

WILLIAM KNIGHT.

A MAN of excellent parts, a scholar, a philosopher in a way, a genius also in a way, but—as was said of one of our giants—poor Coleridge—in all, palsied by a total want of moral strength : such was WILLIAM KNIGHT, linguist, poet, and shoemaker. In glancing at the life of our present subject, there is no need to read a homily on the often-proved madness of a man of talent or genius thinking himself above or beyond those laws of conduct which bring prosperity and happiness to ordinary mortals. Eccentricity and unconventionalism are defects of character in any man ; and depraved habits, even in a man of

genius, arise either from innate wickedness or from weakness of will. The latter was the curse of Knight; for no mortal ever lived who was more alive to his faults, and more helpless to amend them.

His career—from his birth near Portgordon in 1825 until his death in Dundee Infirmary in 1866—was as erratic as any recorded, and, which is perhaps well, will never be fully known in all its saddening details. The illegitimate son of an Aberdeenshire laird, he received a good elementary education at the Parish School of Keith, and showed a wonderful precocity in tackling philosophical and political enigmas at an age when healthy youth naturally seeks an outlet for its exuberance in outdoor sports. He settled with his mother in Aberdeen about 1843, and, before he had formed any definite scheme of life, was attracted to the political discussions of certain clubs or coteries of working men which were at that time in active operation in the town. The bright youth soon became a favourite with these horny-handed, hard-headed philosophers and politicians. It was gratifying to his natural vanity to be looked up to as an oracle by earnest men so much his seniors; and as these discussions generally generated a drought, it is not to be wondered at if the disputants frequently got intoxicated with something more potent than the exuberance of their own verbosity. We cannot help thinking that here Knight contracted those habits of intemperance which wrecked his life.

Shoemakers' workshops, before the advent of the factory system, were veritable debating societies, even more so than the weaving-shops, described in a former paper. The work of the shoemaker was more conducive to continuous talk than that of the weaver, who, however, had the advantage of intervals for thought which the former had not, and perhaps never missed. To these shops Knight became a frequent visitor, and after a time, having picked up, by mere observation, a certain knowledge of the craft of Crispin, he became by a sort of brevet warrant a kind of shoemaker. He had a good deal of the universal genius in the use of tools, and would have as readily picked up a smattering of any other handicraft as he did that of the shoemaker. He thus became one of themselves, and could take part in their discussions with the extra freedom of

a shopmate with a stool of his own—a privilege he perhaps valued as much as he did the small wages he was now able to earn. The following sketch of such a workshop as Knight was now earning his bread in, and studying crude philosophy, and which was his ultimate shift in several critical periods of his career, is neatly drawn:—

A garret hie, whase winnock faced the sky,
 Contain'd oursels and ither three forbye ;
 A' chatty chiels, and neither dauk nor scaur,
 Wha ilka day maintain'd a wordy war
 On kittle subjects that were new to me,
 The head or tail o' no that guid to see ;
 On kings and kingdoms, statesmen, war, and peace ;
 Religion, morals, and the human race ;
 The Nation's income, and the Crown's expense,
 And weigh'd the whole wi' guid rough common sense.

Visions of something higher than a shoemaker's stool appear soon to have filled his thoughts ; plans were formed for obtaining a classical education, and were soon put into execution. "I can surely", he said, "save as muckle as will tak' me to St. Andrews, and, if I canna dae that, I can tak' a piece in my pouch and tramp it". Tramp it he did, entered the bursary competition, was successful, and, though the amount of the scholarship was small, with what he could earn by private teaching and occasional shoemaking, he managed to tide over three sessions, though he seems not to have formed a very high opinion of the advantages to be derived from academic training. This was certainly the most heroic episode of his checkered life. He soon after turned up at Aberdeen, and found fitful employment in lawyers' offices, and for a short time with an optician, where his scientific tastes and aptitude with tools promised a measure of success. But something always happened, and the unfailing resource—the shoemaker's stool—was always a harbour of refuge to him. True, he had often to wander north and south—from Banff to Edinburgh—for even that employment, but it was always something to fall back on. Let it not be supposed that amid all these ups and downs, however, his mental acquirements were allowed to dwindle: his hunger for knowledge was too great to be dulled by adversity or vicissitude. The following extract shows his industry in

this respect, and affords an interesting glance at the character of the man:—

Will it be interesting to you to know that I now believe myself master of German, and French, and Latin? have commenced the study of Hebrew, resumed my study of Greek, and can smatter away in Italian? What next? Surely a day will come when these acquirements will be useful. At all events, come or no, the study of these things is a pleasure worth pursuing. And I am vexed and angry at the fool who duns into my ears the eternal "O' what use?" while he, perhaps, is the same in everything as his acquaintances knew him a dozen years ago. Without egotism—and I do possess my share—I declare that I am the only one of all my acquaintance who has enjoyed life in reality, and the main support of my idiosyncrasy is, that when others, trusting to their mental acquirements, have overlooked the more humble, though more necessary duties of living, and thereby starved, I have been ever ready to seize hold of a hammer or an awl, and live in spite of fate; and keep any acquirements, what kind soever they are, to myself for my enjoyment, or to my friend for edification.

