

PETER STILL.

OF all Thom's poetical contemporaries in the "north country" no one approached nearer to the citadel of his fame as *the* Minstrel of the North, than the humble day labourer whose name stands at the head of this paper. This may sound somewhat strange to the ears of the present generation, who know little about the man beyond what he himself has told in the autobiographic sketch prefixed to his last volume of poems; nevertheless, it is true, and no one knew so better than Thom himself. When, in 1843, "Jeanie's Lament", to the tune of "Lord Gregory", appeared in one of the popular magazines of the day, without any signature, and was being universally ascribed to Thom, and puffed up as one of his very finest productions; and shortly after, when some of the English papers were warmly discussing the question—Whether Thom or Still was the greater genius?—we can easily see some reason for Willie's marked silence in a small company of local *literati* who, in October of that year, were discussing Peter's growing fame. Yet, though Willie plainly saw that "water was going past his mill", and that more than one leaf of the laurel of the north was to grace another brow than his, the friendship between them never suffered through it; and certainly Peter had not only a warm heart towards his brother bard, but persistently looked with a brotherly, tender eye on the backslidings and shortcomings which beset his

latter years, and which his quondam friends rolled as a sweet morsel under their tongues. Peter Still was indeed one of nature's noblemen, one of the few choice spirits whom adversity could not break, nor prosperity spoil, but who possessed his soul in all its integrity and manliness in poverty, penury, and obscurity, ennobling by his character and life the humble lot he moved in from the cradle to the grave. It is comparatively easy—such is the stimulating influence of human sympathy—to battle with an adverse fate or do heroic deeds when one is so placed that the world is looking on; but to do so in obscurity, to fight, to overcome, and yet remain after all is done just as unknown as if one had fought and lost—this is the rub that tries the inherent metal of a man—which determines at once whether the dominating influences of his life come from without or spring from within.

Peter Still's father was a small farmer in the parish of Fraserburgh, where Peter was born on the 1st January, 1814. Farming life then, as well as now, had its ups and downs, and old Still, suffering from reverses of fortune, took up his abode in Cruden, and as the various members of the family grew up, they all entered service, and did what they could to smooth and comfort the declining years of their parents. It is indeed one of the most beautiful things in the family life of the Stills, and is fully revealed in the mass of papers relating to them which has been kindly placed at our service, to see the care which Peter and his brother William had for the comfort of their father—and is only equalled by the love and sympathy which bound these brothers together as if they were one. Peter took to farm service—got married ere he was out of his teens—and though far from enjoying good health, gave up the hired farm-work, and took to day-labouring at Millbank, near Peterhead. Casting peats, scouring stanks, or breaking stones from five in the morning till seven or eight at night, at the rate of 8d. for a hundred barrowfuls for the first—1s. to 1s. 4d. a day for the others—often without milk in the house for months, with a wife and bairns to keep, yet devoting the spare hours which broken weather or ill-health sent him, to poetry and the muses! Think of that ye grumblers, and ask yourselves what manner of man this was who could

so suffer and sing! Determined, however, to make his singing lessen, if possible, his suffering, he made up his mind during the early part of 1839 to try his fate in print. A brother poet, George Murray, then schoolmaster at Downiehill, gave him considerable encouragement. "I am just now come in", he writes, "from George Murray's, the furthest I have been since I fell by, and am very tired. I was over showing him some of my poems; he thinks them very good, and advises me to get them published with all speed. I had forty pages of them, and I have about forty more to write. . . . Murray told me he would give 2s. 6d. for (a copy of) the forty pages I had over to him if I would publish them". His brother William also thought well of the plan, and Peter set out to hunt for subscribers. He tells how he met a brother bard at New Pitsligo also seeking subscribers, how they talked over Mr. King, of Peterhead (their prospective printer), and his terms, and how, without being able to visit Fraserburgh, he returned with 203 names. If the booklet appeared in 1839, as he says in his autobiographic sketch that it did, it must have fallen considerably short of raising the wind to the extent its author hoped. But we strongly suspect that it did not appear then, for not only is there no reference in the letters of that period to any publication of his prior to 1842, but there are pretty broad hints of King's heavy terms being almost fatal to his ever getting before the public at all. Again, the "Rustic Rhymes", 1842, is not mentioned in the autobiographic sketch at all; the dates of his first and second ventures are there given as 1839 and 1844, an evident slip for 1842 and 1844. By this time, however, he had made acquaintance with Mathers, A. Angus, Thom, W. Cruickshank,\* and other poets, with all of whom he carried on a large correspondence. His health was exceedingly fitful, but the indomitable pluck of the man carried him through thick and thin. The injunction "whatever thy hand findeth to do,

