

CHAPTER IX.

HIS MARRIAGE—LETTER TO M'GHIE—INTRODUCTION TO MR. JERDAN
OF THE "LITERARY GAZETTE"—PUBLISHES A VOLUME OF SONGS
—NOTICES OF THESE—EXTRACTS—LETTER TO HIS MOTHER.

ABOUT the middle of the following summer, Jean Walker, the "Lovely Lass of Preston Mill," left her native vale for good and all, to link her fate with Allan Cunningham in London. Her journey thither, like his own, had an incident on the way, of the most friendly character, which he himself thus describes:—"In the house of Gray, Master of the High School of Edinburgh, she met the attention due to a daughter, was introduced to Dr. Anderson, and had the pleasure of hearing a letter read from Bishop Percy, in which he spoke well of the talents of her future husband. In James Hogg, also, and his comrade, Grieve, she met with attentive friends, who showed her the beauties of Edinburgh, conveyed her to the pier of Leith, and saw her safely embarked on the waves. Of her and my sister Jean, who accompanied her, Hogg thus wrote to my eldest brother James:—"I had the pleasure of waiting on your two sisters for a few days, and I am sure there never was a brother took the charge of sisters more pleasantly than I did. But one of them, at least, needs nobody to take care of her—I mean the beauteous mermaid of

Galloway, who is certainly a most extraordinary young woman. I introduced her to some gentlemen and ladies of my acquaintance, who were not only delighted, but astonished at her.' Jean Walker was then twenty years of age; her complexion was fine, and her eyes bright; and her prudence equalled her looks." No doubt the merit with which she had been credited in supplying some of the ancient ballads contributed in some measure to the admiration.

The marriage was celebrated on the 1st of July, 1811, in the Church of St. Saviour, Southwark; and, notwithstanding the joyous excitement of the occasion, Cunningham naïvely says, that he "did not fail to remark that James I., the poet-king of Scotland, had been married there also, and that we joined hands nigh the monument of Gower, and not far from the grave of Massinger." The marriage was a happy one in every sense of the term. Mrs. Allan Cunningham seems to have been a most sensible, intelligent, and prudent woman, highly esteemed in society, and well worthy of all her husband sang in her praise. Mr. S. C. Hall, who was an intimate friend, says, in a memento after her death in 1864:—"She was a charming woman in her prime, and must have been very lovely as a girl. I have never known a better example of what natural grace and purity can do to produce refinement. Though peasant-born, she was in society a lady—thoroughly so. There was not only no shadow of vulgarity in her manners, there was not even rusticity, while there was a total absence of assumption and pretence; and she was entirely at ease in the 'grand'

society—men and women of rank, as well as those eminent in Art, in Science, and in Letters—I have met as guests at her home.”

Cunningham has now fairly entered upon a new career, not only in a matrimonial sense, but also in a literary view, for upwards of thirty volumes of prose and poetry are to flow from his pen before that career shall close, in addition to physical labour, though a concealing Providence did not vouchsafe to him the secret. Desultory employment, in which he was engaged, occasionally roused fears for the future in regard to the permanent comfort of his family home, as he well knew that something more than literature was necessary for the support of domestic life.

Exactly a month after his marriage, while “basking in the beams of the honeymoon,” he thus playfully and also instructively wrote to his friend M'Ghie:—

“London, 1st August, 1811.

“My Trusty Fier,—I look back, like the seed of Jacob in their wilderness wanderings, to the divinity of their fathers, after they had made them a molten god to worship from the golden ornaments they filched from the Egyptians. Ah! cried I, work of mine own hands, I have worshipped thee long enough. I will turn me back to the friend I have not written to these many moons. So I awoke, and thought on thee, vain recreant to looms, free grace, and substantial prayer ‘à la Cameronian.’ And how fares my friend? Basking in the beams of the honeymoon of wedlock, I have still so much time as awakes the pleasant remembrance of other years. I know you deserved an earlier letter than

this from me, but I excused myself from day to day, like the wicked in repentance, and now I am obliged to write under the pleasant prospect of being every moment called from it. . . .

