

CHAPTER II.

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM'S BIRTH—EDUCATION—APPRENTICED TO THE MASON TRADE—GEORGE DOUGLAS M'GHIE—HUMOROUS MEMORIAL TO MR. LENY OF DALSWINTON—BURNING OF CUNNINGHAM'S LETTERS—FEAR OF FRENCH INVASION—MYSTERIOUS MARKING OF THE HOUSES—DISCOVERED TO BE A HOAX, AND REWARD OFFERED—FIRST EFFORTS IN SONG—MEETING WITH THE ETTRICK SHEPHERD ON QUEENSBERRY HILL—INCIDENT AT ALTRIVE—TRAVELS ON FOOT TO EDINBURGH TO SEE SIR WALTER SCOTT—ATTENDS THE FUNERAL OF BURNS.

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM was born in a cottage near Blackwood House, on the banks of the Nith, in the parish of Keir, Dumfriesshire, on the 7th of December, 1784. The cottage has long since disappeared, and its site is now covered with a gigantic yew, but he who there first became a citizen of the world cannot be forgotten. He was but a child, scarcely two years old, when the family removed from Blackwood to Dalswinton; and, consequently, he always looked upon Kirkmahoe very much as his native parish—where his oldest memories took their rise, his boyish days were spent, his youthful associations formed—where his education was acquired, and his apprenticeship served—where his poetic fancy first burst into song, and the flame of love first kindled in his breast. These, and such as these, constitute home, and make the place where they were experienced the scene of our nativity, though it may not be strictly and literally the true place of our birth. So felt Allan

Cunningham when, in after years, and far away, he sang—

“ Dalswinton hill, Dalswinton holm,
And Nith, thou gentle river,
Rise in my heart, flow in my soul,
And dwell with me for ever!”

Allan, like the elder members of the family, was also trained at a Dame's school, which was of the usual order, and conducted in the village of Quarrelwood by a Mrs. Gray. These schools were not only useful but absolutely necessary in their day, as parochial schools were “few and far between,” but they were not by any means of a high educational character. This, indeed, was not required. Ability to spell one's way through the Bible was considered all that was necessary, and when this was attained, the pupil was sent out to country service, to herd the cows, or nurse the children, till age and strength fitted for higher and weightier duties. Writing was not considered essential, as few parents could “read write,” and letter postage was entirely beyond reach. The Bible was the grand climax, and when a scholar was “once through the Bible,” his education was finished, and he was removed.

At the age of eleven, or rather before he had attained that period, Allan was taken from school, and put under the care of his brother James, resident in Dalswinton village, to learn the trade of a stone-mason, while his physical frame, as may well be imagined, was yet scarcely strong enough for handling the mallet and the chisel with anything like effect. However, in his case the maxim was true, “Learn young, learn fair,” as his

handiwork afterwards proved; and though his education was sadly curtailed as regarded both quantity and quality, yet his insatiable thirst for knowledge induced him in great measure to become his own instructor. At this time he knew nothing of English grammar, which was afterwards to be so necessary in his connection with literature and the press; but he supplied the defect by private study, while experience in reading and writing brought him into the art of what was required for correct composition.

In the evenings, after the labours of the day were over, as well as at the mid-day hour, he read with avidity every book within his reach, listened eagerly to every snatch of old ballad he heard sung, treasured up every story told—his own imagination amply supplying any omission in the narrative, or any failure in the memory of the narrator. As he got into the middle of his teens he began to manifest somewhat of a roving disposition when the stars came out and the moon arose. At kirns, trystes, rockings, foys, bridaleens, weddings, and such like merry-makings, he was always an invited guest, and was sure to be present, for the fun and frolic they afforded, as well as for the opportunity of hearing lilted some old Scottish ditty, or narrated some tradition of the feudal times. But besides this, he was suspected, along with some of his companions, of occasionally playing pranks at the farm-houses in the neighbourhood, to the annoyance of the inmates, though it was never known to their injury either in property or person. Yet, however bold or venturesome in his frolic, he always managed to escape detection.