\* William Cruickshank, the poetical "mole-catcher", was born at Bauds of Montbletton, parish of Gamrie. He was a man of superior education, having, it is said, in his earlier years, views to one of the learned professions, but met with discouragement. He resided for some time at Ellon, then at Bogbrae, Cruden, and latterly at Kinknockie, parish of Ardallie. He died suddenly on the 8th July, 1868. His poetical effusions, "Charlie Neil and other Poems", were collected and published for the behoof of his widow, in 1869.



do it with all thy might", he persistently carried into practice. Some of his notes of work are curious—for example, one of them tells, how "from 14th April to 21st June, 1841, he had cast 14,400 peats, and had some 2000 barrowfuls to row out". Again, writing to his brother, we get a bit personal analysis which reveals much of the man and his method of life. Speaking of some bit of poetry he says:—

I shall revise it as soon as possible, but none knows how little time I have to spare upon these matters during summer, always toiling late and ear' to keep in the life of myself and family. Winter is the only time—when the tempest is howling round my humble cot—or, as Tannahill has it—

When the rude wintry winds idly rave roun' our dwellin'—

then is the time (when I see that I can do nothing without) that I can compose my mind to spin a thread of rhyme. Often during the long, sickening summer's day I sigh for

Snaw on ilka hill,  
And Boreas' reign so snell.

Winter is dear to me—dear as the mountain to the wild roe. Never yet could I compose my mind to write poetry when my conscience whispered that I might be gaining a sixpence elsewhere; but when winter dared me to venture out at my peril—then was the time. Think not from what I have said above that I cast all the muses overboard in the warm weather. No, spring, summer, and autumn are the seasons that—like the bee—I provide for winter in. It is then that I lay in a store of ideas to be ready against the appointed season. There is a time for everything under the sun. There is not a day passes that I do not pick up something new either from nature or my own mind. My mind is never idle, always in exercise; it requires exercise as well as the body. Yet how many are to be met with whose minds never gave birth to one original idea they could call their own, who sleep and toil and eat, and think only of those things which lie within the sphere of their daily occupation. I have often wondered if some clowns were altogether men—if they did possess a mind or not—God pardon me the thought.

His first publication, after hanging fire for two years, was issued early in 1842, and bore the somewhat extraordinary title, "Rustic Rhymes, Sangs, an' Sonnets; by Peter Still, Poet-Laureate to his Royal Highness the Prince of Poverty, and Bard-in-Chief over the district of Buchan. Printed for the author by Robert King, Broad Street, Peterhead, 1842". This little booklet of 66 pp. gave his reputation "a heize" far higher than he expected. It received a very favourable notice from

Mr. Adam, of the *Aberdeen Herald*, who spoke of it as a work of "sterling merit;" and in the *Glasgow Sentinel* and *The Anti-bread-tax Circular* his lines, from "A Real Vision"—

I saw the widow's bosom bleed ;  
 I heard the orphan beg for bread ;  
 I saw ambition's godless greed  
     Tax every loaf ;  
 Then praise the patience of the dead,  
     Whom want cut off !

were quoted in leading articles, as the utterance of "a gifted son of toil". Contributions from his pen found their way into various newspapers and magazines; while such asylums for fugitive poetry as "Whistle Binkie" and "The Ayrshire Wreath" claimed examples of his muse—and the tide of his fame kept rising. During the summer of 1842 he was temporarily engaged by a literary gentleman near Cuminestown, to assist in arranging and copying for the press "a work on mathematics, and some information on the management of farms". This was a Mr. Anderson, at one time teacher of St. Fergus, latterly a farm overseer. Still had got acquainted with him while canvassing for subscribers, and mentions in one of his letters about spending "many a long winter evening with him over Euclid, and descanting on the wonders of science". Anderson was a superior scholar, and soon discovered how useful a man Still would be as an amanuensis—for he was a splendid penman, at once clear and swift. As winter came round again the muses once more took up their abode at Millbank, and some of the pieces which ultimately graced his volume of 1844, and many others which never saw the light in print, were thrown off during his enforced leisure. These were mostly epistles to brother bards—a species of composition in which he excelled. As a sample of these, we give a fragment of an unpublished one which occurs in a letter to his brother. He says:—

I have got acquainted with another poet since I saw you—a singing master—Jamieson, I think, is his name. He began to come in here once a week regularly as he went to his school about a month before the term, but was very shy a while, and never told me what he was. One night I was not at home, and he told Bell (Mrs. Still) that he had seen my book and was very much pleased with it, and wished to get acquainted with me. Thomas Daniel, of Cruden, sent one of his prose tales to me with him

the week following, and we had a long crack together. He sings Thom's songs to Bell, and promised to write out some things of his own and bring them to me soon. I am writing an epistle to Daniel :—

While jolly June invites the swain  
 To quat the ha' an' seek the plain,  
     An' bids the Poet sing ;  
 A noteless clown on Ugie's sward,  
 A reckless, hair-brain'd, wad-be-bard,  
     Begins his lyre to string.  
 Ye ken the monkey apes the man,  
     The man the monkey too ;  
 An' Ugie's rhymin', ravin' clown,  
     Maun sing a sang to you.  
     All hail! then, my sail, then  
     Afore the wind I'll raise,  
     An' veer now, an' steer now,  
     For Cruden's heathy braes.