“ On the whole, George, with a pleasant and good-hearted woman, you would prefer it to the lonesome life which late I led. You wrote me a pithy but very short epistle last time, and, really, I expect one of alarming size this forthcoming month. You were, however, so vague in your mode of expression that one part of your letter I could not understand after the most adroit scrutiny. Whether you expected some uncommon tidings soon from me, or that you might have some extraordinary occurrence to relate concerning yourself, you left it for those gifted in the unraveling of prophecy to decide. I fondly believe my friend may have an elegant recantation of the heresies of Bachelorism to make unto his friend, and nothing, I do assure you, would more sensibly touch me with pleasure than to find you, in your next letter, sending me the respects of a sweet and beloved fine woman whom you have wedded. This is not counsel, it is only wishing; for, matrimony without affection, I pray heaven to keep you from the hell of it.

“ Permit me now to give you counsel of another kind. Instruct yourself in grammar, and learn French until you have ability to translate it. Read, and faithfully treasure up in your mind, the history and most prominent events of your native country; acquaint yourself with its revolutions, civil commotions and their causes. These you will find in Hume and Robertson, and I counsel you to prefer these authors, for while they are instructing you in history, they familiarize you to the most beautiful and vigorous modes of expression, the most lucid and perspicuous arrangement of language. Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

is a work written with an eye to the taste of my friend. Plutarch's Lives of Eminent Grecians and Romans you should take into bed with you, as long as you are unmarried, and dream on it. A history of the world in abridgment will, after these, be almost sufficient to acquaint you with History. Elegant literature is the soul which agitates, in conjunction with that of genius, the whole range of your learning, and sets it in motion. Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric—the Elements of Criticism—some of the articles in the *Edinburgh Review*—many articles in the *Spectator*—and the whole of Samuel Johnson's prose works.

“These will assist you to judge. Then Milton, Shakspeare, Dryden, with his translation of Virgil—Pope, with his translation of Homer—Butler, Akenside, Thomson, Cowper, Campbell, Burns, and Scott, must be treasured in your heart, and practised in your life. All this range of knowledge might be acquired in your leisure hours, and on rainy Sundays. When you have such knowledge as this, you can be an overmatch for any ordinary reader, and then you are ready to accept of any place which may cast up to you in the lottery of life.

“Present my love to your father and your mother, your sister Rachel, and your brother James. I have no very remarkable occurrence to edify you with. You will find some Hudibrastic verses enclosed, which I struck off at a heat; accept them rough-hewn. . . . Write me soon. I hope you are highly improved by your attendance at Maxweltsown's School. Write me any little short notices of local news which you can find. Yours, sleeping or waking,

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“Mr. Geo. D. M'Ghie,
“Quarrelwood, Kirkmahoe.”

With regard to the latter part of this letter, in which the course of instruction is laid down, we humbly think that such a formidable array of literature was enough to upset any mechanic, however numerous his "leisure hours," and frequent the "rainy Sundays" might be; but the advice was kindly intended, and possibly a desire was felt that M'Ghie should, like himself, come out in the literary line.

Soon after his arrival in London he introduced himself to several editors of the magazines, with the view of obtaining employment as a contributor, literary work being the great object of his ambition. Some received him favourably, while others treated him as an unknown stranger. Of the former class was Mr. Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, who was himself a Scotchman, being a native of Kelso, and who afterwards became one of Cunningham's most intimate and valued friends, as we shall afterwards see from their correspondence. The first meeting, however, was productive of an anecdote worthy of rehearsal, as showing the poet's dogged adherence to his own ideas of composition. Cunningham appeared one day in the office of the *Literary Gazette*, and presented some verses to the editor for insertion in that periodical. Mr. Jerdan read them carefully over, expressed satisfaction with them, but pointed out a grammatical error, which he requested him to correct. "Na, na," was the abrupt reply, "I will make no alteration. Grammar, or no grammar, it must go in as I wrote it, or not at all. What do I care for the gender of pronouns? We care naething for such things in Nithsdale, and I won't in London." So the *which* was

printed instead of the *who*, the editor, no doubt, sympathizing with his fellow-countryman's sturdy exhibition of the national motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit*.

The honeymoon is all very well while it lasts, but it is soon discovered that something more than love is necessary for the sustenance of life and the maintenance of domestic comfort. This feeling naturally becomes the keener when the olive plants begin to appear, soon to take their places around the table; therefore, we do not wonder to find him expressing anxiety and concern for the future, especially with the aim of literary distinction never relaxed. He possessed, however, one sterling quality which is often wanting in persons holding his position, and cherishing his aspirations; he wisely and prudently resolved to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, and not to rely upon the produce of his pen, except as an auxiliary, in supplying the wants of the household. He hoped that both connected would carry him and his along, so he made the resolution, and carried it out to the last.

