



PART SECOND:  
MID-DAY - ABOVE THE SOIL.



UT whilst he fares thus onwards, let us now, most scrupulous and respectable brother, sacred wife and spotless daughter, talk for a moment concerning him. You have seen his poems, you have heard his evil report, and you have complaints of your own, perhaps, to make against this wondrous wayfarer. That strange, new-found, winged companion of his will rear and neigh, and trespass, and disturb your world; the man himself, with reckless indifference, will scatter thistle-down over the hedges into your finest wheat, and cockles into your choicest barley—his pipe in the meantime stounding too loosely, or too keen. What then? You desire me to interfere and check his freedom, or to follow and repair his wrong or reckless doing? This I may not, dare not do. But let me, on the other hand, inquire—Would you consent, at any price whatever, for all his shameless gambolling, to have that fire-breathing winged charger from the clouds expelled from your coasts? Who was it that sowed for you, out of his own bosom, this sweetest grain of love you now cherish? and cultivated for you, at his own risk, this polished awn of wit and humour? Who so gladdened for you these very fields, in which you now complain he is a trespasser? and provided for you, there, the wheat of wisdom and truth you garner so jealously? The very man who left the thistle-down and cockle-seed behind him. Shall I then presume to pluck these up? with Pharisaical hand, to collect and burn them? or with insolent ungrateful effrontery, to fling them in his face? This, least of all will I ever do, or think of doing. Am I therefore an approver of their growth? My answer is No: but they came there without my knowledge, along with the corn itself; and must remain where they are, with or without my will, till the time of the harvest come, when the angels of sympathy and forgetfulness will gather them.

But is it not strange, my friends, that this world of ours should continue still to insist on its own richest draught of love, on its own fullest feast of humour, on its own most exquisite accompaniment of song; and have neither pity, nor excuse, nor forgiveness for the passion, or the recklessness, or the frenzy that must inevitably go along with these?—inevitably; for never in this world were they separate. This heart that bleeds we rifle of all its sweetness, this hand that so lavishly bestows we rob of all its treasures, these lips that trill out for us, till they decay, the most ravishing melodies, we hang upon like selfish birds, as long as they will yield and vibrate; and all that then remains of passion, of folly, of sin, of sorrow itself, and perhaps of despair—the very elements through which this distilled elixir of threefold inspiration was obtained, we reprobate and cast forth under foot of men, with censorious alarm and indignation, as salt that has lost its saltness. The passion that grew into a furnace, the humour that was allied to profanity, and the music that was based upon dread scarce-audible echoes from the deep, and that flowed out of them—we will have none of these! We have drunk of the sweetest, we have eaten of the richest, the residue we spurn at with our feet; and the poor exhausted soul that supplied them, with its own inward cross to bear, of self-reproach and

sadness, may fare forth upon eternity, for us, at its own risk and leisure. What then, in this matter, is to be done? Shall I seal up the water of the dangerous well, and pretend that I never saw it? or tear out the tree of forbidden fruit, and swear falsely that it never grew on these pages? I can do neither; and the result of attempting it would be simply to send you, the most scrupulous and timid objector, to that very well for guilty draughts of water, to that very tree for theftuous purloining of fruit. They will do less harm as they are, unnoticed and undisguised, than screened under all the falsehoods and denials, or within all the hedges in the world.