Should balmy breezes deign to smile,  
 My crazy bark may swim awhile  
     An' seem a ship of note ;  
 But should some critic raise the wind,  
 (Ye ken what next—but never mind,  
     My *ship* might prove a *boat*) ;  
 Meantime in sailin' trim, ye see  
     I've got my tary muse ;  
 We'll leave auld Terra on the lee,  
     An' hae anither cruise.  
     Apollo, may follow,  
     Or sing a sang on shore  
     If wanted—uncounted ;  
     If present—little more.

Nae lang apology I'll mak',  
 Nae senseless, ceremonious crack,  
     Nor prayer, to be forgi'en  
 For daurin' thus to steal yer time  
 Perusin' at my rustic rhyme—  
     I hail ye as a frien'.  
 An' tender here my gratefu' thanks  
     For clouty 'Cummine Cheyne',  
 The tale ye sent to Ugie's banks,  
     I thank ye for't again.  
     I'm wae tho', to say tho',  
     I've naething to return ;  
     But bide yet, the tide yet  
     May soon be backward borne.



About this time, too, he composed what is in all probability his tenderest love song, the "Jeanie's Lament" mentioned above. We quote it from his MS. copy, which has some slight verbal differences from the printed version.

I never thocht to thole the waes  
 It's been my lot to dree ;  
 I never thocht to sigh sae sad,  
 Whan first I sigh'd for thee ;  
 I thocht your heart was like mine ain—  
 As true as true could be :  
 I couldna think there was a stain  
 In ane sae dear to me.

Whan first amang the dewy flowers,  
 Aside yon siller stream,  
 My artless heart was press'd to yours,  
 Nae purer did they seem ;—  
 Nae purer seem'd the draps o' dew—  
 The flowers on whilk they hung—  
 Than seem'd the heart I felt in you,  
 As to that heart I clung.

But I was young an' thochtless then,  
 An' easy to beguile ;  
 My mither's warnings hadna weight  
 'Bout man's deceitfu' smile ;  
 But noo, alas! when she is dead  
 I've shed the bitter tear,  
 An' hung my heavy, heavy head  
 Aboon my father's bier!

They saw their earthly hope betray'd ;  
 They saw their Jeanie fade ;  
 They couldna thole the heavy stroke,—  
 An' baith are lowly laid !  
 Oh, Jamie!—but thy name again  
 Sall ne'er be breathed by me,  
 For tearless through yon flowery glen  
 I'll wander till I dee.

Towards the fall of 1842 our poet had a very severe attack of rheumatism, the result of cold caught while ditching—and he was confined within doors for a long time. Tom Mathers had been talking about publishing a volume of verse, and before he left Peterhead for the fishing in the south, he handed Still a considerable bundle of MSS. to consult with Mr. King,

the printer, and settle, yea or nay, about their being put into book form. King, also, had fallen ill, and no consultation could be had, and Still found himself in a bit of a dilemma. Writing to his brother about the difficulty he felt himself in, he says:—"Mathers, you know, is so utterly destitute of the first principles of grammar that it would be a hard task to edit the work, as the slightest grammatical error in a sentence would often require the alteration of an entire stanza. Nevertheless there are many fine thoughts in his pieces, if they were brushed up a little. He wants taste, and is a little tinged with self-conceit, but is withal a fine creature—a little, lively, bustling, gabby body, about Thom's size". The "nay" had to be given, and Mathers accepted it quite cheerfully. We may note parenthetically that some ten years after this, Mathers died—just within sight of that which his poetic ambition had striven after so long—while his "Musings by Sea and Shore" were passing through the press.

With returning health, in the spring of 1843, Still found the conditions of life wretchedly bad. "The wages offered", he writes, "are a disgrace to a Christian country, 8d. per 100 barrows for peat-casting, 4d. per ton for breaking stones, and I am resolved, if God spare me, to publish another edition of my rhymes, and if I make any profit I will devote it to carry me and mine o'er the wide waters". The desire to emigrate was strong in him for a time, but he was so happily constituted that he kept his cares no longer than they kept him, and the first blink of a promised prosperity usually dispelled every tinge of gloom which had previously shadowed the course of his struggling life. A rather interesting record of a holiday visit which he paid to his poetical friend Harper at Foggieloan (now Aberchirder), in Stra'bogie, is found in a letter to a crony written 6th July, 1843. He tramped it on foot through New Deer and Turriff, starting at 4 a.m., and goes on to say:—