There is a self-apologetic, if not self-deluding, strain in the above, as if he would fain find some reason or excuse which would suffice to explain to his friend, perhaps to himself, his failure in life, but he evades, maybe unwittingly, the true cause of that failure. Equipped as he was with the above-mentioned acquirements, to which are to be added a good knowledge of natural science, general literature, and accomplishments like music, with extraordinary mechanical skill, few men have been better fitted out to command success in life, *ceteris paribus* Knight, however, drifted helplessly, seldom got his nose above the lapstone, and when, at the age of forty-two, he died in Dundee Infirmary, in August, 1866, he must have been as conscious as his friends were that life with him had been a sad failure.

Three years after Knight's death, "Auld Yule, and other Poems, by William Knight, with an Introductory Essay by the Rev. George Gilfillan, and Recollections of the Author's Life" (by Mr. William Lindsay) appeared. The introductory essay is for the most part *à propos de bottes*, like many of the reverend critic's trumpeting; the biographical notice is sympathetic and as complete as, under the circumstances, could be expected; but the collection of "poems" would have lost nothing by a more severe weeding. Writing verses, we have a strong conviction, would not have been Knight's speciality had the whole

of his powers got fair play, and we are sure that, had he been spared to superintend the publication of the volume, many of the trashy verses which swell its bulk would have been thrown aside. The title piece, "Auld Yule", characterised by Gilfillan as "a long, sober, and chastened 'Jolly Beggars', without the rant, jollity, or daring imagination, or wild humour of that extraordinary production, but equally true to the characters and scenes described", is built on familiar lines. The scene—

Within a house, midway between
The Spital and New Aberdeen,
Braw lads and lasses did convene,
A goodly thrang.
A blither core was never seen,
At dance or sang.

The merrymaking is sketched with much spirit, though it is rather too much to keep it up for two nights. The characters introduced are natural types, and the songs and stories go in clinking rhymes. The language is direct, and even sometimes vulgar, though at the same time quite in keeping with the types of character introduced, with whom the plush of speech would have been unnatural. The best part of it is "The Stranger's Tale", which is largely autobiographical. Knight had a keen eye, and could sketch the various characters he came in contact with to the life, though he never attempts analysis of the mental twists which go to the formation of pronounced character. Keeping in mind the habits of the writer, it will be allowed that the following apology must have come from his heart:—

Yet dinna hasty blame,
When claes grow tattered, minds sune grow the same ;
The chiel wha damns you in a moleskin weed,
Will bless in braid claith, or I'll lose my head ;
And mony a ane wham dress mak's angel fair,
In rags wad play the devil to a hair.
Amang that core wha sat aroun' their head,
There were whase hearts were ne'er to honour dead,
But poortith garr'd them lend their lugs to hear
The pride o' well-filled virtue made a jeer,
And Providence, there viewed wi' partial sklent,
Held up to merriment and foul comment ;
And, when they weighed their ain puir hapless state
Wi' ithers' routh o' haith, their hearts grew great,

Then in the bowl their waes they socht to droun,
 Till each fleeced bannet turned a gowden croun ;
 And could ye blame them, when I tell ye true,
 Their backs were bare and wames richt seldom fu'.

The whole of this poem teems with like simple, natural sketches, drawn with great truthfulness, while occasionally a higher level is reached, as in the following lines :—

Sweet April suns had green'd the fields ance mair,
 And mony a flow'ret's fragrance filled the air ;
 The lav'rock sang, the burns outgush'd wi' glee,
 And wanton trouts pursued the sportive flee :
 But Summer's sheen the heart wi' sadness fills
 O' him that's born and nurs'd amang the hills,
 Whom fell necessity compels to won
 In reeky touns, and never see the sun,
 Save when some friendly cranny lets a ray
 Gang strugglin' in, to tell him it is day ;
 Or when, at eve, some neighbourin' lang lum head
 Shaws him a gleam o' melancholy red.

One of the best of the miscellaneous poems from a certain point of view is the "Visit to Granny", a specimen of auld Scotch wife lately extinct, and so unknown in the flesh to the rising generation. Many, however, will remember the interesting genus who believed as firmly in "death warnings", "elf shots", "fairies", "gaists", "bogles", and a personal, visible "deil" as they did in their Bibles. Here are some of "granny's" experiences :—

Mony a fearfu' thing, I wat, I've heard,
 An' mony a gaist and bogle hae I seen,
 An' water kelpie, splashin' thro' the ford,
 Or howlin' roun' the brig, wi' eldritch scream.

