

CHAPTER III.

LETTER TO THE REV. JOHN WIGHTMAN—MR. WIGHTMAN'S ANSWER—
 SECOND LETTER TO THE REV. MR. WIGHTMAN, CONTAINING A
 POETIC EFFUSION—CONTRIBUTES TO A LONDON LITERARY MAGA-
 ZINE—COMMENDATION OF HIS PIECES—"THE LOVELY LASS OF
 PRESTON MILL"—LETTER, WITH NEW POEM, TO HIS BROTHER
 JAMES.

IN a letter to his parish minister, the Rev. Mr. Wightman, Allan gives an account of the way in which he spends his leisure time, and requests advice as to the best manner of improving his intellect, and raising his position in the world. He is now in his twenty-second year, a journeyman mason, but with a strong desire for literary distinction in the annals of his country, although the path before him seems rugged, and the atmosphere around him hazy in the extreme:—

"Dalswinton Village, 11th April, 1806.

"Reverend Sir,—According to promise, I have sent you Sharp's edition of 'Collins, Gray, and Cunningham's Poems,' and I am well assured they will give you in reading them the same degree of satisfaction and pleasure which they gave to me. I would have been happy to have seen you at the manse on purpose to converse about some important and laudable matters—particularly to get your advice concerning my future course of life—to direct my reading, &c., for I am in a manner entirely left to my own inclinations in pursuit of what we term happiness, and I may go wrong. I shall

be directed entirely by you in everything that tends to my welfare and improvement; for I am not above nor below advice. I shall give you some idea of what I make of time when among my hands that you may form in your mind what kind of being I am. My daily labour, I may say, consumes it all, except what is allotted for sleep, and the short intervals for meals, and considerable portions of these are dedicated to reading any entertaining book, provided it says nothing against our religion. Such I carefully avoid. Poetry especially gives me most delight—Young, Milton, Thomson, and Pope, please me best.

“Social converse with my fellow-creatures I never avoid on any rational subject that improves the mind, and sweetens the bitters of life, of which, though young, I have had my share. Sometimes I write a few lines on any pleasing subject that strikes my fancy. I have even attempted poetry, but mostly failed. After public worship is over on the Sabbath, you may find me reading in some sequestered spot, far from the usual haunts of bustling mankind, where I retire by myself to be more at liberty in my reflections and contemplations upon the works and goodness of Him who made me. I am for the most part cheerful, except when musing upon, or reading some affecting book. After returning thanks to God for my preservation, I retire to the embraces of sleep, and rise with a cheerful mind, judging it part of my tribute to my Maker. An honest and cheerful heart is almost all my stock. I fervently adhere to truth, and, to close all, I have an independent mind.

“These, sir, are the outlines of my way of life as near as I can draw them. Now, to be candid with you, I wish to have your advice concerning books which are most proper to peruse; how to use my time, and in short, whatever you deem useful to me in life. If you would be so good as to

direct my small share of abilities to flow in their proper channel, I would esteem it the greatest favour your goodness could bestow. I am certainly much in want of education. I was taken from school and put to learn my trade at eleven years of age, and I really begin to feel the want of it much. English grammar I never learned—indeed it was not in use in the school I was at. I have spoken of the Library to several of my acquaintances here, and they will become members of it as soon as it is instituted. I spoke with all the eloquence I was master of in its favour.—I ever am, reverend and worthy sir, your devoted servant, while

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Rev. John Wightman,
“Manse of Kirkmahoe.”

Now, passing over the immature style of this letter, which, all things considered, is rather to be admired than faulted, it is valuable as giving a glimpse of the writer's inner life at this time, as well as an outline of the manner in which his leisure hours were spent. It was just such a production as gratified the heart of the minister, and he was not long in replying to his young parishioner. He might have said, “Go on as you are doing, and you will prosper, your conduct is commendable;” but a request had been made, and therefore he wrote as follows:—

“Kirkmahoe Manse, 20th April, 1806.

“My dear Allan,—I return you your two volumes, with many thanks. These poems have long been great favourites of mine. The picture you have drawn of yourself in your letter to me is exceedingly interesting. I wish you

to have a happy journey through life—a smooth road and a serene sky. We must, however, lay our account with a chequered scene. The wisest and best of Beings has seen this to be most conducive to our true interests. I approve of your reading poetry. Goldsmith, in his ‘Deserted Village,’ says something very fine on the subject of poetry—

‘And thou, sweet poetry, thou loveliest maid,
The first to fly when sensual joys invade.’

