

W I L L I A M S H E L L E Y .

THE stir and hubbub consequent on the outbreak of the Crimean War, if it did not altogether silence our local poets, at least so far drowned their melodies that nothing but the merest chirpings and twitterings were heard from time to time in the places where our "Linties" were wont to warble longest and loudest. After this lull, one of the earliest who came to the front was WILLIAM SHELLEY, then known as William Fisher, who, under the pseudonym "S. Sherif", inaugurated a long series of poetic contributions to the *Herald's* columns by the

publication of a song "Bonny Lizzie Livingstone", in September, 1855. Those who knew the man only in his later years, so quiet, shy, and retiring, would never have imagined that he had done other than moved from home to office, and from office to home, all his life; so quietly did he glide along the grooves of duty as police-office clerk for fully twenty-five years. At all times difficult of approach, except to the chosen few who had broken through the chill of first impressions—with a considerable dash of what seemed pride, but which was in reality a habit of taciturnity which gradually disappeared as acquaintance became more intimate—those who finally reached the heart of the man found him kindly and warm, but dominated by a nature so peculiarly sensitive, so storm-ridden by gusts of impulse and even of passion, that one was occasionally apt to wonder how some of the tenderlings in "Flowers by the Wayside" ever came to be thrown out of such a volcano. The relation of the man to his poetry was to many a curious problem—explainable in great measure through inherited disposition, the influence of the extraordinary life he had lived, and the persistence in idealization which grew upon him with advancing years. The life he lived was one thing, the poetry he wrote quite another thing. For, just as Hood has been said to have written his most humorous verses when plunged in despondency almost to madness, so William Shelley, out of the depths of poverty and misery, sang of the heroism of labour, of love, and sweet contentment, with as loud a ring, with as tender a note, and as cheering a voice, as if he had been a very favourite of fortune, and sang from pure gladness of heart. Thus it came about that poetry was ultimately to him the great solace of his life—the airy sphere in which he sought to realise what he had ceased to hope for in reality. To him the ideal was no antithesis to the real: but the desire "to dream his sorrows down" did not come to him in full flood till after middle life, when, from an experience more varied and romantic than ever perhaps fell to the lot of any of our local bards, he had reaped a harvest of sorrows, enough to sadden if not to sour the most optimistic of mortals.

William Shelley was the eldest son and third child of a family of five, which Sarah Shelley, a domestic servant

belonging to Great Barr, South Staffordshire, bore to Isaiah Danks, a wealthy manufacturer of hinges and coach springs at Wednesbury. The nature of the connection between his parents was never sufficiently made clear, but from what transpired in after life it appeared to have been founded on an ardent mutual attachment, and equally mutual prejudice against the fetters of legalised wedlock. William was born at Marylebone, London, where his parents lived, on 24th January, 1816; but was, on the advent of another son, in 1818, handed over to the care of his maternal grandparents, peasants at Handsworth. Some years after this, the mother, with two young sons, came down from London, and the whole family, including the grandparents, removed to Birmingham, where they all lived together, supported by the father. His childhood was happy; he was particularly attached to his grandparents, and his immediately elder sister, Annie; but, very soon after the removal to Birmingham, he began to learn something of the fits of love and harshness which was peculiar to his mother. He was sent to school, made considerable progress, and promised to turn out an apt scholar, when the sudden death of his father upset all the family plans. The wealth of Isaiah Danks was considerable; he bequeathed £30,000, besides his business, to his three nephews; but there appeared to have been no provision made for Sarah Shelley and her family, although it ultimately came about that each of the children received £100 when they came of age—less some money advanced to the mother when under very necessitous circumstances. The immediate prospect for the Fishers (the name under which the family was reared) was very uninviting. The mother for some time wrought in the fields of a market gardener; the eldest girl went into service; and William, at the age of eleven, got employment in the shop of an engraver and letter-cutter. His master, a young man, did not succeed,—soon gave up business, and emigrated, and the boy was sent here and there to various trades, but the invariable demand of a premium before entering on an apprenticeship proved an insuperable barrier to his ever getting fixed. The circumstances of the family, his own inability to find steady work, and the unreasoning harshness which seemed

