepest love ;

And she glows so bright on the tall old pines  
 That wave o'er the foaming rills—  
 Not softer her beam than the light of love  
 In our home among the hills.

The river sings to us songs of love,  
 And the breezes sigh again  
 Its music back in their boughs above  
 Where they lace their leafy chain :  
 They seem to speak a prophetic song  
 Of love which our life fulfils—  
 'Tis a power so soft that they waft along  
 To our home among the hills.

We love our home !—'tis a dear, dear spot—  
 'Tis a haven of peace and light ;  
 And never, ah ! never, shall be forgot  
 Nor suffer a chilling blight.  
 Would you ask the charm, so sweet and dear,  
 That chases away our ills ?  
 Ha ! what but love could bring such cheer  
 To our home among the hills !

As we have already said, he rarely touched the lyre, in his after life, although his pen was seldom idle in other directions when he had time to spare. In 1861 he was offered and accepted the Rectorship of the Peterhead Academy, an institution then at a low ebb of efficiency, and he entered into the scholastic work there with such energy and ability that in a very short time its reputation as a high class seminary was second to none in the north. He never was a man who spared himself when duty called, and what with the hard work of his regular appointment, supplemented by the drudgery of private teaching which grew upon him from year to year, his health again gave way, and in the autumn of 1868 he was compelled to resign his post. A presentation was made to him on that occasion by friends of the institution and parents of pupils, as a mark of their respect for his high qualities as a teacher and a man. He retired to his home and a lingering death-bed ; and closed a short but highly useful career on 9th February, 1869.