We should like to have had a peep unseen into the young folk's dwelling, in the winter evening, when the windows were closed and the curtains drawn. Beside a "cozy fire and clean hearthstane" is Jean Walker sitting on one side, and Allan Cunningham on the other, with a table between them on which a lamp is brightly burning. She is busy with the needle—darning stockings for her young husband's comfort, making up some frills for her own adornment, altering a dress from the fashion of Kirkbean to that of London, and, in anticipation of some forthcoming event, shaping and sewing

certain pieces of very little apparel, which she would willingly conceal, or wish not to be noticed. On his part, the mallet and the chisel has been thrown aside for the day, and he, too, is busy with pencil and paper, cogitating a new song, which, verse by verse, as they start into creation, he sings or recites aloud for the criticism and gratification of his "bonnie Jean." Happy pair! with the world before them smiling in hope, blest in each other's love, and, conscious of manly talent, artistic and mental, if health is vouchsafed he fears not the future.

In the summer of 1812 the first of a distinguished family of sons was born, who was named Joseph Davy, after one of his old associates when engaged on the *Day* newspaper. His cares now increased with his joys, and he strove the more ardently to maintain a position of credit as well as comfort, with literary distinction still in view. Writing to Professor Wilson, many years afterwards, he said:—

"My life has been one continued struggle to maintain my independence, and support wife and children; and I have, when the labour of the day is closed, endeavoured to use the little talent which my country allows me to possess as easily and as profitably as I can. The pen thus adds a little to the profits of the chisel, and I keep my head above water, and on occasion take the middle of the causeway with an independent step."

Well said! all the more independent that you have the good sense to use the pen only as a subsidiary

means of support. The pen, however, has not been idle, and we are now to see what it has produced.

In 1813 he collected his musings, and published them in a volume, with the title "Songs, chiefly in the Rural Language of Scotland." It consisted of forty-nine songs, and was dedicated to Henry Phillips, Esq., New Bond Street, London. Like many of his predecessors, a considerable number of the songs have "Bonnie Jean" as their subject. There are two, which, though different, have the same title, "The Lovely Lass 'of Preston Mill." The volume was well received by the public, and was soon out of print, which stimulated the author to further efforts in the same line. As it is not now to be had, and is even unknown to many, we shall the more readily give some account of it. In the Dedication, which is somewhat lengthy, the author says:—

"After seriously meditating, therefore, upon the characteristic excellences of those songs, which the approval of the public has made popular, I have consented to censure, as wholly unworthy of future imitation, half-a-dozen deviations from the natural tone of British lyrical composition."

Well, we are anxious to know who these offenders are, who have so deviated, and are in consequence to be ostracized. The first class are those "courtly poets of ancient date," who have been succeeded to the present day, by endeavouring to please their mistresses with "metaphysical subtleties and sprightly sallies of wit, which appertain not to the customary feelings of the human race." The second are those who introduce the

names of the heathen goddesses in describing the objects of their adoration, such as Venus, Diana, Apollo, Cupid, and the Graces. The next class is very much akin to the preceding—they lament the degeneracy of the present race, and, in imagination, seek to restore a resemblance of the beautiful world which has been lost by peopling it with a race of beings perfectly pure, and who inhabit regions of beatific splendour and fertility. We are introduced to Pan, and Sylvander, and Chloris, and the Arcadian lute, an arbour of woodbine, nuptial engagements, ruddy-countenanced shepherds, and the flocks of Admetus. He next attacks the lyrical sentimentalists with “a professed veneration and high-toned affection for everything which excites no emotions in any breasts but their own.” The next batch under denunciation are similar to a previous one, who introduce into Christian song the names of the heroines of heathen lyrics. The last brought under ban are those who sing of shepherds and shepherdesses in luxuriant pastures, and beside murmuring streams, swains and nymphs finding themselves unconsciously in close proximity to one another.