growing in his mother's treatment of him, developed a careless, unsettled, dissatisfied spirit in him, which bade fair to wreck him at the outset of life. He had inherited much of his mother's impulsive headstrong nature—was silent, dogged, stubborn under reproof, and, when that reproof was unmerited, it helped to confirm rather than dispel the inborn dourness of his nature. Throughout life he had to complain of people misjudging him, because of the surface appearances, which belied the inner man, just as in a measure it had belied the boy. His was a difficult nature to read, and his mother was not discriminating enough to understand such a nature and train it successfully. Like most weak natures her emotions or passions were all powerful for the time being, and could brook no opposition. At last, William resolved to run away from home, and, if possible, get to sea. It was accordingly done. One Sunday morning, without a penny in his pocket, or a crust of bread in his possession—with nothing save the clothes on his back—this youngster of thirteen years bade good-bye to Birmingham, and turned his face towards London. For three months he lived the life of a waif, in beggary and vagrancy; tramped to London, thence to Portsmouth, and other seaports in the south of England; was everywhere pronounced "too young--too little", but, with an obstinacy akin to pluck, persistently kept his head from home. He was picked up at Stockton (having been taken there from London in a collier brig) by an Irish hawker of ballads, songs, and almanacks, and travelled with him through great part of Yorkshire as an assistant; and was at last captured by his sister and a policeman in a common lodging-house near Birmingham. His return home was unlike that of the typical prodigal—there was no fatted calf—but for many a day plenteous taunts about his profligacy and callous nature. Again he got work, this time with a die-sinker and letter-cutter; liked his work well, and began in earnest to cultivate a natural talent he had for drawing. Things went smoothly for a time—but only for a time. A disagreement arose between his mother and employer, anent the terms of his engagement, and, much to his chagrin, he had to leave the place. A caning from his mother, for some alleged misdeed, put the copestone on

his resolve to leave home for ever, and it was quickly done. He borrowed some money, and set out for Bristol. There is no need, however, to follow the outs and ins of the checkered career which he now entered upon, its miseries, its occasional gleams of hope streaking for a moment the wretchedness that was sure to swallow them up. Working as a labourer among gardeners, and at other casual jobs, he tramped the south of England, sailed as an odd hand in a collier ship trading between London and Sunderland, hawked small wares through Wales and the northern counties, sang ballads in the border towns, and finally made a kind of settlement at Alnwick, from whence, as a centre, he pursued the small wares hawking. Here in his seventeenth year he met with Ann Taylor, a young girl who ultimately became his wife, and who exercised a highly beneficial influence in his vagrant career. She spurred him on to fix on some more settled kind of life than he had hitherto led, as she knew well that any hopes of home comforts that might spring from their union depended much on his doing so. He became a labourer on the Duke of Newcastle's estates, and for the first time began to feel the inspiring power of a true-hearted woman raising him to higher views of life. In the erratic vagrancies of his career he had fortunately never shown any tendency to dissoluteness—a love of nature early formed, and a passion for reading, especially poetry, had been ever present with him, and possessed his mind so fully that he was saved from the mental and spiritual degradation which too often accompanies a wandering life. Milton, Burns, and Pope were special favourites with him, and the little pocket volumes of these authors which he had become possessed of in those days, and which he conned in many a queer, unlikely place, he treasured to the last as among his most cherished household gods. Many of the verses which graced his little volume in 1868, and many others that have never seen the light, were first drafted after his acquaintance with Ann Taylor. They were married in 1834, and took up house in Shields. He wrought for the most part as a striker in the iron works—sometimes as a labourer at coal pits—and only when work was at a standstill did he return to the hawking. He occasionally, too, did a little work at engraving and letter-cutting, having made a set

of tools for himself in his spare time. He became a prominent member among the local Oddfellows, holding office for a considerable time in that body, and contributing pretty freely to the poetical corner of their magazine. But despite his brave heart, despite the industry, thrift, and womanly love that smoothed and cheered the rugged uphill road, poverty and misfortune rarely lost their hold on him.