I arrived at Foggieloan about 6 p.m., without being in the least wearied, and received a true poetical welcome from Mr. Harper and his amiable wife. After partaking of tea, he showed me "The Land of Burns", a splendid work, which you have doubtless seen noticed in the public journals, although your purse and mine are too short to enable us to gratify our taste by becoming purchasers. I have never seen such a galaxy of splendid engravings, but the one which most deeply affected me



was a portrait of the Rev. J. Skinner, author of *Tullochgorum*, and a countryman of our own. The portrait bears a strong resemblance to the Cummings, his grandchildren, especially to the Rev. J. Cumming, Longside, before he began to fade 'neath the withering hand of time. Mr. Harper also showed me the proof-sheets of a poem by himself—"Excursions on Deveronside, &c., by a Deveronside Poet". A perusal of this poem, which is in the style of Lord Byron's "Pilgrim", has raised my ideas of Mr. H.'s ability as a poet to a very high pitch indeed; and much as I esteemed his abilities from what of his work I had previously seen, my admiration is raised still further and further when I look at the *man* as well as the *poet*. Mr. Harper is in all respects a very amiable character, possessing all the fire of the poet, along with the feelings of the man; perhaps a little too sweeping in his censures on teetotalers and the Non-Intrusionists; but, take him all in all, I have never seen any one so much to my mind as Mr. H. There is no pride, no self-conceit, no jealousy, and, what I like better than all the rest, no affectation in his nature; he is single-hearted and sincere, unpretending yet interesting in his conversation, and homely in his manners. To sum up all in one sentence—he is a man after my own heart. . . . Mr. Harper and I went to Mr. Cooper's inn, to show our independence of the teetotalers, and having met some congenial spirits we enjoyed ourselves freely, but not to excess. In the afternoon I was taken to the chapel of the village to see a seraphine, a musical instrument something resembling a piano, and used in places of worship for leading the sacred music. Mr. H. is performer on Sundays, and he played me a few tunes to show me the way of the instrument. . . . We returned to Mr. H.'s, and I took leave of all the members of his family, as I intended starting early next morning. He seemed sorry at my departure, and requested a few parting verses as a memorial of my visit to Stra'bogie.\*

During the trying times of ill-health and little work which proceeded the publication of "Poems and Songs" in April, 1844, an incident occurred which gives us more than a glimpse of the manly independent spirit which animated Still to an

\* Alexander Harper was a native of Banffshire, the son of a miller at Inverkeithing, and born there in the year 1782. While a young man he enlisted in the Royal Artillery; and was, during the five years he served, stationed at Woolwich, and rose to the rank of a non-commissioned officer. On leaving the army he returned to his native place, and took to farming. He published at Aberdeen in 1810, a lengthy poem of very unequal merit—"Ryando and Helmina, or the Mirror of Love". After being for some time tenant of the farm of Little Blackton, he removed to Gellymill, near Banff, and while there published the poem referred to in the above letter, "Summer Excursions in the Neighbourhood of Banff",—a considerable advance on his juvenile work. He latterly gave up farming, and spent his last years in retirement at Huntly. In 1852 he issued a collected edition of his poetical works, entitled "Fruits of Solitary Hours", wherein, along with revised editions of his earlier publications, a large body of fresh matter, in songs, ballads, and epistles, gave the work a literary value much beyond common. He died at Huntly, 22nd Dec., 1858.

eminent degree, and which was then, much more than now, characteristic of our rural population altogether. We refer to the subject of charity. No one esteemed more than he the kindly gifts by which dear friends often cheered his chequered lot, but on this occasion, a farmer's wife in the vicinity had sent round about the locality for subscriptions, or, as he called it when he came to hear of it, "begging siller", to relieve him in the long spell of illness which had overtaken him. The thought of it roused him to the very foundation. He sat up in bed, wrote a letter to the lady telling what he had heard of her "mistaken kindness", refusing to allow a copper of it to enter his door, and requesting it to be returned to the subscribers. This letter Bell (Mrs. Still) carried to the farm; the lady sniffed at his "selfish pride" and told Bell to take the money and never say anything about it. "Na! please peace I winna—I wad seener work thae ten fingers to the stumps than tak' a bawbee o't", said his plucky helpmate, and returned to her duties at the sick man's bed! He was so incensed about it that he wrote out and posted a notice anent it on the Old Mills. If the poet's "selfish pride" lost him some friends, it certainly gained him many more.