He acknowledges that he is perfectly aware of the sweeping character of his censure, as it comprehends some whose songs are the masterpieces of lyrical excellence, but he says in extenuation—“I have been wholly desirous of fixing an accurate idea of what I hold to be the natural elements of British song, by disencumbering it of those gorgeous trappings and unnatural decorations with which injudicious innovators have obscured its beauties.” Then, with regard to the

songs in the volume, he says:—"I have attempted to preserve inviolable what I conceived to be the primitive rules of lyrical composition, and associate with the emotions of love the rural imagery of my native land." The volume gives indication that the author was following in the footsteps of some who had gone before him, by adopting similar titles, phrases, and measures. For instance, one is addressed "To Jean in Heaven;" doubtless suggested by Burns' "Mary in Heaven." It runs thus:—

"TO JEAN IN HEAVEN.

"Dalswinton holms are soon in bloom,
 And early are her woods in green;
 Her clover walks are honey-breathed,
 And pleasant riv'lets reek between:
 For lonesome lovers they are meet,
 Who saunter forth with tentless feet,
 The gowan bending 'mang the weet,
 When evening draws her shady screen;
 Retired from the noting eye,
 Unloosing all the seals of joy.

"Far in a deep untrodden nook,
 A fragrant hawthorn there is seen;
 Beside it trills a babbling brook,
 That loops the banks of primrose green.
 When spring woos forth its blossom fair,
 In solemn gait I hie me there,
 And kneeling unto God in prayer,
 I call upon thy shade, my Jean;
 And soon I feel as thou wert near,
 And heavenly whispers meet mine ear.

“ I treasure all thy tokens, love ;
 Thy ring, thy raven fillet fair,
 Which curled o'er thy blooming cheek,
 And swan-white neck beyond compare ;
 Bright as it glisters with my tears,
 The beauteous cheek again appears,
 O'er which I passed the silver shears,
 And cut the sacred pledge I wear :
 Drenched from my troubled eyes with weat,
 I dry it with my bosom's heat.

“ Oft thou descendest in my dreams,
 And seem'st by my bedside to stand ;
 Around thy waist, and on thy cheek,
 Are marks of a celestial hand :
 Divinely wakening I see,
 The glances of thy dove-like ee,
 Which, smiling, thou dost bend on me,
 To go with thee to angel's land :
 My arms outstretching thee to take,
 I sleep of heaven, on earth I wake.”

Then there is another song, at once suggesting the source:—

“ MY HEART IS IN SCOTLAND.

“ My heart is in Scotland, my heart is not here,
 I left it at home with a lass I love dear ;
 When the ev'ning star comes o'er the hill-tops of green,
 I bless its fair light, and I think on my Jean,
 What distance can fasten, what country can bind,
 The flight of my soul, or the march of my mind ?
 Though hills tower atween us, and wide waters flow,
 My heart is in Scotland wherever I go.

“ When I bade her farewell on the flow’r-blossomed knowe,
 The bright lamps of heaven more lovely did lowe;
 The ocean return’d back the moon’s silver beam,
 The wood tops and fountains were all in a leam;
 Our wet eyes to heaven in transports we threw,
 Our souls talk’d of love, for our hearts were owre fou;
 Her warm parting kiss on my lips aye will glow,
 For my heart is in Scotland wherever I go.

“ How silent we met, and how lonesome the grove,
 The rising moon welcom’d and kend of our love;
 The wind ’mongst the branches hung listening and lown,
 The sweet flowers blushed love, with their bloomy heads down,
 The hours seemed but miutes, so lightsome they flew,
 Her arms clasped kinder, more sweet her lips grew;
 Till Aurora, gold-lock’d, set the land in a lowe,
 O my heart is in Scotland wherever I go.

“ Now where are love’s gloaming walks ’mang the new dew,
 The white clasping arms, and the red rosie mou’?
 The eloquent tongue dropping honey of love,
 And the talk of two eyes which a statue might move:
 I left them by Criffel’s green mountain at hame,
 And far from the heaven that holds them I came;
 Come wealth, or come want, or come weal, or come woe,
 My heart will be with them wherever I go.”

This is evidently an imitation of “My heart’s in the Highlands,” and other songs in the volume may also be traced to their original source. We cannot well account for this, except on the ground of his adoration of Burns, and his admiration of previous poets. Perhaps, too, there was a feeling of want of self-reliance, and of mis-trust in his own originality; but however this may be,

he is pluming his wing for further and higher flight, and the pinion is growing apace. He becomes more confident as he moves along, and at last he launches out on his own resources, and after his own manner, the most satisfactory of all.