For more than sixteen years he struggled and sang—had frequent glimpses of joy, frequent tastings of happiness—mid the long agonising wringings of grief and misfortunes which beset him behind and before in Shields. At last, he left it with what of family and movables death and duns had left him master of, made temporary settlement at Glasgow, then at Dundee, and finally settled down at Aberdeen in the fall of 1853. He was engaged to work as an engraver and die-sinker for Edward Davis, 3 Market Gallery, at 30s. per week. The engagement ultimately fell through; Davis left Aberdeen, and William Fisher kept on the shop on his own account. The business was small; work came by fits and starts, but his industry and perseverance knew no limits—his pluck was indomitable—and gradually he made the concern pay. He kept no company—he had, indeed, no acquaintances in the town—so as leisure turned up, and domestic matters moved more smoothly, he returned to his old love, poesy, and, as we have said above, his first verses were sent to the *Aberdeen Herald* in 1855. He gradually became known among local men of literary tastes, but formed very few friendships; came prominently into public notice at the Burns' centenary celebration, and soon afterwards was appointed to the situation he so long held, clerk in the Aberdeen Police Office. In the humble haven of rest he thus found, he did not, however, find happiness. He had gradually come to live in a world so completely ideal that the jarrings and bickerings of actual life fretted him to a degree that few could imagine. Domestic and friendly relationships often became strained over trifles, but which viewed through the medium of his mind assumed gigantic importance. The few who knew and understood the man enjoyed his company in a very high degree. He was swathed in poetry from head to heel. His conversation

was full of wisdom, and the jewels of thought which were wont to begem his discourse were frequently as bright as anything he ever uttered in song. For many years a select coterie of intimates were wont to hold a kind of literary symposium on Sunday afternoons at his house in Justice Street, and at these meetings he was always seen at his best. Few of our modern poets had greater charms for him than Gerald Massey, and we remember well his reading of "Babe Christabel", as well as some of the smaller poems which appeared in the same volume, and dilating on the beauties of that work and the extraordinary life of its author in his impassioned style of native, nervous eloquence.

About 1866 he began to bestir himself in collecting, selecting, and retouching his poems for publication in book form; and ultimately "Flowers by the Wayside" appeared, in 1868, under the name of William Shelley, he having about this time dropped the name of Fisher and adopted that of his mother. He was a most painstaking worker. Many pieces, like "The Reamin' Bowl", "My Love of Low Degree", and the majority of those directly referring to Aln side, had been written more than thirty years before, had lain beside him, and was touched and retouched, like all his other pieces, up to the eve of publication. His principal poem, and the one which stands head and shoulders above all that he ever wrote—"Among the Field Flowers"—was written about 1860, and had brought him considerable repute and a few guineas by its appearance in *Good Words* some years after. We remember the nervous flutter he was in about its fate, as month after month elapsed after the dispatch of the manuscript before he heard of it again. Just on the eve of his receiving the favourable reply it brought, he wrote to a friend—"I have not yet received any tidings of the work sent south about which I spoke to you. The matter seems strange, and, for the credit of the cloth, I would fain believe that such treatment is unusual. I have lost all hope in the success of the venture, but deil-may care, for I am quite as independent as I am indignant, and wear no muzzle". It appeared at last, with a special illustration, which, along with the *honorarium* he received, sent him into ecstasies of delight at his good fortune. In 1863 three capital specimens of his

doric verses appeared in *Hedderwick's Miscellany*, a much-esteemed Glasgow periodical, in company with poems by such writers as James Ballantine, David Gray, William Black, James Hedderwick, and other luminaries. These, however, are mere trifles compared to his "Field Flowers". Into this poem he wove, with all the wealth of his poetic endowment, whatever fragments of sweet memories he could glean from the bleak past. They were indeed very few, but he loved them all the more because of that; and by mentally re-living them again and again, dwelling on them, doating on them, he shut out more and more the grim reality of the circumstances into which they had peeped like angel visits. All through life he had a rapturous passion for wild flowers—traceable to the beautiful countryside at Handsworth and Rowton Wells, where his infancy was spent. Many an hour