But whilst we thus reason, the wayfarer himself, astride now upon his steed, approaches the habitations of men. He enters the city, not yet aware of his coming, almost *incognito*; secures a modest lodging there, according to Cunningham and Chambers, with an old Mauchline friend, John Richmond, the writer's clerk—most beautiful youthful recognition and friendship, this; and at his leisure, from the heights above, surveys the old grey town: salutes afterwards affectionately the vacant dwelling-place of Ramsay, with uplifted hat, enquiring for the 'Shepherd's shop;' and the grave of Ferguson on bended knee, with his lips—not ostentatiously, but with quiet reverence, being himself as yet utterly unrecognised.\* He shall have a further tribute of respect for Ferguson by and by, who certainly sleeps there, although his name is not yet inscribed upon the ground. That acknowledgment is well reserved by fate, for Robert Burns's own gratitude to the lad whose youthful tongue inspired him. His introduction to Henry Erskine, at the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, now takes place; after which Glencairn, Monboddie, and the rest all follow. Dugald Stewart speaks, Henry Mackenzie writes, Her Grace of Gordon presides; Robertson, Blair, Adam Ferguson, Gregory, Tytler, draw near; the Caledonian Hunt *en masse* receives him, and in its records resolves to patronise him. In a word, all Edinburgh awakes, and rises, and rushes out by day and night to welcome him with pride into her loftiest and her lowliest homes; is moved with love and admiration in her inmost exclusive heart—not without a smile on her sternest brow, or a blush upon her fairest cheek. Here comes one of God's chosen, and it behoves this little old world of wisdom, wit, and beauty—this eye of Europe, and focus of intelligence for the moment—to receive the wayfaring soul gladly and graciously. It must be beyond a moment's doubt to anybody, that every minister and philosopher among them; every wit, every woman even (who were then the brightest wits as well), had read and re-read that handful of lyrics; had filled up easily all its suspicious blanks, and interpreted without any reserve its most objectionable figures. Yet nobody seemed to feel either repugnance or alarm, and nobody affected squeamishness. The magnet that lay hidden in that small Kilmarnock volume drew them all. The nobility bowed frankly, the clergy without reserve coveted an introduction, the wealthy citizen and the aced squire vied in hospitality; judges and philosophers wondered at, and women listened to him with distraction—some of them, it would seem at this distance, at the risk of their reputation, listened too long: out of all which grew a new world of life for him, and the most ecstatic noonday existence. To prepare for this ovation, and enable him to take part in this public universal fete in his own honour, his personal exterior, as was reasonable, must undergo some change. The dark-blue coat "o' his mither's makin' and his mither's sewin'," gives place accordingly to a more fashionable suit, of political significance, as the custom then was; and the long black hair that "swirled atowre his shouthers" is confined, *à la mode*, in a bag; the hodden grey and corduroy are replaced by buckskins; and a broad-brimmed stylish hat completes the attire: but the heart, the eye, the incomparable tongue can suffer no change. So walks he among the astonished throng, so speaks he among delighted listeners, as woodland Apollo might—as the representative and beau-ideal of unsophisticated Scottish life and eloquence had a right to do.

Such life, without almost any diminution of its excessive excitement, continued for an entire season; but the whole period of ecstatic spiritual exaltation for Robert Burns, which we denominate

\* A similar act of devotion at the tomb of Robert Bruce in Dunfermline Abbey afterwards, although performed in the presence of witnesses, in the days of his own glory, was no doubt equally profound and genuine.

his mid-day existence, and which began with this, his first visit to Edinburgh, extended considerably farther, and included much more. It may be computed by about half as many years at least, as months that were now occupied in triumph. Brief but wonderful was that noon, thronged with incident, and brimful of energy and labour. Chronologically, it included his enthusiastic reception by the highest society in the capital, his presentation to the Metropolitan Lodge, to the Caledonian Hunt, to all other associations, public or private, whose patronage was desirable; the spontaneous homage of rank and beauty; the attentions of the learned, the admiration of wits, the applause of the world; the accidental interview with, and prophetic recognition of the boy Walter Scott.

It included also, not without the usual amount of commercial mortification, a new and enlarged edition of his poems, with the ultimate receipt of some £500, lovingly and dutifully shared, by gifts or loans, with the household at Mossgiel; included, as consequent thereupon, his various tours through Berwickshire and the north of England, through the Highlands by Inverary, Lochlomond and Dumbarton, home; again, with his friend Nicol in questionable humour, by Dunkeld, Castle-Gordon, and Inverness; with ducal hospitalities, intercourse and correspondence, by speech and letter-writing, with lords and ladies and literary celebrities everywhere, and unlimited social enjoyment with all sorts of company, both high and low; with return again to Edinburgh, and the introduction to 'Clarinda.' Above all, it included for himself domestically his own marriage, his definite settlement in life, the abortive experiment at Ellisland, the beginning of the gaugership in reality, and the removal to Dumfries, with a thousand intermediate delusive dreams of extrication from this whirlpool of sunshine, and unstable resolutions to alter or retrieve his destiny; to do something higher, grander, better, in conformity with the hopes—one may also say the supplications of the world, and more worthy of himself than ever: the thing itself actually, and not altogether unwittingly, done, during this very epoch—this brief ecstatic interval of seductive light—in letters and in song-writing, being grander and better of its kind, than anything of the sort hitherto achieved by the hand of man.