* * * * *

'Tis saxty years noo, come the month o' May,
 Sin' I gat warnin' o' a neiper's death ;
 An' aye sin' syne I kent whan folks war fey,
 By mony a sign forbye the bodie's wraith.

* * * * *

And ance upon a cauldribe, snawy nicht,
 As I was sittin' by the fauld dyke side,
 I turn'd to see gif a' my beasts war richt,
 An' fand an elf-dart stickin' i' my plaid.

Lang did I keep it as a powerfu' charm
 Against the wiles o' thir mischancy faes;
 For they can never dae a body harm
 As lang's they carry ane about their claes.

* * * * *

The nicht afore auld Broomies dee'd, I heard,
 Upo' the dresser there, a heavy drap;
 I raise, an' lookit furth, for I was fear'd
 The rain was comin' thro' the riggin' crap.

But whan I lookit, quiet was the nicht—
 Ye wadna heard the flaffer o' a bird;
 The lift was fu' o' starnies shimmerin' bricht,
 An' nae a spark o' weet had touch'd the yird.

Neist day the wricht frae Keith, auld Tammas Bain,
 Cam' in tae rest him, gaun tae Broomie's toun;
 An' put the streekin' buird jist up agen
 The dresser en', whaur I had heard the soun'.

The whole of this sketch is delightfully life-like, and preserves a type, the records of which are unfortunately too scanty. Knight's songs, which compose a goodly part of the volume, are neither better nor worse than the shoals of similar effusions which find their way into the coveted corner of provincial newspapers. They go trippingly, and show a correct ear; some are sweet, simple, and natural, others are humorous, and lots are trashy. The following is a fair sample, and withal philosophical:—

Thro' a' the ups an' douns o' life,
 I'm happy an' content;
 I please mysel', an' gratefu' am
 For a' the gude that's sent.

But wad ye ken the way, my frien',
 This kittle mark tae hit--
 If the warld disna gang wi' you,
 Ye just maun gang wi' it.

Tho' dainties dinna crown my board,
 Yet I hae meat an' claith;
 He's ill tae please wha grieves for mair,
 I'se freely gie my aith.

* * * * *

My honest frien', noo dinna gloom,
 Tho' poortith be yer lot;
 There's wale o' happiness, believe,
 Aneth the hamespun coat.

Tak' my advice, it's good to use,
 An' dinna drumlie sit;
 If the world disna gang wi' you,
 Get up, an' gang wi' it.

In an "Ode to the Stars" he evinces a touch of mysticism which was characteristic; for, though most of his published verses are direct and simple in both thought and language, there was often about the thoughts of the man himself a vagueness or mystery which it is the compensation of small minds to want:—

What are ye, O, ye lovely things,
 That nightly vigils keep;
 And sail, so calm and beautiful,
 Thro' ether's boundless deep;
 Sparkling like studs of silver bright,
 Or diamonds on the brow of night?

What are ye? but in vain I ask
 Philosophy to tell;
 Her eagle eye grows dim, and fails
 Your secret to unveil;
 And daring Fancy dreads to fly
 Across the strange immensity.

Yet have I stood beneath the arch
 Of yonder teeming night,
 And gazed upon ye, till my soul
 Expanded with delight,
 And from adown the viewless wire,
 Caught sparks of Heaven's electric fire:

And bursting from this mortal shell,
 Away from earth I flew;
 And with ethereal spirits skimm'd
 The fields of sapphire blue;
 Fresh beauties opening on the sight,
 As chaste as morning's roseate light.

'Twas but a dream : I'm still on earth,
 And every crystal sphere
 Is hanging in th' eternal halls,
 As undisturbed and clear
 As when with loud acclaim they sung
 That morn when earth first balanc'd hung.

But yet from earth our thoughts may rise
 To your sublime abodes ;
 And bring us blessed dreams from thence,
 By world-unknown roads,
 To warm afresh with kindling glow
 Our numbèd hearts that lag below.

And sure there is such pathway made
 For happy dreams between ;
 Altho' to us who travel here,
 That pathway lies unseen ;
 Yea, spirits of the earth and sky
 Are mingling there incessantly.

Utterly inadequate as are the published remains of Knight to show the possibilities that were inherent in him, we can only say with Gilfillan that "the productions he has left are enough to show a man of very considerable natural powers of observation, and minute, faithful, limning—to excite grief on account of his misfortunes and failings—and to suggest the nobler proofs of genius he might have given, had his life been spent better, and been further prolonged".