The reading of poetry should be mingled with other pursuits. It is a liberal recreation, but should not be a business. It is said to be apt to foster, in elegant and ingenuous minds, a romantic delicacy, and a morbid sensibility inconsistent with the sober and industrious pursuit of the useful arts and professions. This can be the effect only of an excessive fondness for the creations of fancy; but I think there is not much reason to fear this excess in one who is so much confined, and so properly, to the duties of his employment as you are. You would do well to read books of practical science, and history, and travel, which will guard you effectually against any danger of loving poetry too much.

“Such books as the following may be worth your perusal, as they may fall in your way, or as you may find it convenient to purchase them: Dr. Robertson’s ‘History of Scotland;’ Hume’s ‘History of England,’ with one of the continuations; Dr. Henry’s ‘History of Great Britain;’ some of the best tours in Great Britain, or different parts of it; the travels or tours of Moore, Cox, Swinbourne, Brydone in Sicily and Malta, Niebhur in Asia, Vaillant and Sparrman in Africa; Captain Cook’s and Anson’s voyages, &c., &c.; and I shall mention a book or two in divinity: ‘Evidences of Christianity,’ by Dr. Porteous, Bishop of London, by Dr.

Beattie of Aberdeen, and by Mr. Addison; Dr. S. Clarke's 'Commentary and Paraphrase on the Four Gospels,' with Dr. Pyle's continuation through the New Testament; or, the 'Family Expositor' of the pious and amiable Dr. Doddridge; Dr. Gisborne's 'Survey of Christianity,' and his other works; the sermons of Blair, Walker, Seed, and Sherlock. These, my dear sir, are a few of the books which you may read at your leisure, and still be steady and unremitting in attention to your profession. It is a well-balanced rather than a well-stored mind which bids fairest to be happy. Never lose sight of your religion. This is the grand recipe for happiness:—

'Let fouk bode weel, and strive to do their best;
Nae mair's required: let Heaven make out the rest.'

"While you preserve your independent mind, consider always that stubbornness has no right to the title of independence. I am *convinced your* mind is not of that character. That rude and savage independence which does not attend to the mutual subserviency of the branches of human society, is apt to meet, in an evil hour, with a rude blast to break it, and ruin follows. Mingle with your virtuous contemporaries and friends, and convince them that one may be cheerful, and yet 'unspotted from the world.' I will be glad to give you my best advice at any time, and am, dear Allan, yours truly,

"JOHN WIGHTMAN.

"Mr. Allan Cunningham,
"Dalswinton Village."

The following week Allan sent the minister another letter, enclosing a poem which he had just composed:—

“Dalswinton Village, 27th April, 1806.

“Reverend Sir,—You will no doubt think me impertinent in writing to you again, but you must forgive me. Your fine ideas on the pleasures of solitude, on the Sabbath of 20th April, so charmed me, that whenever an opportunity offered itself, I determined to write thanking you for so many useful hints on life and the sweets of retirement, &c. But your letter arriving, for which I sincerely thank you, overthrew my resolutions entirely. I instantly resolved to show my love of solitude, of nature, and of virtue, in a kind of rhyming, prosaic poetry. It but poorly expresses my ideas, but it is sincere enough:—

“THE NITH.

“ Nith, sacred Nith, beside your hermit stream,
 Your rocks and foliage bright with summer's beam,
 How do I love to walk and raving muse
 Upon the balmy fragrance Heaven bestows!
 How dear unto my mind your foaming pride,
 Where spreading hazels drink your blushing tide!
 How sweet the morning mist that wraps your woods—
 How pure the orient sun that gilds your floods!
 Wild in his beams your sportive tenants stray,
 And show their gold-tinged sides in wanton play.
 Sweet to the smell your honey-suckled trees,
 That fling their dew-dipt odours on the breeze;
 Mild blooms your primrose on the shelving rocks,
 And sweet the hawthorn shakes her dewy locks.
 Like beauty is the dew on yonder thorn,
 That as a meteor vanishes in morn.
 Your beeches high their lofty heads uprear
 Unto the heaven, and threat the middle sphere;
 The scented birks bend too their tressy locks,
 And form cool arbours o'er the moss-girt rocks.
 The woodbine anxious clasps the cavern's brows,
 Where rustic heaven-taught genius loves to muse.

O how the mind is fired in nature's fields!
 What virtuous peace this to the bosom yields!
 O ever welcome to my soul ye groves,
 Ye rushy fountains, and ye green alcoves!
 Ye hermit glens, ye haunts of peaceful rest,
 That soothe the soul, and calm the tortured breast;
 Ye teach the melting passions how to move,
 And charm the heart of man to heavenly love.