An especial characteristic of the Cunningham family was their filial affection towards their mother, the only remaining parent, whose widowhood was cheered by their kind attention to her, even when far away, and by the endeavours they made to afford her the comforts which declining years required. No one of all the family was more affectionate and helpful than Allan. The letters he wrote to her are full of the warmest love and the deepest gratitude, and must have greatly gladdened her heart, and cheered her loneliness, while she ruminated on the days of other years. True, one at least of her daughters was always with her, and made the descent of life as smooth as possible; but what mother could avoid following her sons into distant lands, and throbbing with delight when the post brought her, from time to time, tokens of their remembrance and affection, as well as tidings of their well-doing in the world. Did far distant sons know only half the pleasure which their letters impart to a mother's breast, they would not be so remiss as they often are in putting pen to paper, and telling all the news. With her, above all others, out of sight is not out of mind, but rather the reverse, and the thought of her *boys*—for they are always *boys* in her mind—causes many a wakerife night, and constitutes many a dream. The following letter is creditable to the hearts and heads of the two sons who sent it:—

“8 Ranelagh Place, Pimlico, London,
“20th October, 1814.

“Dear and Honoured Mother,—Distance has not diminished our affection, nor long absence altered our regard for a parent whom we reverence for her tenderness and love, and venerate for her motherly care and affection for all her children. Though we have not punctually corresponded with you, and though by living in a remote land we have been prevented from conversing with you face to face, and from being cheered by your conversation, and guided by your counsel like others of your children, yet our hearts entertain your image as dearly, and our minds are filled with as much respect, as if we wrote to you daily, or lived beside you.

“Our situations and prospects in life are now much altered, and perhaps sobered, since we parted from you. Both husbands, and both parents, we have become settled and sedate. Our chief felicities consist in the pleasures which our own homes afford, the love of our wives, and the artless affection of our children; and if one moment more tender than another occurs, it is, when on Sabbath evening we turn our minds from business and the ordinary anxieties of life to think on our former home, on a mother whose whole heart is composed of kindness and tenderness and care, and on a father unequalled for excellence of heart and soundness of understanding. To console our minds for absence from our native land, and separation from those whom it is our duty to love and esteem, we frequently picture out the felicities of our earlier years; our old house at the Roads, with our beloved mother, and brothers, and sisters, always composing a prominent part in the Drawing—we fancy ourselves seated happily beside you, and thus we comfort ourselves through

many an hour, which all the pleasures of London could not render supportable.

“We lament the distance at which we are placed from our beloved mother, now in the decline of life, because we might help to make her situation more comfortable by the tender assiduities of affectionate children, and by many little attentions which cheer old age and render life more pleasant; but it is in vain to bewail what is not to be remedied. Desirous, however, of rendering every assistance in our power, we authorized our brother James, with the goodness of whose heart no one who knows him is a stranger, to assist you in any manner which might be most conducive to your comfort and your health, and it will bring a bitter pang to our hearts to think that our mother accuses us of neglect, or want of affection.

“It would delight us much would our dear mother send us a letter, no matter how short or how long; the sight of words, written by that venerable hand which nursed and watched over us, would be a gratification which we cannot describe. Our wives desire to be remembered to their mother, and have the warmest wishes for her welfare. We are anxious to be remembered to our brothers and sisters. We sincerely hope that your health is better, and that your mind is cheered by the presence of your children who have the happiness to be nearer you than ourselves. With most earnest prayers for your welfare, we remain your affectionate and dutiful sons,

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“THOS. M. CUNNINGHAM.

“P.S.—Present my compliments to my brother James, and say that nothing but some of those rough occurrences which bewilder and perplex the human mind, making resolves

vain, and giving fortitude itself the look of desperation, could have prevented me from writing him long ago. I will certainly write to him before you read this.

“A. CUNNINGHAM.

“Mrs. Cunningham, Dalswinton.”

Such a letter as this must have come like balm to the mother's heart, and it was succeeded by many others of a similar import on the part of Allan, some of which we shall give anon. Of the part which the other sons took in correspondence with home we have not had opportunity to show, but though even none but Allan had existed, the mother's heart must have been delighted above measure. How kind and grateful and affectionate are all his letters to her, when with many others family claims would have diverted the attention from the parent tree! But we are now to enter upon a new era in the biography, which closed only with his death.