The most prominent, distinguishable event, in the very foreground of this period, was no doubt the metropolitan edition of his poems; in which not only his countrymen of all ranks at home, but many influential associations of their number abroad, took a most affectionate brotherly interest. It was in a certain sense fortunate for Burns, that the original selection from his own manuscript works was imperfect. So much beauty already presented to the world, with such a residue forthcoming, was a very rare phenomenon indeed in the history of literary reputations. Besides recent efforts, much of what had already been written, and hitherto suppressed, both in songs and other compositions, was now added to the acknowledged store, and this second edition of his works became thus like another inheritance of fame. 'The Brigs of Ayr,' and 'Address to the Unco Guid,' gave a new idea at once of his powers and of his character, in the very same field in which he had already achieved so wonderful a triumph; whilst 'Death and Dr. Hornbook,' 'The Ordination,' and some other pieces of similar stamp, now for the first time heard, in another department, convulsed mankind almost beyond the bounds of decorum. Indications of modesty like this, in the reservation of such masterpieces, we meet with everywhere throughout. 'Tam o' Shanter,' by and by, shall be gifted away to help the fortunes of a distressed English gentleman: 'Holy Willie's Prayer' and the 'Jolly Beggars' together must be disinterred after the author's death, from among the waste papers of his friends! It is only the richest soul, after all, that can afford to be lavishly indifferent about wealth: the churl above all others, in intellect or in purse, must be cursed with some secret pressure of poverty. But the great events of the epoch were undoubtedly, for him, his introduction to society and his settlement in life; and for the world at large, his letters and his songs. These exhaust it: but the enormous accumulation of excitement that was crowded into this period, which extended at the very utmost to some three or four years, and in its intensest whirl to but a few months only, can be best understood by a glance at the correspondence it produced, and the songs that were indited in the interval. A volume would not suffice for the satisfactory illustration of its details. Besides letters

innumerable, published and unpublished (which, to judge by those we see, must have constituted a mass of correspondence almost incredible), of endless variety, of exquisite taste and style, overflowing with humour, with wisdom, with love—on all sorts of topics, to all sorts of persons; there appear in bold relief, beyond other compositions, ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and ‘The Whistle,’ ‘Auld Langsyne’ and ‘Of a’ the Airts the Wind can Blaw,’ with the first instalment at least of those hundred and fifty or two hundred songs for nothing, that unparalleled offering of love and genius to the reputation of his country. Letter-writing and song were the recreation and relief, and triumph of his noonday being.

This season of epistolary correspondence, in fact, was like a new lease of intellectual life for Burns, which he entered on with a prodigality of display, and an exuberance of enjoyment, beyond the imagination of his most enthusiastic friends. The faculty itself was not untried, but hitherto practically dormant. For such achievements he had long been silently preparing, in secret competition with the finest models then extant, and a few desultory flights at Mauchline, when the first compliments of the world required a formal acknowledgment, showed what he might be tempted to do; but such an outpouring of the gift through so many channels was a phenomenon of eloquence and ease, of versatility and tact, not to be dreamt of by the most partial admirers of his genius. The highest craft of mere scholarship, with policy, conventional sentiment, and knowledge of the world combined, could not have equalled this. It was in reality another phase of the man’s own rich soulful existence, unfolded by the sun, and diffused by the atmosphere. The sunshine of popularity it undoubtedly was that liberated this golden butterfly *imago* of his soul, which had long been slumbering half-conscious in the chrysalis of peasant life, unknown among the cold woodland foggage of poverty, and sent it forth on the mottled wings of a thousand epistles, to astonish and delight the world; illuminating the solemnest shades of aristocratic life, like some capricious visitant of the woods, and flitting with conscious fascination of superior beauty over the choicest garden groups of grace and fashion; darting homely through the open lattice, among kind old friends, on the earthen floor, to beautify and cheer with its exquisite lustre the scenes where it once had slumbered; and glancing like the dragon-fly with a flash, through the haze of revelry and mirth. This whole period of letter-writing, indeed, seems to have been a holiday of rapture for Burns, in which he soared and swung through the atmosphere, till life could sustain it no longer. His soul, without the limits or exhaustion of poetic speech, could expatiate and digress continually on the gravest or the lightest themes, and threw itself thus beyond the bounds of critical restraint, with a levity that was at last provoking. Spiritual *imago*, therefore, we may truly designate the whole of this winged epistolary efflorescence of the soul; for not the very soul of Burns, but only the express noontide image and midsummer offspring of the soul—a thing begotten of the soul, and very like the soul, liberated by auspicious contact with the world, was here; the soul itself, intense and uniform, appearing never but with immortal music as its medium. During the same epistolary period, the very soul, no doubt, was often in its own zenith of revelation too, shining together with the mere *imago*; a more ethereal and constant type of life, floating along with and close beside it, but easily distinguishable from it by any attentive eye. Nay, so closely sometimes do they fly together, that the soul, in jeopardy of its birthright, seems now and then to drift into eternity asleep on the perishable wing of some audacious epistle. Psyche, at noon, borne off by a butterfly, the reverse of what it should be, seems to be the type of such phenomenon.