On rugged heaths, on plots of common land,
Far up steep mountain slopes, and down the lanes
That lead to mill and market, church and school,

he had talked to them as brother to brother, and had felt in their presence somewhat of that feeling which has been said to lie "too deep for tears". Turning to them now, he says:—

Ye darlings, how my life is changed since then!
What bitter sufferings have come to pass
Through rebel waywardness; and how the weeds
Of sin and sloth have stifled my few flowers!
No more dear mother leads me by the hand
To sunny spots where bees grow rich amain;
No more she sings to me where water brooks
Shine bright as virtue's pathway through the world;
She never calls me home at twilight now,
To hold me in the soul-warmth of her love,
And wrap me in her beautiful belief,
And lift me heavenwards, the while her soul
Pleads hopefully—"Oh! Father, make the lad
In goodness resolute, in meekness great!"
I feel her fingers 'mongst my hair no more,
Nor hear her chide my disobedience;
She's gone to rest; and I am grown a man,
But—Heaven help me!—I forget the prayers
She taught me kneeling on our cottage hearth.

No more my sisters, coming home from school,
 Try races with me in the narrow lanes
 That are more beautiful to memory
 Than any gardens that I gaze on now ;
 Their loving-kindness never reaches me ;
 I cannot catch the burthen of their songs,
 I never see them when the sun breaks out,
 Nor feel them near me when the world goes hard.

* * * * *

Lift up your heads for joy, and let me feel
 That 'tis my stubborn wilfulness of heart,
 And not the taint of time on Nature's face,
 That blinds one to the beautiful and pure.
 Unfold your frills, and pour your loveliness,
 As children do their laughter, down my way ;
 All sweetly as ye welcome hopeful morn,
 Speak to my spirit of humility ;
 When ye bow down before the passing gale,
 Show me that patience is Time's conqueror :
 As ye rejoice when rain-clouds pass away,
 Teach me that earnest men may worship God
 While gazing, soul-intent, on Nature's charms,
 And singing merrily to sweeten toil,
 As well as when they kneel before a shrine,
 Or grand cathedral nave prolongs their praise.
 Then shall I understand the lofty thoughts,
 The quiet dreams, and bright imaginings,
 That make men valiant, in the sweet belief
 That human worth is growing in the land,
 While children love the flowers of the field.

The poem from first to last is bejewelled with beautiful and chaste imagery—abounds in fine flashes of nature-life—is rich in the thought and wisdom he had wrung, as it were, from the very depths of bitter experience, and is altogether a piece of genuine poetry. The other poems in the volume are very varied in both subjects and quality—the second and longest, “Wooing in the Woodlands”, being the most unequal of all his larger pieces. Much of it was written in his younger days, when his musings were, relatively speaking, crude and unformed, and the additions he made to it in later years, are easily discernible in the structure of the piece. Of his lyrical work, perhaps the best example in the volume is the poem “Aneth the Roden Tree”—a bit of weird allegory—vague and indefinite in its gruesome-

ness; but, as a work of poetic art, very effective and telling. It has something of an air of antiquity about it, which makes it more akin to our elder minstrels than to the work of a present-day poet. Much could be read into it; we only know that the writer meant it as in a measure typifying one of the heavy and sad family bereavements which he more than once sustained. It opens:—

Sair tewed wi' wark, I laid me down,
 And sloomed aneth the Roden Tree ;
 I had a dream I'll ne'er forget
 Till Mercy's right hand reaches me.
 The sun seemed near about noon height ;
 The wind cam' soufin frae the west,
 And balood round the Roden Tree,
 Like mithers singing bairns tae rest ;
 And whiles it leugh laigh down and sweet,
 Like some dear lassie love possess't.
 * * * * *
 While I seemed fondlin' twa sweet flowers
 That kythed tae me like bairnie's fain
 Behold, a fearsome wark-machine
 Cam' wildly raikin ower the plain ;
 Twa horse abreast were yokit till't,
 The ane was black as howe-o'-night,
 The ither (far the better beast)
 Was clean, and sleek, and spotless white ;
 They mindit me o' Dark Despair,
 And Hope, the darling o' Delight.