His chief companion in these days was George Douglas M'Ghie, a youth about his own age, the son of a weaver in Quarrelwood, and engaged in the same occupation as his father. It is necessary to notice him here, from the future reference we shall have occasion to make to him in his correspondence with Allan Cunningham during the greater portion of his life. M'Ghie had very considerable talent, but his education was limited and imperfect, though it was afterwards improved, and it was thought by many in the place, that had circumstances permitted, he would have been more than an equal to his friend Allan, but he early involved himself in the cares of matrimony, and so there was an end to all literary aspirations. He was full of humour, and was always in request when public, social, or charitable petitions were to be drawn up. Besides being considered qualified for the composition of the document, he wrote a beautiful hand, which was an additional inducement to apply for his service. As a specimen of his ability in this way we append the following, premising that the inhabitants of Quarrelwood had long playfully constituted it a burgh, and appointed Magistrates and a Town Council:—

“To James M'Alpine Leny, Esquire of Dalswinton.

“The Petition of the Magistrates, Town Council,
and Freeholders of the Burgh of Quarrelwood,

“Humbly Showeth,

“That your Memorialists cannot contemplate without feelings of just indignation, the reckless manner in which Mr.

Rodan, like the Destroying Angel, has torn down and erased the ancient fabrics of Gothic and Grecian architecture which for time immemorial have been the boast and pride of the Burgh; even the College, which has sent forth men whose names will flourish to immortality on the page of their country's history, has been swept away by this ruthless invader of a Burgh's rights; hence your Memorialists may, with great propriety, be compared to the ancient Jews lamenting over the ruins of Jerusalem. Much, however, as these doings are to be regretted, we beg leave to call your Honour's attention to that which more immediately concerns the preservation of human life.

"Your Memorialists have long viewed with pride a magnificent Ash tree everhanging one of the principal streets and thoroughfares of this ancient and venerable Burgh, which, for stately grandeur and symmetry, might rival the boasted Cedars of Lebanon. Your Memorialists have lately observed, with unfeigned regret, the ravages which time and the many angry storms it has encountered have made on its large and elevated trunk, being literary split into halves, and every blast threatens its total annihilation. Had the funds of the Burgh permitted, your Memorialists would have employed Daniel Hunter, or some modern Archimedes, to have secured it by hoop or screw; but since the Free Church mania has seized a great proportion of the ratepayers the revenues of the Burgh have rapidly declined.

"Your Memorialists, having carefully examined their Charter, find that it gives them no right or control over the growing timber, although standing within the boundaries of the Burgh. Your Memorialists, therefore, humbly solicit that your Honour will either cause the tree in question to be taken down, or otherwise secured, as to your Honour shall seem fit, so that the lives and property of Her Majesty's liege

subjects may in future not be thereby endangered, and your Memorialists, as in duty bound,

“ Shall ever pray.

“ GEO. DOUG. M'GHIE,
“ Burgh Chamberlain.

“ Council Chambers, April, 1844.”

The application of the terms *Gothic and Grecian architecture* to the hovels of Quarrelwood is humorous in the extreme. So also his appellation of *College* to the Dame's School. But M'Ghie was something more than humorous. For withering satire he had scarcely an equal; and in his capacity of Inspector for the Poor, an office which he had long held until incapacitated by the infirmities of old age, his official correspondence must have excited the risibility of the Board of Supervision, as well as troubled the serenity of his brother Inspectors. On his retirement from the Inspectorship he was entertained at a public dinner in the parish, as a mark of esteem, and in recognition of the valuable services he had performed in his official capacity, as well as a land-measurer in the district. In returning thanks for the toast of his health, he very modestly said, in his own humorous and graphic way,—

“ Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I presume that the most of you are aware that nature never designed me for a rhetorician, but still this deprivation has peculiar advantages, for where little is given, little can be expected. I feel myself much in the predicament of Sir John Falstaff,

when, on the morning preceding the battle of Shrewsbury, he wished it was bedtime and all well. I am under the same tribulation of mind, but from a very different cause. Sir John, whom Shakespeare represents as no hero, was apprehensive of personal danger, while mine is from a moral conviction of my unfitness to express the deep sense of gratitude I feel for the unlooked-for, and, I may add, unmerited testimony of your kindness. From the very flattering and eulogistic manner in which our Rev. Chairman has been pleased to introduce my health, I am beginning to feel grave doubts of my own identity, as he has given me credit for much to which I never considered myself to have the remotest claim. In the discharge of my duties as Inspector I am conscious of many shortcomings, but I have had the good fortune to be favoured with an intelligent Board, and what is of primary importance, an intelligent Committee, always ready to aid me with their counsel and direction in cases of difficulty. It is certainly very flattering to the feelings of an old man, verging on the confines of another stage of existence, to be considered deserving of such a mark of your esteem, the remembrance of which may well cheer the remaining period of life."