The great question at this crisis of his life now to be determined, was the influence of society on his intellectual and moral nature—a question perhaps more easily determined now, than it could have been at the time. That influence, upon the whole, appears to have been merely stimulating; the result being development, and not transformation. His power of assimilation to the world in its best and in its worst phases, without abandoning, or very much modifying himself, was indeed the wonderful fact in his spiritual history. In speech, in manners, in style, in what must be called sin itself, he became a man of the world as by instinct; but was always the same Burns—the same Robert

Burns. He was better known, more pronounced, more published among mankind, in his amazing strength, capacity, versatility, and concomitant weakness; but there was nothing false or new in the whole process. The vapour and the fire expanding in a sunny cloud, with thick attendant wasteful darkness, are the same elements after all that propel the space-devouring engine—the same, but no longer latent; in him, alas! no longer sacred—their grand force already partly spent, and to be replenished only by a continual destructive drain on his whole constitution. This altogether unusual display of intellectual power and beauty must have been an entertainment for the world, fascinating and instructive beyond example. It must have flattered, and piqued the world besides, not a little. The world could not, without self-gratulation, behold its manners, its follies, its very vices adopted so freely by such a man; nor without pique could it observe that this child of the soil, all uninstructed and without a master of ceremonies, could step into its inmost sanctuary of fashion without difficulty or mistake: and it is the highest imaginable proof of his own modesty and goodness, that the world, with all its jealousy in such an hour of surprise, did not quarrel with him. There would have been no toleration assuredly, if the slightest slip, provoking ridicule or offence, had occurred. But this was a *parvenu* from the clouds, to teach them dignity and wisdom in one lesson. To himself it was injurious rather than otherwise, in so far as it affected the tranquillity of his own life, and interrupted its natural tenor: but this too, like many other things, was appointed for him, and he might not escape it.

It was during this period, on the occasion of his second visit to the capital, and some eight or nine months after the publication of his new edition, that his introduction took place, at her own solicitation, to Mrs. Maclehose, the celebrated 'Clarinda'—a woman of genius by inheritance, and of fashion to a certain extent by birth and education; whose misfortunes excited his sympathy, and whose admiration affected his heart; who exercised upon him for the moment an exceptional but seductive power, more dangerous and discreditable to himself than anything that had yet occurred. In the lady herself there was frantic hopeless passion, being still a wife, although practically widowed; in Burns there was, to say the least of it, reprehensible acquiescence and collusion. All obstacles apart, he might have married Clarinda, of similar tastes, of similar constitution, and of the same age with himself—and would certainly have repented afterwards: as matters then irrevocably stood, he only dallied with her affections, and with her own deliberate acquiescence so far mocked her. To investigate this strange and questionable relationship, would imply an analysis that must carry us far beyond herself; for the extraordinary moral problem presented to us by the competing claims of Mary Campbell, Jean Armour, and Mrs. Maclehose, for supreme domination in this man's soul, within so short a period, is in fact the mystery that requires solution. It is as a matter of speculation however, only, that it has engrossing interest now; for the death of the one, the repentance of the other, and the impossibility of success for the third, have solved it as a matter of history for us long ago. Mary Campbell, with her own rich freight of love and immortality, in the sea of hope, on the very poop of betrothal, sank and died—a loss that shall be gazetted for the world, as that of an argosy; Jean, the survivor of many a jeopardy and peril of her own creating, was formally acknowledged for wife at Mauchline, but with as little ostentation as possible, having first had to brook her own shame; and Mrs. Maclehose, after the distraction of such a desperate venture for the possession of such a man, had to console herself that nothing worse had befallen, than her own inevitable disappointment.<sup>9</sup> These are the matters of fact, and were the final issues of the case, with pain, with difficulty, and not without social damage to the man himself, ultimately determined: at which, by and by, for a moment, we shall hereafter glance. But now, whilst his correspondence with Clarinda, newly begun, still progresses; and final separation, with seeming despair on both sides, is not quite inevitable; the correspondence itself, so remarkable in every way, is what directly claims our attention.