After describing the machine, the driver, and the two dames who sat behind him "back-a-back"—

The ane seemed awfu' sib to death,
 Her pockard face was groff as sin ;
 The tither looked as blythesome-like
 As bondage-lass when love draps in ;
 Wi' grief a' guid gaed widdershins,
 While gladness heartened worth to win—

the desolation and destruction which the movement of the machine spread around where he lay, and the "curst and foul pack" which followed in the rut of its track—after describing these with a vividness which makes one's blood tingle—he is awakened by the mention of his name—

. . . . The beasts were gane,
 And when I turned me frae the wa',
 Lo ! Grief sat greetin' piteously,
 While Comfort found nae seat ava,
 The clock was stopped—The blinds were down,
 Our bits o' bairns were hyne awa' !

Few of his poems equal the above in graphic force, its only rival being an unpublished one—at least only parts of it appeared in the local newspapers—"Poverty's Hame-come", a bit of genuine realistic work, which he was wont to look upon as, after "Field Flowers", his best production. It refers to his life at Shields, was sketched in skeleton there, but lay beside him for over thirty years before it assumed its present form. It is a lengthy poem, in three parts, conceived in an easy, airy vein, considerably different from the saddish, thoughtful type of his verses in general. It opens with a description of the little household of a day-darger, at night, while the candle, well down in the socket, was "blinkin' bed-time" to the wearied worker, then enjoying his pipe at the "smokie ingle". A strange foot is heard on the stair, and "Poverty", in the guise of an aged beggar-man, enters the dwelling:—

Fancy some duddy gangrel's picture painted
 Wi' brocked beard and tousie head o' hair,
 And far ben, blinterin' een right weel acquainted
 Wi' ilka twink and smudge o' deil-may-care.
 For lang he hadna kend the guid o' washing ;
 His chafts bore mony furs o' grief and sin ;
 His nose and chin wi' ither aye kept clashing ;
 His in-gaen lips were hackit, blae, and thin,
 And knuckles o' cheek-banes were like to rive the skin.

A fowsome coat hung frae him, "tatter-wollops,"
 Happin' life's thrums, and creishie pocks forby ;
 His "hither-my-dudds" o' breeks, a' clouts and scallops,
 Made corbies thankful for the power to fly ;
 Through divers rents a kind o' sark was keekin',
 As gin it ettled mang the suds to be ;
 Frae twa mismarrowed shoon his taes were seekin'
 And warslin for a place to rest a wee,
 For, sooth, nae tender taes in siclike shoon could 'gree.

Langsyne the carl had been a sturdy billie,
 A gey unchancy chiel to set asteer ;
 Though sair forefoughten now, waeworn, and silly,
 He didna look the least acquaint wi' fear ;
 I read him aff frae bonnet down to bauchals,
 In shorter time than sairs to strike a light ;
 "Auld carl," quoth I, "ye've seen a warl' o' trachals ;"
 "Preserve's" ! cried Nannie, "he's a grousum sight,
 But looks belie the best ; we'll lat him bide th' night".

Then forrit to our hearthstane he cam' steering,
 Though neither o' us bade him tak' a seat ;
 And, wi' a smirk was kind o' meant for sneering,
 Quoth he, "kind sirs, I'm trakit aff my feet."
 He flang his creishie pocks aneath the table,
 And sosst himsel' in Nannie's nursing-chair,
 And looking maisterfu' as he was able,
 Speert gin I had a cutty pipe to spare ;
 "I brak my ain," quoth he, "while staupin' up yer stair".