“Blest solitude, by kindred nature given,
 Amidst thy peaceful walks I've talked with heaven!
 But oh! too few, alas! its sweetness feel—
 Man's giddy brains in maddening tumult reel;
 His soul rough-cased in ignorance and whim,
 Floats wildly on, and reason swells the stream;
 His life he prizes as if life were given,
 To swell his pride, and shake him off from heaven.
 His heaven-erected face is given in vain—
 He drags his reason 'neath the bestial train;
 In life's deep mire, in search of gold he plies,
 He grasps the shadowy phantom fast and dies:
 This is the foolish man's unthinking end,
 With too much vanity to think and mend;
 With too much wisdom to do aught amiss—
 Too happy for to taste of happiness;
 Too well informed for to inform his mind,
 And too quick-sighted for to see he's blind.

“O, what's the source of prideful thoughts, and vain?
 'Tis self-struck reveries of a vacant brain.
 What can we boast of, for vain thoughts to swell?
 We grasp at heaven and plunge ourselves in hell!
 Go, ask yon graves where our great forbears lie—
 'Come to your kindred dust,' they all reply.
 Look to yon blasted oak, low in the vale,
 Its moss-grown trunk, gray, whistling to the gale;
 Its many arms reached wide, its top touched heaven;
 Its forked roots into earth's centre driven;
 Its foliage green embalmed the dawning mild,

Wild flowers and shrubs beneath its fragrance smiled ;
 But lightning came, and scattered it around,
 And strewed its blushing honours on the ground.

“ And so is man, tall as an oak he shows—
 Pure vernal odours from his foliage flows ;
 Vain in his strength, he mocks the lowly thorn,
 And opens wide his giant arms in scorn.
 He shakes the neighbouring woodlands at his nod,
 And grasps the echoing winds, ærial load ;
 But death in form of thunder cleaves his pride,
 And widening ruin hurls on every side :
 The brambles, wild-insulting, o’er him grow,
 And nameless streams deep-eddying o’er him flow.

“ This is ambition’s end, this folly’s fall,
 Thus certain vengeance overwhelms them all ;
 Thus they stand trembling on the brink of death,
 And shudder at eternity beneath.
 O dreadful chance ! but no dread chance to those,
 Whose mind with virtue and religion glows.
 Let tyrants threaten, boreas tempests howl,
 And nature tremble, ’twill not shake their soul :
 Death, gloomy death, to them no terror seems,
 Their nature sinks in paradisian dreams.

“ Thus, O my soul, pursue fair virtue’s road,
 Keep peace with honour, and revere your God ;
 And though in life’s rough ocean luckless starr’d,
 We read that ‘ virtue is its own reward.’ ”

“ You are in the right with respect to poetry. Reading it too much and nothing else certainly softens the mind ; but I have a very good collection of other books which I read at times. At another time I will give you a list of them. I shall avail myself of your courteous offer of advice without reserve, and you may often expect to hear from

me on that head.—I ever am your obedient and obliged servant, while

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Rev. John Wightman,
“Kirkmahoe Manse.”

The discourse alluded to above, containing the “fine ideas on the pleasures of solitude,” was an exposition of the Twenty-third Psalm, in which the minister, himself a poet, gave a graphic description of the scenery that the King of Israel saw around him, while tending his father’s flocks on the hills and in the solitudes of Judah.

Encouraged, as we have seen, by the genial countenance and sage advice of his parish minister, who was himself endowed with the spirit of poetry, and published many admirable pieces anonymously, Cunningham now began to give rapid flight to his muse, and to look for a channel through which he might try his poetic strength, and “tempt his new-fledged offspring to the skies.” Liling lassies, at kirns, and weddings, and other merry-meetings, might be good enough in their way, but as an advertising medium they were not in his mind sufficiently extensive for what he thought himself capable of producing. So he looked elsewhere and succeeded.