That correspondence, the reader of this volume is probably aware, was never an acknowledged literary labour of Robert Burns—was conducted, in fact, both by himself and the lady, under fictitious

<sup>9</sup> Gossip, investigated.

names; and, for that reason alone, should never have been intruded on the world as theirs. Secrecy, and perhaps a sense of shame, were connected with it. Towards the end of the correspondence, which was long after he was a married man, this is manifest—her very name, according to his own explicit declaration, being still a mystery. It is not, however, to be regretted, in a psychological point of view, that such an extraordinary revelation has finally, even with indiscretion on the part of some, been authorised; for it is in this correspondence that the very essence of his *imago* life, burnished like a sunbeam, but drenched in aconite, is really to be found. Beyond all mere fictitious imaginary love-correspondence in its vehemence, being prompted manifestly both by passion and by rivalry, and having conquest in both alike clearly in view, is this wonderful series of epistolary outpourings; but distinguishable for ever from all genuine correspondence of love, by the hardihood that flashes through every line. Through all imaginable disguises of Platonism, of theology, of moral respect, of sympathy, of deference, of friendship and concern for one another, the fever of eloquent expostulation, and remonstrance, and petulant entreaty rages, till both man and woman are overwhelmed and exhausted with their own theme. To be born of indubitable frenzy every hour, and maintained at its zenith for months, within the limits of propriety and of reason, nay, with the solemnest recognitions of religion itself, when appeals to the Deity were proper, scarcely any extant correspondence of the kind can be compared with the letters of Robert Burns to this woman; and the secret of this is to be found unquestionably, in the one source of rivalry, as much as in the other of love. His letters to other women on the same theme, and with the same object in view, might no doubt have been equally eloquent and passionate, if other women had been able to reply; which they never were, except with bewildered silence. It was Clarinda's own faculty of rejoinder that stimulated him to such efforts of eloquence; and his own love of victory, conjoined with his belief in the possibility of dissolving adamant with words, that carried him ultimately beyond the veracities of his nature in such a perilous encounter. Alas! for such unlicensed and seductive war. For his own credit and peace of mind, it should have been honestly abandoned, when the inevitable issue was foreseen; and for her credit, it should never have been renewed. But a man of his stamp once harnessed for competition with a woman, and furnished incessantly with artillery by her own hand, was not likely to retire from the contest whilst a shaft in the quiver remained. For himself it was disastrous, and for her sorrowful. No good could come of it. There were ominous shadows of disgrace for him in such equivocal sunshine, and mischief for them both in such dread purgatorial kissings of the soul.