He died at Quarrelwood in 1868, at the age of eighty-four, and a few weeks before his demise he burned upwards of a hundred of Allan Cunningham's letters, extending over a period of many years, because a promise that he would do so had been exacted by the writer. No persuasion of ours could prevent the holocaust. "I promised Allan that I would do so!" he said, and he did it.

During the first few years of the present century the

South of Scotland was in a continual state of ferment and alarm, from the reports every now and again arriving of a threatened invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte. The inhabitants of Kirkmahoe, like others within easy reach of the Solway, were always in dread, night and day, of being in the hands of the French without a moment's notice. When the alarm was at its height, it was found one morning that every dwelling was marked with a mysterious number, indicating too certainly that the foe had secretly landed, and had sent forth their emissaries to make preparations for a sudden attack. Neighbour ran to neighbour in the greatest consternation, but only to find that the one was as bad as the other. Every door was marked, and that must mean something, and therefore a watch must be set to prevent being taken by surprise. So all set to watching, every man his own house, with the arrangement, that, in the event of anything happening to one, the alarm should at once be given, that all might run to the rescue. The sun slowly ascended the sky, slowly crossed the meridian, slowly descended to the west, and darkness gathered around, while the sentinels faithfully stood at their posts. They were relieved by another guard during the night, and when the morning came, all being safety and peace, it was at once surmised that a cruel hoax had been played upon the parish. This was speedily confirmed, and great was the indignation shown, but who had perpetrated the deed no one could tell, no one was suspected at the time, but afterwards.

One farmer—Thomas Haining of Townhead—a very worthy and God-fearing man, felt his spirit greatly

roused within him at what he considered a most cruel, heartless, and unholy deed; and loudly declared that if he could discover the perpetrators, as it must have required more than one, he would assuredly bring them to justice. In the course of the week a placard was secretly posted up in various parts of the parish to the following effect:—

“Whereas some person or persons unknown, with no fear of God before their eyes, have been guilty of wantonly, maliciously, and profanely imitating David’s numbering of the people, and the marking of the dwellings of the Israelites on the eve of their departure from Egypt, to the great annoyance and trepidation of the inhabitants of this parish, a reward of £50 is hereby offered for such information as may lead to the conviction of the offender or offenders, as aforesaid.—Apply to Thomas Haining, Townhead, marked No. 14.”

The offenders were never discovered, but soon universal suspicion pointed only in one direction. What added to the mystery at first was, that during the same night all the houses in the Kirklands of Tinwald were marked in a similar way. Without any expectation of receiving the reward, we now give the information solicited, though it may be rather late. The “perpetrators,” both of the house numbering and the placard, were Allan Cunningham and George Douglas M’Ghie. The secret was told us by M’Ghie a short time before his death, when he said he had never told it before. We deeply sympathize with these fear-stricken inhabitants of Kirkmahoe, who fancied themselves doomed to

destruction on that woful morning, but we are not quite prepared to say what sentence should have been passed, in the event of discovery, upon the delinquents—Cunningham and M'Ghie.

The term of Allan's apprenticeship has expired, and he is now a journeyman mason, and to a certain extent, therefore, his own master, that is, he is free to choose his own master; but the literary aspiration is growing with his growth, and strengthening with his strength, while the poetic *afflatus* has already kindled into song. His effusions found the best of all circulating mediums, in being chanted by the peasantry at their wedding-parties and other merry-makings, and strangers present wished to hear them repeated, so that they might carry them into their own district. Many amusing attempts were made by the buxom damsels to transfer them to writing for the benefit of their friends, but the general method adopted was to have two or three encores by which they could be impressed upon the memory. It is not to be wondered at that in these ballad singings under difficulties varieties should occur, according to the ability of the fair songstress to tax her memory aright. These liltings, however, had become pretty widely diffused, though they had not yet received the dignity or the assistance of print.