There was at this time (1807) a London periodical entitled *Literary Recreations*, conducted by an Irish gentleman, Eugenius Roche, which seemed to him a likely vehicle for the gratification of his desire; and, accordingly, he despatched a few pieces to the editor for insertion, under the signature “Hidallan,” the name

of one of Ossian's heroes, describing their origin, and intimating that it was the writer's first attempt to have his verses put into print, so as to obtain the high title of an author. These were readily accepted, and received insertion in due time. Not only so, but in one of the monthly notices to correspondents, special reference was made to him in the following terms:—"We really feel proud in having the pleasure of ushering to public notice, through the medium of our publication, the effusions of such a self-taught genius as Hidallan." Mr. S. C. Hall, in reference to this matter, says:—"I knew Eugenius Roche somewhat intimately in 1825. He was an Irish gentleman, of a very kindly and genial nature. At that time he was editor of the *Morning Post*, and had all his life been a labourer for the press. He was proud of the small share he had in advancing the fortunes of Cunningham; and long before I became acquainted with Allan, described to me the surprise he had felt on the discovery that so young and so apparently rough a specimen of the 'north countrie' was the writer of the poems he had read with so much delight."

This notice of Mr. Roche was highly encouraging, and stimulated the youthful poet to further efforts of a similar kind. But it had not the effect of inducing him to relinquish the hope of eminence in his special profession. As a tradesman he was distinguished among his fellows, and in Dumfries he always received higher wages than they, as he was put to the execution of work which required peculiar skill and delicacy in the manipulating, such as carving, moulding, and like

ornamentation, for which he had a decided taste, and an artistic hand.

A new era is now about to dawn upon him, as well of love as of literature, and rural quietude is soon to be exchanged for a city's fermenting din. Still he knows it not. He is chiselling away during the daytime, and in the evening pluming his muse's wing. He has left the superintendence of his brother James, with whom he had served his apprenticeship, perhaps because of the scarcity of work which often occurs in the experience of a country mason, or probably because he had a great ambition to rise in the pursuit of his trade. As we have seen, he had a decided taste for the execution of ornamental work in buildings, to which he was always assigned; and as country employment was generally precarious, and as plain as possible, there was no encouragement for him to follow it. So he went here and there and everywhere, as his taste directed. He is now twenty-five, and has sobered down from the moonlight escapades carried on by his friend M'Ghie and himself, when both were in their teens.

His master in Dumfries is anxious to assume him as a partner in business, but this offer he declines. He has other projects simmering in his mind which he keeps to himself. A new mansion was to be erected at Arbigland, in the parish of Kirkbean, and as carved ornamentation was essentially necessary for such a building, we find Cunningham there. While engaged in this work he lodged in the neighbouring farm-house of Preston Mill, where he met for the first time with his future wife, Jean Walker, in the capacity of a domestic

there. The intimacy by degrees ripened into affection, and then into love, but they did not unite their fates together for a considerable time afterwards. She is the subject of one of his finest songs:—

“THE LOVELY LASS OF PRESTON MILL.

- “ The lark had left the evening cloud,
 The dew fell saft, the wind was lowne,
 Its gentle breath amang the flowers
 Scarce stirred the thistle’s tap o’ down;
 The dappled swallow left the pool,
 The stars were blinking owre the hill,
 As I met, amang the hawthorns green,
 The lovely lass of Preston Mill.
- “ Her naked feet amang the grass,
 Shone like twa dew-gemmed lilies fair;
 Her brow shone comely ’mang her locks,
 Dark curling owre her shoulders bare;
 Her cheeks were rich wi’ bloomy youth;
 Her lips had words and wit at will,
 And heaven seemed looking through her een—
 The lovely lass of Preston Mill.
- “ Quo’ I, ‘ Sweet lass, will ye gang wi’ me,
 Where blackcocks craw, and plovers cry?
 Six hills are woolly wi’ my sheep,
 Six vales are lowing wi’ my kye:
 I hae looked lang for a weel-faured lass,
 By Nithsdale’s holmes an’ monie a hill;’
 She hung her head like a dew-bent rose,
 The lovely lass of Preston Mill.
- “ Quo’ I, ‘ Sweet maiden, look nae down,
 But gie’s a kiss, and gang wi’ me:’
 A lovelier face, O! never looked up,
 And the tears were drapping frae her ee :

' I hae a lad, wha's far awa',
 That weel could win a woman's will;
 My heart's already fu' o' love,
 Quo' the lovely lass of Preston Mill.

" ' Now wha is he wha could leave sic a lass,
 To seek for love in a far countrie?'
 Her tears drapped down like simmer dew:
 I fain wad kissed them frae her ee.
 I took but ane o' her comely cheek;
 ' For pity's sake, kind sir, be still!
 My heart is fu' o' other love,'
 Quo' the lovely lass of Preston Mill.