This absorbing, and it must again be admitted, most questionable relationship seems to date from the beginning of December, 1787—from the hour of their first introduction, in fact; and may be traced by correspondence, with some slight interruptions and gradual diminution of enthusiasm on his part, till 1793; distinctly marked at its conclusion with anger, recrimination, and passionate regret. During the whole of the latter period misunderstanding prevails, for which the lady herself was unquestionably to blame; and the correspondence of these years, apparently renewed by herself also, seems to be little more than a series of hopeless and fatiguing attempts to readjust a balance of respect for ever dislocated. But on a review of the whole, the difficulty to which we formerly adverted returns again—namely, how to explain the mystery of a threefold love during so long a period in one man's soul; for that Mary and Jean, the one in heaven and the other on earth, were still there, is indisputable; and that Clarinda was there too, although with weakened sway, cannot be easily denied. The most exquisite lyrics to each of these three women are all to be found within this period—not fictitious poetry, but genuine effusions of the heart. All lower self-indulgence, disastrous and sorrowful, in which he sometimes compromised his own dignity for the delight of others, we omit to account for here: this alone—this triple waltzing of the soul, purely spiritual with one among the clouds; honest and affectionate with another on the cottage floor; questionable, but real, with a third through the post-office—with holy memories, with living love, with half-guilty fiction in the name of love—was indeed the great enigma of his life, and altogether inexplicable on any ordinary

psychological principles. Could there be any serious delinquency, any practical moral disloyalty here? Difficult it would be to believe this; still more difficult with some, not to believe it—for sin will be imputed by a few, where there is no sin, who cannot imagine such amorous extravagance as a normal condition of the soul. Be it so; then David, Solomon, Sappho, and Petrarch were all in similar condemnation. He goes along with these in the biographies of the world, and was not unconscious of his own resemblance to the greatest of them during these very hours.

But no reader, nor any writer with unassisted memory, can imagine the actual amount of personal and domestic excitement—of love, of sorrow, of temptation, and of triumph that was crowded into so brief a space as that of two years, at the commencement of this epoch of his life. That readers may judge for themselves, and that the present writer may be seen to exaggerate nothing, a chronological summary of the most important events of this period for Burns is here introduced, which otherwise should have been part merely of an appendix. Between the month of March, 1786, and the month of April, 1788—that is, between the ages of twenty-seven and twenty-nine—he is deserted and disowned by Jean Armour; he is solemnly betrothed to Mary Campbell; his poems, written chiefly, it may be said, as well as printed in the interval, appear; twin children are born to him by Jean Armour—one of whom subsequently dies; Mary Campbell dies; his life in Edinburgh begins; new and enlarged edition of his poems appears; after tour through the south, he returns to Mauchline; Jean Armour repents, and his intimacy with her is renewed; after tour in the north, he returns again to Edinburgh; is introduced to Mrs. Maclehose, with whom his celebrated correspondence begins; returns once more to Mauchline; takes Jean himself secretly to Tarbolton Mill for her confinement there, in disgrace—where twins are again born, both of whom die; acknowledges Jean Armour for his wife; satisfies the church; satisfies affectionately mother, brother, and sisters out of his miraculous £500; and makes final arrangements for his own removal, with wife and family, to Ellisland.<sup>10</sup>

During the former part of this brief space, Miss Alexander of Ballochmyle, dignified, unconscious, reserved, glances through; during the latter part, Clarinda is in indisputable ascendancy, for whom the marriage with Jean is an irrecoverable blow. Besides which, during the former part, bailiffs pursue him, in his unborn children's name, almost to the very verge of the sea; and during the latter part, the gaieties, the social excesses of metropolitan life, in which he was then involved, as in a whirlpool, are all to be taken into account; with letter-writing, song-writing, visiting, and conversation for half the world. And how brief an interval after all! the gentle, the sober, the well-regulated, and the prosaic reader together, in a single breath exclaim; to be crowded with so much mental excitement, with so much passion, with so much violence, with so much recklessness, folly, grief, and shame! Brief enough indeed, O reader; and crowded with excitement, with shame, and perhaps with folly sufficient too, to have exhausted the constitution of an hundred ordinary men; but brimful, notwithstanding, of wisdom and of inspiration, such as no one man in a hundred thousand were capable of during an entire life. Hours in fact, with him, were then as years, and years were as epochs. On no other principle whatever can such an existence be explained; and to quarrel with him for conflicts or transitions of passion so intense and rapid, is to quarrel with the Almighty for his own arrangements of vitality and time. During these very months, when his external life seemed to be an uninterrupted scene of distraction and extravagance, with every extreme of passionate excess combined, his thoughts and words alone were the delight and solace of the world; his deeds were those of charity and forgiveness, for the very souls whose own want of charity had most grievously wronged him; his supreme anxiety was for peace and retirement, and all his provisions, so far as man could provide, were for a future of humble industry and domestic honour. That such designs and aspirations were never fully realised, was due to the counteracting influence of a constitution, and such solicitations from the world as no man then living, and no man since, could form any adequate idea of the difficulty and danger of contending with.