Allan had an ardent desire to meet with the Ettrick Shepherd, of whose poetic abilities he had heard so much; and as they both belonged to nearly the same class of peasantry, and had also been imperfectly educated, he was the more anxious to have a meeting. The Shepherd had now come within ordinary reach of

him, being engaged with Mr. Harkness of Mitchelslacks, in the parish of Closeburn, and he resolved to embrace the opportunity lest he should never have another so convenient. The distance, however, from Dalswinton to Mitchelslacks was by no means inconsiderable. The Shepherd himself describes the first meeting with enjoyable gusto. It took place one summer day on the side of Queensberry Hill, where he was tending his master's sheep, and cultivating his muse in the leisure time. Here he had erected a hut of the smallest dimensions to shelter him from the weather, and take his meals in on stormy days. To get inside he had to crawl on hands and knees, and this effected, the roof was so low that it would only allow him to sit upright, not at all to stand. Within was a bench of rushes which served the double purpose of seat and bed, and just the length of himself, on which he could recline at ease when the sheep were all right. So one day, to his great surprise, he saw two men ascending the hill towards him, who, from their gait, he at once knew were not shepherds, and he was at a loss to conceive who could stumble into such an out-of-the-way place. His dog Hector saluted them in his usual hostile manner, and he himself would much rather have avoided them, as he was not in dress to receive strangers, being bare-legged and bare-footed, and his coat in tatters.

"I saw by their way of walking," he says, "they were not shepherds, and could not conceive what the men were seeking there, where there was no path nor aim towards any human habitation. However, I stood staring about me till they came up, always ordering my

old dog Hector to silence in an authoritative style, he being the only servant I had to attend to my orders. The men approached me rather in a breathless state, from climbing the hill. The one was a tall thin man of fairish complexion and pleasant intelligent features, seemingly approaching to forty; and the other a dark ungainly youth of about eighteen, with a buirdly frame for his age, and strongly marked features—the very model of Burns, and exactly such a man. Had they been of the same age, it would not have been easy to distinguish the one from the other.

“The eldest came up and addressed me frankly, asking me if I was Mr. Harkness’ shepherd, and if my name was James Hogg? To both of which queries I answered cautiously in the affirmative. . . . The younger stood at a respectful distance, as if I had been the Duke of Queensberry, instead of a ragged servant lad herding sheep. The other seized my hand and said, ‘Well, then, Sir, I am glad to see you. There is not a man in Scotland whose hand I am prouder to hold.’

“I could not say a single word in answer to this address; but when he called me SIR, I looked down at my bare feet and ragged coat, to remind the man whom he was addressing. But he continued: ‘My name is James Cunningham, a name unknown to you, though yours is not entirely so to me; and this is my younger brother Allan, the greatest admirer that you have on earth, and himself a young aspiring poet of some promise. You will be so kind as to excuse this intrusion of ours on your solitude, for, in truth, I could get no peace

either night or day with Allan till I consented to come and see you.'

"I then stepped down the hill to where Allan Cunningham then stood, with his weather-beaten cheek toward me, and, seizing his hard, brawny hand, I gave it a hearty shake, saying something as kind as I was able, and, at the same time, I am sure as stupid as it possibly could be. From that moment we were friends, for Allan had none of the proverbial Scottish caution about him; he is all heart together, without reserve either of expression or manner: you at once see the unaffected benevolence, warmth of feeling, and firm independence of a man conscious of his own rectitude and mental energies. Young as he was, I had heard of his name, although slightly, and, I think, seen one or two of his juvenile pieces."