His new volume, as we have said, was issued in April, 1844, and his ardent desire now was to get, if possible, into a croft, if the money would only come up. He had not only included the best of his former publication in its pages; but a lengthy metrical tale—"Robin and Mary"—numerous epistles to his brother bards (his best work), and a variety of songs of considerable merit made up a volume of over 150 pp., which was soon to bring him into notice in the proper quarter. It attracted the attention of Mrs. Jack (wife of Principal Jack, King's College, Old Aberdeen), who not only communicated directly with the poet, but brought his merits prominently before her friends, Sir Michael Bruce, Dr. Daun, and others, and immediately set him to work on preparing a new edition. He had now removed to Peterhead—for he could never endure Millbank after "the begging affair"—and there received fresh hopes of ultimate success in a kindly letter from Robert Chambers, of Edinburgh, who "writes flatteringly of my poems", and promised his influence and assistance in helping off the new edition then in contemplation.



The "Poems and Songs" were very favourably noticed in some of the leading magazines; friends started up on all hands, and by March, 1845, "The Cottar's Sunday", one of his highest attempts in the region of poesy, was already written as a suitable leading poem for a new edition. The MS. went the round of his patrons, who were busying themselves in various ways to benefit the poet and his family, and Still began to have strong expectations of the long-looked-for "bright day that would yet dawn on Ugieside". He now started on his journey southward in quest of subscribers, not, as some of those who have written sketches of his life say, on a lionising tour under the wings of patronage—he never fell a victim to that species of celebrity. Writing to his brother from "7 Drummond Street, Edinburgh", on 25th April, 1845, he says, "My success is far beyond my highest expectations", and he goes on enumerating his subscribers:—"The Messrs. Chambers, of the *Journal*, £2 2s.; Dr. Murray, who befriended the Bethunes, £1; Captain Gray, the poet, 10s.; Professor Wilson, 6s.; Ballantine, the poet, 3s., Gilfillan, the poet, 3s", and a host of others, making in all "£20 in nine working days". A "Mrs. Hay in London has ordered 100 copies, taking the risk of selling them, and paying full prices to me". From Edinburgh he went to Glasgow in May—his Edinburgh subscription amounting in all to £21 11s.—and got introduced to a number of literary friends there. His letters during his three journeys south are full of interesting gossip about the minor poets of the time—most of whom he became personally acquainted with. "I have learned in Edina", he writes, "that some of the finest 'Whistle Binkie' poets are poor, dissipated mortals". William Miller, Alexander Maclagan, and David Vedder are referred to in somewhat uncomplimentary terms. "I saw Gilfillan, Captain Gray, and Alexander Smart. Smart is a very respectable man, a printer in Edina. Captain Gray is not a man, he is altogether a spirit—walks the street like a whirlwind, and talks like a steam engine. Gilfillan is rather of a cold, forbidding aspect, but was very civil". Five days after he says:—"I have seen Sandy Rodger; and D. Robertson, publisher of 'Binkie,' has been very kind to me. He told me that next 'Binkie' would appear about the end of the year, and asked something from me before it



comes out. He says much depends upon Rodger as to the exact time of publishing it, and remarked, with a smile, that ‘Sandy is ill for *gaun doon the water at times!*’ I have seen Andrew Park, author of ‘Hurrah for the Highlands’ and other fine songs. He is a very respectable-like man, a bookseller, and has presented me with most of his poetry, and some of his songs set to music”. From Glasgow he had to make a speedy return homeward, however, owing to the illness of his canvasser who accompanied him. Still was so deaf—had been so, long before his earliest publication—that he could hardly go alone to any strange place without a companion—the slate, which he usually handed to those who would converse with him, would have been a bad introduction to the subscribing business.

When “The Cottar’s Sunday and other Poems” was ready for the public in July, he again turned south to deliver the work to his subscribers. While in Edinburgh he consented to submit to an operation on his ear—had brought his wife with him to attend him—but, after full examination, it was deemed more prudent not to operate, as no good results were likely to be obtained. He returned to Peterhead, and began to look out for a croft, as the money now coming in was highly gratifying—£24 from Calcutta—£26 from London for 150 copies—and an order for 50 more copies for Calcutta. Besides, the Rev. Henry Christmas, Dr. Forbes, of London, and some others were making the initial moves for a grant from the Literary Fund on his behalf, and had great hopes of success in doing so. About this time, as a set-off to all these good things, a writer in the *Aberdeen Banner*, in an article on “The Small Poets of Aberdeen and Banff”, roused Still’s ire very considerably by the petty venom of his criticism of “Poems and Songs”. He replied to “the Reverend small critic of the *Banner*” in a letter as bitterly sarcastic as could well be, and George Murray, another of the *small* poets, then studying at Marischal College, also retaliated, but both speedily saw that they could well afford to ignore any such adversary in future. A very appreciative notice of Still and his book from the pen of Hugh Miller appeared in *The Witness* newspaper, a notice which Still was particularly proud of, coming from such a quarter and from such a man. Meantime he

was knocking about the country side, now here, now there, looking at crofts which were to let, but none of them seemed likely to prove advantageous at the terms offered. He once more turned southward to sell what remained of his "Cottar", and his letters at this time are not only full of interesting gossip, but contain not a few poems written during the journey, which have remained hitherto uncollected.