<sup>10</sup> Gossip connected with this period, investigated, corrected, and enlarged.

But on a question like this, there are authorities much more worthy of being attended to, than that of any passing prejudiced observer, within our reach: these are St. Augustine, in his own priceless Confessions; and Robert Burns himself. Listen then to St. Augustine at the age of twenty-seven; who had his own temptations too, of vanity and of passion, doubtless, to contend with—but in the safe seclusion of a college: what says he?—“And I was then about six or seven and twenty years of age, when I had indited those volumes, crammed full of those corporeal figments that thundered in the ears of my heart; which I was turning ever, O sweet Truth, to thy inward melody, dreaming of the beautiful and fit, and willing enough to stand and to listen to thee, and to rejoice with exceeding joy for the bridegroom’s voice—and was never able! for by the clamour of my own folly was I ever snatched out of doors, and by the weight of my own pride flung headlong down into the deeps. For thou hadst not yet given joy and gladness to my hearing; or the bones were still exultant which had not yet been cast down.”\* And what shall we say of Burns, exposed to an hundredfold worse temptations at the same age, and with no sanctuary but a Masons’ Lodge, or the Caledonian Hunt, to protect him? What says he of himself, and of his then predicament—in one of his most beautiful, but as yet unpublished letters? “You will very probably think, my honoured friend, that a hint about the mischievous nature of intoxicated vanity may not be unseasonable; but, alas! you are wide of the mark. Various concurring circumstances have raised my fame as a poet to a height, which I am absolutely certain I have not merits to support; and I look down on the future [from an elevation that was certainly not less dangerous than St. Augustine’s] as I would into the bottomless pit.”† It is matter of astonishment indeed, and of thankfulness to God, that he passed through such an ordeal at all, with his intellect and sympathies entire; with his heart untouched, with his capacity for love remaining. He too, like the young saint at Carthage, had written his own book, crammed with strange corporeal and incorporeal figments of bewitching sound; had listened with as devout rapture to the inward melody of truth, and was never able to catch it all; had been snatched out of doors by the clamour of his passions, and now, in the zenith of his glory, was in jeopardy of ruin among the deeps. As for all the rest, of future and of happiness, that shall be for him, as it was also for St. Augustine, as the Lord provideth.<sup>11</sup>

His marriage having now been solemnised, with the utmost privacy, as taste and sense alike decided; and domestic matters at Mossgiel as affectionately and satisfactorily arranged as mother, brother, or sister could desire, his removal to Ellisland as practical farmer, and prospective excise officer, with the eyes of the world on all proceedings, takes place. His settlement there, all things considered, is auspicious; and with gracious act of brotherly neighbourhood, in the gift of a Bible to the outgoing tenant,<sup>7</sup> begun. There were no doubt the discomforts of a decayed and worthless dwelling-house, in which for awhile he must live solitary, to put up with; but there was the excitement and the interest connected with the building of a new one (much handsomer than his father’s) to compensate. This work was executed under his own eye, according to his own design, and partly by his own hand—Jean’s brother being mason in chief; and if it be true, that the two grandest occasions of a man’s life, with the exception of his marriage, we presume, are the building of a house and the birth of a first-born, then Burns’s circumstances at the time must have been enjoyable, rather than otherwise. Besides which, there would be a visit or two to Mauchline occasionally, which Dr. Currie and some other people seem foolishly to deplore; and there was Jean’s own home-coming to temporary lodgings in the old tower at the Isle—romantic and appropriate enough, although partially decayed; and finally, the solemn ceremonious removal in procession to the new domicile—in which little act, as Chambers prettily details, the family Bible and the bowl of salt are prominent auxiliaries; and in which, moreover, as our own readers will find at its proper place, one old Ayrshire friend, Jean’s best and most generous protector in the day of her greatest need, Mrs. Muir of Tarbolton

\* Confess. Lib. iv. cap. 15; 4.      † See letter to Robert Aiken, December 16th, 1787—General Correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> Gossip—Facts and Opinions.      <sup>7</sup> Reminiscences, original.