The afternoon was spent cheerfully within the hut, the two visitors freely partaking of the Shepherd's bread and sweet milk, while they in turn treated him to something they had brought with them, which was *not* milk. Allan repeated many of his songs and ballads, and heard many in return. "Thus began," says Hogg, "at that bothy in the wilderness, a friendship and a mutual attachment between two aspiring Scottish peasants, over which the shadow of a cloud has never yet passed. From that day forward I failed not to improve my acquaintance with the Cunninghams. I visited them several times at Dalswinton, and never missed an opportunity of meeting with Allan when it was in my power to do so. I was astonished at the luxuriousness of his fancy. It was boundless; but it

was the luxury of a rich garden overrun with rampant weeds." The remembrance of this meeting was referred to by Cunningham twenty years afterwards, in London, on a renewal of correspondence with the Shepherd, as we shall afterwards see, since it was a day never to be forgotten on either side.

An intense and lasting friendship henceforth subsisted between James Hogg and James Cunningham, which was greatly strengthened by the various visits of the former to Dalswinton, to which reference has been made. So much so, indeed, that the Shepherd and his wife, Maggie Philip, were desirous of adopting as their own child, one of Cunningham's daughters, Jane (Mrs. M'Bryde), a sprightly girl some nine years of age. She lived with them for three years at Altrive, and had many opportunities of observing the character of the Bard of Kilmeny. There she had the proud satisfaction of being introduced to Sir Walter Scott, as the "niece of Allan Kinnikem." He would take her hand tenderly into his, pat her on the head, and look with his soft loving gray eyes into hers, asking some kind question. She said "he was just a douce, plain, hamely-spoken country gentleman." An incident in connection with one of Sir Walter's visits to Altrive, while she was there, is not known, but is worth relating. The Shepherd had a greyhound which he sarcastically named "Claverse," after the hero of Scott and Aytoun's love. Hogg's servant lassie, a little maid of all work, and, perhaps, for a girl, not over well-fed, had been making black puddings in the kitchen. While Sir Walter and Hogg were seated at the parlour window, their attention was

suddenly arrested by the appearance of Mary the servant, running like the chief witch in "Tam o' Shanter," to recover a pudding which she alleged the dog had stolen. Sir Walter laughed heartily, and slyly insinuated that he feared poor "Claverse," like his great namesake, got the credit for crimes which he perhaps did not deserve.

Young Allan's admiration of poetic genius was enthusiastic, and could scarcely be restrained within reasonable bounds. He had the strongest desire to see face to face those who in this respect had acquired fame. As an instance of this, in addition to the above, may be mentioned the following incident:—When Sir Walter Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" was published, Allan purchased a copy at 2s., out of his scanty earnings, which he committed to memory, and when "Marmion" appeared, in the height of his ecstasy, he started off on foot from Dalswinton to Edinburgh, that he might catch a stealthy glimpse of the author. He kept pacing up and down opposite Scott's house in North Castle Street, when an adjoining lady tenant from Dumfries recognized him and invited him in. There he stood for a time, when at last his curiosity was gratified by a sight of the great author on returning home from the Parliament House. Allan immediately thereafter departed again on foot for Dalswinton.

Another instance of his poetic enthusiasm for genius was in reference to the burial of Burns. He was then an apprentice under his brother James, and both were working in Dumfries at the time Burns returned from the Brow-Well worse than when he left for it. All saw he was dying, and the poet knew that himself. On the

third day after his return his spirit passed away to the "land of the leal." Allan took a position in the funeral procession, and walked with head uncovered all the way to the church-yard. He remarked afterwards to one of his sisters, that while he saw some shedding tears as the mournful cortege moved along, there were not so many as should have been. This was his estimation of the great departed. It could not arise from personal friendship or much intercourse, for although the two residences were almost opposite each other, Sandbed and Ellisland, yet the river Nith flowed between, and there was no convenient way of access between the two. Besides, Burns was only three years in Ellisland, and when he left, Allan Cunningham was only seven years old. At the time of the funeral he was consequently only twelve. So that, as we have said, Allan's enthusiasm arose not from personal friendship, but from admiration of the poet's genius.

At the same time, there was personal knowledge of the poet, if not personal intimacy, at such an early age, for Burns and John Cunningham, Allan's father, were on the most friendly terms as neighbours. It was at John Cunningham's table, in the farm-house of Sandbed, that Burns first recited his glorious epic, "Tam o' Shanter," while one of his best future biographers stood in the ingle-neuk, listening with eager and sympathetic interest to the eloquence with which it rolled forth from the lips of its great author.