" She stretched to heaven her twa white hands,
 And lifted up her watery ee;—
 ' Sae lang's my heart kens aught o' God,
 Or light is gladsome to my ce;—
 While woods grow green, and burns rin clear,
 Till my last drap o' blood be still,
 My heart shall haud nae other love,'
 Quo' the lovely lass of Preston Mill.

" There's comely maids on Dee's wild banks,
 And Nith's romantic vale is fu';
 By lanely Cluden's hermit stream
 Dwells monie a gentle dame, I trow!
 O, they are lights of a gladsome kind,
 As e'er shonc on vale or hill;
 But there's a light puts them a' out,
 The lovely lass of Preston Mill."

We are informed, in a note by the author, that "Preston Mill is a little rustic village in the parish of Kirkbean on the Galloway side of the Solway; it consists of some dozen or so of thatched cottages, grouped together without regularity, yet beautiful from their situation on the banks of a wild burn which runs or

rather tumbles through it, scarcely staying to turn a mill from which the place takes its name."

While his thoughts seem to be intent on love, the Muse is not forgotten, as, in addition to the above, the following letter to his brother James shows:—

"Arbigland, 1st July, 1809.

"My dear James,—I would have seen you upon the 'Siller Gun' day, but I was so fatigued that I really could not attempt the journey. As I will not possibly be up from here before a month or six weeks, I will send you a few of the rhymes I have been composing in my leisure moments. The following opens with the arrival of intelligence to Lord Maxwell of our *own* Nithsdale of his Queen's escape from Lochleven, and the summons is sent by him at midnight to warn his military tenantry and vassals:—

"'Twas midnight when, at portgate barred,
 The clanging tread of hoofs was heard
 In Maxwell's hilly tower—
 And soon, 'To arms,' the chieftain cries,
 And soon, the nimble courier hies,
 Dashing through Nith's dark stream he flies,
 To raise the Nithsdale power.
 Fast by Dalswinton's woody hall
 The bugle blast was blown—
 Its gallant baron heard the call,
 And bounded forth his vassals all,
 A spearmen forest gleaming tall
 Into the star-beams shone.
 While o'er the Nith's lone stream they bound,
 By Tinwald towers was heard the sound,
 The warrior's rousing cry.
 The woodman on his rushy bed,
 Lone-bosomed in his woodland shed
 Uplifts his toil-slept eye,

And rushing from his jangling brakes,
 His six-ell Scottish lance he shakes.
 Sad sight it was to see dismayed,
 In midnight hurry, loose arrayed,
 Each young and lovely Nithsdale maid,
 Waked with the hour's alarms.
 All by their cottage doors they shook,
 Whilst in their arms their lovers took,
 And on them fixed each tearful look,
 And sank within their arms.
 Adown their ready spears they threw—
 But short the promised love—the vow—
 And short the farewell interview,
 For louder waxed the note.
 And soon to morning's breaking beam,
 The battle banners dimly gleam,
 As o'er the Nith's fair-valleyed stream
 The gairy pennons float.
 Soon by their various barons led,
 Lord Maxwell's pavement sound their tread,—
 Above the rest the veteran stands.
 With aged smile he eyed his bands,
 And shook his hoary hair.
 Tall, like an ancient oak he stood,
 Whose stubborn trunk the storms have bowed,
 With branches shorn and bare;
 Rejoicing 'neath Spring's milder skies,
 Views round his vassal woodlands rise,
 Outstretching green and fair.
 Oh, ne'er again on tower or height,
 Shall stream that reverend banner white,
 Or rustic bard, with heartfelt strain,
 Welcome his gallant lord again!
 Long, long, each lovely Nithsdale maid
 May stretch her white arms from her plaid,
 And bare her breast of snow.
 The aged matrons long may mourn,
 Yearly upon that fatal morn,
 Which saw their banners low.

They'll march at midnight's solemn hour,
 Their corpse-light quivering round the tower,
 And weep for all the gallant flower
 Of lonely Nithsdale low.
 And long in rustic tale or song,
 At coming 'mongst the peasant throng,
 Will all their loss their tears prolong,
 Thy spring, O Nithsdale low!

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“I would have sent you the *Edinburgh Review*, but I suppose you will get the loan of George M'Ghie's. I had a letter from one of the editors of the *Recreations*, wishing me to send him all my poetry, and he would get it published for me in London. This offer I have declined.—With my respects and good wishes for you and your family's welfare, I am, dear Brother,

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Remember me to my mother, and my sister-in-law, and any of the 'lave.'—A. C.

“Mr. James Cunningham,
 “Dalswinton.”