

JAMES HAY BEATTIE.

DR. BEATTIE'S eldest son, James Hay Beattie, whose youthful promise and early death we have already noted, was not only distinguished by his scholastic attainments, but for many years was well known to a small circle of friends as a considerable dabbler in poetry and general literature. Shortly after his death, his father, in order to "amuse away some heavy hours of this sorrow-stricken season," wrote a sketch of his life and character, to which was appended such a selection from his poems, essays, and other literary remains as was deemed worth preserving, and issued it in private to his many friends. Not long after it was deemed advisable to publish the volume for the general public, which was accordingly done in 1794. It is one of the kind of books that nobody cares to take up in a purely critical spirit—it would be a piece of heartless work indeed; not only because the greater part of it never received revision at the author's hand, but one can never get rid of the feeling that, in turning over its pages, we are handling the memorials which a great and a good man has left of a son, who was, indeed, the apple of his eye. Circumstances like these should

never be allowed to sink entirely out of sight in the perusal of such a work, but should help to disarm severity and modify the judgment at every turn.

Of James Hay Beattie's life, which ended in his twenty-second year, there is little or nothing to record beyond those everyday events which make up the home, school, and college career of the average diligent student. He was born at Aberdeen, 6th November, 1768. Inheriting an extremely weak constitution, which debarred him from the rougher sports of boyhood, he very early exhibited a keen and insatiable appetite for books; indeed, so unremitting was his application to class and other studies that his father had frequently to devise means to allure him into out-door and other recreations. He very soon, however, gave up the healthy exercise of fowling for humane reasons, and eschewed dancing because it was incongruous to his habits of thinking and feeling, and betook himself heart and soul to his books. He passed through the University with much distinction, and for some time before his death held the appointment of assistant to his father in the Chair of Logic and Moral Philosophy.

Heredity and early training are well known to determine much in man's life; with James Hay Beattie they determined almost everything; for if one thing is more evident than another in the sketch of his life and writings now before us, it is how completely he was his father's son. The same tastes, the same opinions, the same habits of life which marked the "Minstrel", reappeared in his son, with the little variation which more delicate health and more impressionable temperament were sure to give them. At the father's advice, and as part of his educational training, he began early to occupy his mind with Latin verse making, and numerous examples of translations into that language from Pope, Collins, Gray, and others, are given in his published "Fragments". One of his most ambitious attempts at authorship is a poem "On the Excellence of Christianity", which, though it extends in all to some three hundred lines, is only a series of fragments from which it would be impossible to gather an idea of what it might have become had he been spared to elaborate it. From a foot note, in which he roughly sketches the design he had in view, one would be

led to fear that, had it been carried out, another would have been added to the many laborious, didactic poems we already possess, rich, perhaps, in poetic jewels, but which few have the courage, and still fewer the perseverance, to unearth from their cumbrous mass in which they lie embedded. The poem opens with the following invocation:—

O thou, whate'er thy nature, cause, or name,
 Pure emanation of celestial flame!
 From Shakespear's magick page whose glories roll,
 To melt, alarm, o'erwhelm th' enraptured soul;
 Illumine Pope's keen verse and moral lay;
 Beam in full radiance on the lyre of Gray;
 And, with th' omnipotence of lightning driven,
 Make Milton blaze in all the pomp of heaven!
 If still, bright offspring of ethereal birth,
 Thou lingering deign to cheer the gloom of earth,
 Inspire thy feeble votary's design,
 Exalt the thought, invigorate the line,
 And bid in harmony the numbers flow,
 To check gay Pride, and comfort anxious Woe;
 From Folly's lure the wanderer to entice,
 Who heedless roams the wildering maze of vice;
 And guide his footstep to that silent cell,
 Where Love, Tranquility, and Virtue dwell;
 Whence Contemplation, listening, hears afar
 Ambition, Interest, Pleasure, Passion jar;
 And sees in doubt, in fear, in danger hurl'd
 The dim confusions of a distant world.

He then discourses in somewhat stereotyped phrase on the vanities of life; takes up the theme that

Man's final mansion is not here below;
 His glory springs from goodness, not from show;

and passes on to show man's native excellency in the sublime powers of his immortal nature—contrasts sensualism with spiritualism; touches on the natural state of man; the light revealed from the Cross; compares this latter with the wisdom of the Sages, &c., &c.; his versification in general being good, while the philosophical and religious views and reflections appear pretty much like the father's, only diluted.

We have mentioned already Dr. Beattie's avowed liking for burlesque or facetious verse, and his hobby of indulging in its composition. His son struck the same vein; and although

there is little real humour in any of his productions, yet there is an amount of pleasantry and good-natured banter about them which make them the most readable and enjoyable items in the volume. For whether he is parodying Gray's "Descent of Odin", throwing off a rhymed epistle to a friend, imitating Horace, having a mad-cap fling at "Fashion", or quizzing the "Modern Philosophers", he shows that buoyant, merry, genial side of human nature which, especially in youth, and when regulated with judgment, one always likes to meet. Most of these ludicrous pieces, we are told, were written for the amusement of his father, and were usually thrown off with ease and readiness. An instance of his facility in that line is seen, when, from a passing remark by his father, that modern philosophers and their theories presented an excellent opportunity for some one writing a second part to the ballad "Diogenes surly and proud" (see *The Charmer*, Vol. I. p. 242), he two days after set before him the "Modern Tippling Philosophers" as it now stands in his poems. One of its best verses hits off the typical materialist thus:—

A certain high priest could explain,
 How the soul is but nerve at the most;
 And how Milton had glands in his brain,
 That secreted the Paradise Lost.
 And sure, it is what they deserve,
 Of such theories if I aver it,
 They are not even dictates of nerve,
 But mere muddy suggestions of claret.