It was in Edinburgh at this time that he learned that the General Committee of the Royal Literary Fund had voted him £30, and in a hasty letter written to his brother on receipt of the news he says:—"You must now allow me to put a stone at the head of my mother's grave at my own expense. It is a debt I have long wished to pay to one of the very best of mothers. Would she not have rejoiced had she lived to see me so highly honoured?"

No pompous epitaph will I display  
 Above my mother's venerable clay;  
 'Tis plenty if I whisper, with a tear,  
 That *all a mother's heart* is mould'ring here".

This needs no comment: the bond that links a mother's memory to the moment of one's highest fame is a nobler possession than even fame itself. Before leaving Edinburgh he called on Dr. Candlish and Dr. Lee in the way of trade, and found them "two of the most fiery particles of humanity I have met in the whole course of my wanderings. They are both little men, and their *wee* bodies appear to be inhabited by the same little spirit. Both sprung from me—would not look at my book—darted into their rooms, dashing the doors behind them 'with all the fury of scalded fiends', as Gilfillan said of Byron". Passing through Glasgow and Paisley, Still wound his way to Ayr, from whence he writes:—

I am now in the "land of Burns", and a most beautiful land it certainly is. I have seen nothing that can be called romantic; but for chaste and varied beauty I think the banks of the Doon cannot be surpassed. Every glen, every green plantation, and every gowany brae seems teeming with poetry. What a profusion of wild flowers are here! Pretty gems they are, and countless as the sands on the sea shore. Nature has been more liberal of these charming "wildlings" on the banks of Doon and Ayr than on the cold and desolate banks of Ugie. I gathered and kissed them as if I had been a child!

Ae wee bit gem o' bonnie blue  
 I pu'ed it wi' a sigh ;  
 Beside the brig o' Doon it grew,  
 As pure's an angel's eye !

The following from his MS. " Poetical Ledger " was written at this time :—

STANZAS TO UGIE.

*Written on the banks of Ayr.*

Dear stream of my heart, thou art far, far away,  
 And long have I sighed to be near thee ;  
 For nought, save the pang that recalls me to clay,  
 From the folds of my bosom can tear thee.

Ah ! there thou art blended with all that I love  
 In my moments of thought to remember—  
 The joys which were mine in my April grove,  
 Ere I thought of my leafless November !

\* \* \* \* \*

Thou hast heard our vows, while the minstrel moon  
 Like an angel was watching o'er us ;  
 And thy wavelets sung us a soothing tune  
 As we talked of the pleasures before us.

But her voice no more my closed ear  
 From its silence deep can awaken ;  
 And why am I dreaming a dream so dear  
 When the leaves of that love-rose are shaken ?

O ! Nature is strong, and this heart of mine  
 Is lonely, thoughtful, and tender !  
 Though here by the song-hallowed Ayr I recline,  
 My spirit to Ugie must wander !

The mavis will haunt his favourite grove  
 And the eagle his chosen mountain ;  
 And the stately deer to the scene of his love  
 Will return from the distant fountain.

O ! what are the beauties of Ayr to me  
 When far from my Ugie I wander,  
 Were it not for the might of the minstrelsy  
 That made Scotland her love-homage render ?

The song-sweeten'd streams of this honour'd land,  
 I feel that I love and adore them ;  
 But the Ugie ('tis bound by a dearer band)  
 Takes a hold of my bosom before them.



I have sigh'd by the Deveron's waters deep  
 And the murmurs of Ythan have warm'd me ;  
 While the Dee and the Don, 'mong their mountains steep,  
 With a transient rapture have charmed me.

I have looked on the Esk with a feasting eye,  
 And bathed in the lovely Leven ;  
 And left, to the wandering winds, a sigh  
 By the Teith, by the Forth, and the Devon.

I have sung by the Tay's majestic tide ;  
 I have mused by the " dark winding Carron ;"  
 And sailed on the bosom of beautiful Clyde,  
 From the Kelvin to lofty Arran.

I have looked on the Isla, the Earn, and the Cart,  
 On the Irvine, the Doon, and the Avon ;  
 But Ugie's the stream that can water my heart  
 Till I feel it's affection's haven !

Perhaps while I sing,—by that dear lov'd stream  
 My *darlings* the wild flowerets gather ;  
 And memory may sadden their blissful dream  
 With a sigh for their absent father.

Dear stream of my heart, thou art far, far away !  
 O, I wish I were wand'ring near thee ;  
 For nought, save the pang that recalls me to clay,  
 From the folds of my bosom can tear thee !