The goodman, irritated by the jocose familiarity which the intruder began to manifest, threatens him with forcible ejection, but his rising ire is tempered by the wiser councils of his better half.

The wife cried ben the bonny lass
 That sweetened life when first we met ;
 And, shedding back my hair, she said—
 "We aye wrought through the winter yet ;
 Let angry winds rave as they list,
 The darkest cluds ne'er quench the sun,
 They merely hide the ravelled heads
 O' feckless folk that crawl the grun'.

"Let come whatever Dudds can bring,
 While loving kindness warms our nest
 The leme-o'-life shall haud us keen
 To brave the warst as weel's the best.
 Then, dinna be cast down, my man ;
 But light yer pipe, and speak o' spring,
 For a' that hae the grace to thole
 Shall find abundant cause to sing".

How could I stand wi' empty arms,
 Nor fondly clasp her to my heart :
 So womanly she set hersel'
 To strengthen me to play love's part ?

Auld Gruesome at the chimley-cheek
 Eyed us asklent and smudged a wee,
 And mumbled laigh-down till himsel'—
 “Sic twa ! They'll be the death o' me !”

Seed time and hairst hae come and gane,
 Wi' mony changes, foul and fair,
 And still that auld man cruicks his houghs,
 And cracks his jokes in Nannie's chair,
 Her couthy word, and canty sang,
 Whiles heise him like a bird for glee,
 And aye the body's at his best
 When showdin' bairnies on his knee.

The heart within him's deedlin' crouse ;
 Folk tak' him for a bonnet-laird ;
 He sings o' blessings i' the hule
 That justice shall see bravely wared ;
 He seldom throws his beardy mou',
 Nor brings the tears frae tender een ;
 But speeds our thoughts, in laverock flights,
 To better warl's than sin hath seen.

His shorter lyrics and songs proper are, in general, of a hearty and inspiring order, the dignity and worth of honest labour being an oft recurring theme ; while love has, as a matter of course in such things, a fair share of attention at his hands. He acquired considerable facility in the use of our norland doric ; but, even at his best in this line, he fell short of his higher achievements. His sonnets are, for the most part, little poems of subtle grace, well phrased. In later years, having changed considerably his notion of the structure and functions of the sonnet, this form became a very common one with him ; but still his success was not at all proportionate to the labour expended on them, his best ones being still poems of fourteen lines—nothing more.

The excellent reception which his “Flowers” met with in the public press spurred him on, if he indeed needed spurring on, to try his hand in the broader field of prose. He wrote a number of short stories or sketches, into which he wove a number of small poems, but we cannot record of them such a measure of success as he achieved in poetry pure and simple. His only other publication was “Aston Brook”, a poem of

considerable merit, issued at the time of the great Ferry-boat disaster on the Dee, in April, 1876, and the profits from the sale of which were to go as a contribution to the fund which was raised for the benefit of the sufferers. An almost impromptu piece, "Are there any bodies found"? was included in the same pamphlet, more perhaps as a means of connecting the publication with the object of its issue than for any merit it had. "Aston Brook" was one of his most finished poems, and left all the other poetical publications anent the same calamity far far behind. For many years prior to his death, which occurred on the 7th September, 1885, he had made appearances in the poet's corner of our local newspapers under the signature "Flaxdresser", and had been contemplating the publication of another volume of verse, for among his papers were found the whole matter for one, revised and arranged, with even a preface written. Indeed the mass of materials he left behind him is quite astonishing, and evinces a devotion to the muses which might well have absorbed his whole time, and yet we know that other subjects—especially art subjects—were not neglected by him. Besides his talent for poetical composition, he was a very sweet natural singer, a highly skilled workman as an engraver and letter cutter, and had considerable taste as a water colour painter—indeed, many of his drawings which we have seen show an aptitude for that kind of work which, had more favourable circumstances been granted him, would probably have placed his name as high among local artists as his poetic talents have placed it among our Bards of Bon-Accord.