Of course Hume came in for a rub along with Priestley, Berkeley, Newton, Hobbes, and the rest of them, although his name is suppressed:—

[David Hume] ate a swinging great dinner,
 And grew every day fatter and fatter;
 And yet the huge hulk of a sinner
 Said there was neither spirit nor matter.
 Now there's no sober man in the nation
 Who such nonsense could write, speak, or think:
 It follows, by fair demonstration,
 That he philosophized in his drink.

In "Fashion—a Dialogue"—on the whole one of his best pieces—the following fable occurs, which we quote in its entirety as a fair example of his easy, humorous rhymes:—

A Tree once in a churchyard grew,
 Some say, an oak, and some, a yew ;
 An elm or walnut, some prefer,
 One ancient *codex* reads, a pear :—
 But that is neither here nor there.
 Two stems must from its root have grown,
 Though afterwards there was but one ;
 For t'other, hewn from parent stock,
 Was made into a weathercock.

How did the village boys admire,
 When first he got a-top the spire !
 But when he saw, so far beneath,
 The woodland, meadow, cornfield, heath,
 Road, river, cottage, hillock, plain,
 He was you cannot think how vain ;
 So vain, indeed, that he design'd
 To turn about the first fair wind,
 And shake in scorn his yellow tongue
 At the old stock from whence he sprung.
 A flurry's long-expected blast
 Enabled him to move at last ;
 When, his head sparkling to the sun,
 He wagg'd a while, and thus begun :—

Fine company I was indeed in !
 Hark ye, old log, is that your breeding ?
 Must a gold weather cock like me
 Pay first respects to a poor tree ?
 In what high splendour am I born here ?
 You grovel in a churchyard corner.
 Me all the parish come to view :
 Pray, do they go to look at you ?
 You stand in dirt, must fall, and burn ;
 I turn, old boy ; mark that—I turn.
 Your shape—enough to frighten Nick !
 Green, like a rusty candlestick !
 My form how smooth ! my skin how yellow !
 Look, demme, what a clever fellow !

The solemn branches heave and sigh,
 Then murmur slowly this reply :—
 If we be clumsy, you be limber ;
 What then ? we both are of one timber.
 Once a plain simple stick, when sold
 You got a name, and you got gold,
 Given by your masters, not your friends,
 To fit you for their private ends.
 What made them raise you to that throne ?

Your interest, coxcomb? no; their own.
 "You turn", you say; we have a notion
 That something regulates the motion.
 You say "men study you"; vain prater,
 They study but your regulator.

Yet, cocky, be of cheer: one finds
 Such failings even in human minds.
 Lord Lighthouse's wavering foppery see:
 A gilded weathercock is he;
 That from the common timber hew'd,
 And set up merely to be view'd,
 About while fashion's light gales veer him,
 Thinks all who look up love or fear him;
 Thinks they admire, who only gaze;
 And that all honour him, who praise.

This fable recalls to mind a story we have heard about a reading of it long ago. The late Dr. Longmuir, when a student, at a reading competition selected this fable, and being through all his long life a bitter opponent of profane language in every form substituted "sirrah" for the genteel "demme" of line 37. This brought down upon his head a volley of vituperation from Dr. Glennie, a relative of Beattie's, who was present. Young Longmuir, ever ready, retorted with an adaptation from Hudibras—

A man reproved, but not convinced,
 Still thinks the same of curses minced.

The occasional occurrence of similar small oaths in young Beattie's humorous verses does not altogether square with that reputed dread of vulgarity, and the corrupting of one's taste, which made him so much dislike Scotch vernacular poetry and Scotch strathspeys. We never, indeed, read the following sentences from his life without the feeling that a considerable amount of priggishness underlies them:—"He was early warned against the use of Scotch words, and other similar improprieties; and his dislike to them was such that he soon learned to avoid them; and, after he grew up, could never endure to read what was written in any of the vulgar dialects of Scotland. He looked at Mr. Allan Ramsay's poems, but did not relish them. Whether the more original strains of Mr. Burns ever came in his way, I do not certainly know!"

That J. H. Beattie's verses should have sunk almost entirely out of public notice, is in some respects a matter for regret; but is nothing more than might have been expected. If readers now-a-days do not find in them the same indications of poetic power visible to his father, yet few can read them without regret that one of such fair promise should have been cut off at the very opening of real life. What, with his fine endowments, he might have turned out, if in the course of events he had been spared and thrown earlier on his own self-reliance, we can but vaguely conjecture; but that he would have been an ornament to society, a power in literature, and a guide to less gifted men, who can doubt, who remembers how early he exhibited those leading traits of character which had made his father the man he was.