Ayr, 8th May, 1846.

Shortly after his return home in 1846 his father died at the advanced age of eighty-five—and ere the lapse of many months unmistakable foreshadowing of his own end appeared in a frequent spitting of blood. He had taken the Blackhouse Toll Bar—but was still keen for a croft, and was promised " one of the very best and most beautiful in Buchan ". On his visit to it, how he sighed for " health and strength to toil nineteen years on that bonnie brae—to make it a Paradise, a Parnassus, and the pride of Buchan ! " But it was not to be. The Toll was paying fairly well, but although this might not have kept him back, the continual decline in his health put a complete barrier to any such experiment. In June, 1847, a blood-vessel ruptured, and from then till the weary end he was practically unable for any kind of work, though he frequently struggled

to relieve his folks at collecting tolls. He died sitting in his chair by the fireside at Blackhouse Toll Bar on 21st March, 1848, aged thirty-four.

Of Still's published works, "The Cottar's Sunday, and other Poems. Aberdeen: G. & R. King, 1845", contains all his best pieces—the booklets of 1842 and 1844 being practically reprinted there. Like most of our obscure poets, he sang from the sheer love of singing, and published from necessity. His earliest verses, which we have seen in manuscript, and written probably in 1838 and '39, are extremely crude productions, giving little indication of the lyrical smoothness and ease which he seems to have reached at a bound about 1840 and '41. His appetite for reading during his early years was most voracious: every scrap of printed matter, more especially those of a poetical kind, was devoured with astonishing rapidity. On all subjects relating to Church or State, more particularly on questions of current politics, he all his life took a keen interest—indeed, it was in connection with one of these—the non-intrusion controversy—that his muse first reached the level of mediocrity. Burns, however, seemed to have formed the grooves in his nature in which his genius for the most part moved—and although no imitator, in any offensive sense of the word, he could never in certain attitudes shake himself clear of turns of thought and forms of expression which the genius of his great forerunner had branded into his nature. In "The Death of Bacchus", for instance, though the tale has no earthly resemblance to "Tam o' Shanter", the reflective and apostrophic passages which break its current every now and again are essentially in the manner of Burns, and are suggested as such to the reader just as certainly as his lines "To a Lark" suggests "To a Mouse". Again, Still persisted to the last in believing his "Cottar's Sunday" to be his best work, and resented, with a kind of bitterness quite foreign to the nature of the man, any suggestion of its being modelled after, or an imitation of, Burns's immortal "Cottar". He records, in discussing this matter with the Messrs. Chambers, in Edinburgh, a good example of what the schoolmen termed *ignorantio elenchi*, and seems himself to be honestly satisfied with the conclusion, though the fallacy was apparent to everyone else. "One

of them", he says, "hinted that my imitation of Burns would prove fatal to my 'Cottar's Sunday'; I simply remarked that I thought 'The Cottar's Sunday' very unlike 'The Holy Fair', which was the only *Sunday* described by Burns, and I think the remark is quite true". True it certainly is, but it is beside the point. The whole devotional section of "The Cottar's Sunday" is but an amplification of the devotional side of Burns's "Cottar's Saturday Night", and no one can read it without feeling that it is so. This influence of Burns upon him is the more astonishing when we find that of all Scottish poets the one that lay nearest his heart was Tannahill. While fully admitting that Burns's fame would live "to the last syllable of recorded time", he nevertheless, in one of his letters, excuses a digression from "the land of Burns" to "the land of Tannahill" by saying, "I cannot help doing so; poor Tannahill has a firmer hold of my heart than Burns with all his fame can ever have", and he launches away into the beauties of Gleniffer and Glen Feoch.

Many of "The Cottar's" stanzas, especially its opening ones, are instinct with true poetry. As for instance:—

O how delightfu' dawns that blissfu' morn,  
 Whan nature wears her lov'liest robes o' green!  
 Whan fairest flow'rets ilka field adorn,  
 An joyous June leuks lauchin o'er the scene!  
 The cottar frae his ha' comes forth alane,  
 An' doun his rigs or kail-yard saunters slow;  
 Wi' thoughts contemplative, wi' soul serene,  
 He marks the dewy daisies round him blow,  
 While, borne on wings o' love, his feelings heavenward flow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then, turning round to view that lowly ha'  
 For whose lov'd inmates thus he intercedes,  
 He sees his partner dear wi' *hawkies* twa,  
 Whilk o'er the craft to some hained rig she leads;  
 Wi' quickened steps, to meet her on he speeds,  
 An' tentie tethers ane or baith the kye;  
 Leuks gin the *branks* be sicker on their heads,  
 For fear o' scaith to barley, aits, or rye—  
 Synie bids his Katie mark the lovely mornin' sky.

Returning home, we are introduced to the following capital fireside piece:—



The *wee-things* now demand a mither's care,  
 As blythesome frae their lowly beds they rise ;  
 Nae nurse, nae governess stands ready there—  
 A parent's hand their ilka want supplies ;  
 Ilk little Sunday suit, neat folded, lies  
 In press, or drawer, or auld ancestral chest,  
 Hamespun an' plain ; yet, how they a' rejoice,  
 An' deem themsels like lairds or ladies drest,  
 Whan weekly on they're put, to grace the day o' rest !

The anxious father sees their kindling pride,  
 An' checks the germs o' vanity while green ;  
 The modest mither, too, will haufliins chide,  
 Their little hearts frae love o' dress to wean,  
 Yet weel she likes to see them neat an' clean,  
 An' weel she plays her part to keep them sae ;  
 An' aften tells that claes, however mean,  
 If duly wash'd and bleach'd on sunny brae,  
 Are braw enough for bairns to wear on ony day.

Beneath a load o' three-score years an' ten,  
 Wi' staff in hand, an' earthward bendin' sair,  
 Auld *grannie* now comes hoolie creepin' ben,  
 An' seeks the neuk whare stands her auld arm-chair.  
 A cushion, saft and clean, awaits her there,  
 An' doun she sits : the *wee-things* shaw their pride  
 By welcome words, an' warm affection's air—  
 The language o' the heart that winna hide—  
 For blythe are they, I trow, whan seatit by her side.

Nowhere, however, do we see more of the man as he lived and moved and had his being than in the numerous epistles he sent to his poetical friends. The whole philosophy of his life—if such life as his may be allowed to involve a philosophy—the sources of his hopes, his inspirations, the secret of his joyous, buoyant happiness, how he became “a match for Fate”, and found contentment in adversity, are laid before us in an easy undress, homely enough, no doubt, but far more relishable than anything in his more laboured productions.

Among the miscellaneous poems his metrical tale “Robin and Mary”—in the familiar style once made popular by the genius of Hector Macneil—and his story of “The Wanderer” might well have been condensed with considerable advantage. Indeed, among the pieces in this section, “A Real Vision”,

inspired by the condition of the country under the villanous Bread Tax, and one of his earliest productions, is marked by a pith and power he never surpassed. His songs have, in general, a fine flow of subtle tenderness in them—a quality which Thom alone, of all his contemporaries, surpassed him in. We have already given “Jeanie’s Lament”; here is another equally fine:—

THE GLEN O’ THE WEST.

O ken ye the glen whare the wee burnie rows?  
 Or ken ye the bower whare the daffodil grows?  
 Or ken ye the lassie that languishes there  
 Like the shelterless flower in the keen mountain air?  
 I wad tell ye her name, but my heart says me na,  
 An’ the glen maun be nameless an’ kenless to a’;  
 An’ there’s nane in the warld kens the dool that I dree,  
 Sin’ the day that it first shed its licht on my e’e.

But, the glen o’ the west—O the glen o’ the west,  
 An’ the lassie that dwalls in the glen o’ the west;  
 There’s a glance in her e’e that disturbs aye my rest,  
 An’ wiles me awa to the glen o’ the west.

Yet I daurna be seen in yon love-haunted glen,  
 Tho’ I dream o’t an’ sing o’t, again an’ again;  
 The lassie that wons in’t wad welcome me there,  
 But I daurna be seen in its bowers ony mair;  
 For her daddie has gowd, an’ her mammie has pride,  
 An’ my lassie is doom’d to be some baron’s bride;  
 While I, hapless wicht, at the tail o’ the plough,  
 Wi’ a pennyless purse, their ambition maun rue.

But, the glen o’ the west—O the glen o’ the west,  
 An’ the woun’ that I gat i’ the glen o’ the west,  
 It will soon be my dead, an’ whan ance I’m at rest,  
 O, ye’ll bury me deep i’ the glen o’ the west.

He has, moreover, added one imperishable song to the popular repertory, and very likely the one he did not expect to take such a position—his only humorous song—“Ye needna be courtin’ at me, auld man”. It really divides the palm with Macneil’s “Come under my plaidie”.

It is common, and as useless as it is common, to regret that Fortune does not place such men as Still in more favourable circumstances, and also to speculate on what such a man might have done had he been what is called “educated”, and had he

not been so heavily handicapped in the struggle for existence. As we have just said, such speculations and regrets are useless, for, had Peter Still been in any other circumstances than in the poverty which he ennobled, it is doubtful if we would have had the pleasure of writing this sketch. The hard lot, natural though it be to regret it, made the man what he was; a smoother path of life might have given us a conventional respectability, but it would not have given us the Peter Still of whom Buchan men and women may justly be proud.