Mill, did not forget the womanly pledge, by help and presence, that was due to her home-coming in honour:<sup>12</sup> the whole of which must have been not only pleasurable in a high degree, but refreshing and beneficial to Burns's heart. This pleasant experience of alternate domestic quiet, bustle, and expectation, extends from the midsummer of 1788 to the midsummer of the following year; by which time we may conclude, with house and plenishing to correspond, the family was settled at Ellisland. So far, therefore, was it not well?

But music, letter-writing, society, with all concomitant temptations, follow him, and throng his footsteps day and night continually. And why not? cries the inexorable world. Is not this the great singer, who has become as one of us? Is it not true that on us, and on our patronage, he depends for daily bread? Shall not we therefore intrude upon his privacy, and put him to perpetual proof, and waste his golden time? O world, selfish, idolatrous, unthinking! Yet the man was patient, condescending, laborious. Mercury and Apollo hang upon his skirts at the ploughshare, Jean and the bairns, with loving looks, guide the horses. He is a husband and a father now, and looks forward anxiously to other home-comings, by and by, than he has yet, with pleasure, seen. Clarinda's name, however, it is alleged—Clarinda's own handwriting—is still discernible at the post-office in Dumfries; which certainly should not be. Ah, Clarinda! With the poet, this might be admissible; but with the husband—how dared you? Clarinda, however, it must be remembered, was not utterly unknown to Jean; had patronised her in her adversities lately, and had sent a present even of 'twa wee sarkies' to the first-born 'cherub' in her arms—with injunctions for one does not know how many kisses, through the father's lips. Have we not said already, that this was an inexplicable enigma? This woman, it appears, in imagination and by epistles, will still be near him, though in bodily presence never more. But the goodness of his own heart, the sensibility of his nature, and his absorbing parental love, prevail over all. Other lives than his own are now in the scale of competition with the world; and from his highest intellectual exaltations, from his widest foreign flights, the string that ties him to the roof-tree brings him home with a flutter of love.

From one other letter, as yet unpublished, written a little before this date to his wife, and preparatory to her home-coming at Ellisland (or rather, we should say, at the Isle), we extract a single fragmentary sentence here. The letter, in truth, is but a fragment altogether, which the reader will find at its appropriate place elsewhere in this volume:\* but a golden fragment it is, rescued now with triumph from oblivion; more significant and precious than a week's weaving from Penelope's loom, and in the quiet beauty of its broken fabric outweighing a volume of epistles to Clarinda. "MY DEAR LOVE,—I received your kind letter with a pleasure which no letter but one from you could have given me. I dreamed of you the whole night last; but, alas! I fear it will be three weeks yet, ere I can hope for the happiness of seeing you. My harvest is going on. I have some to cut down still; but I put in two stacks to-day, so I [am] as tired as a dog. . . . I have just now consulted my old landlady about table linen, and she thinks I may have the best for two shillings per yard, so after all, let it alone until I return; and some day soon I will be in Dumfries, and will ask the prices there. I expect your new gowns will be very forward, or ready to make, against I be home to get the baiveridge." . . . O Jean! O Jean! did you foolishly then, after a hint like this, at the risk of your own happiness and his reputation, absent yourself ever too long from the presence of such a husband? On your own head, henceforth, shall be the sad and hazardous responsibility.

The truth is, the man's whole life was now like the bounding of an iron ball, or chain-shot of soul and body, through some zigzag deep defile of opposing magnetic attractions; which he must regulate and balance, or at last obdurately repel, for safety and happiness, as his own strength and courage will enable him. Or like the voyaging, it was, of those fated ships in Arabian tales, which are destined to lose all their bolts on the Loadstone Mountain, and to float away dissolved, a mass of rudderless planking—some one fortunate soul alone, by miraculous escape, surviving the catastrophe. From such

<sup>12</sup> Gossip—Mrs. Muir of Tarbolton.

\* Letter to Mrs. Burns, September 12th, 1788—Domestic Correspondence.

fatal moorings, if he be wise, he will steer far to seaward soon. But if the bolts have been already reached, and the loadstone cable draws—alas, then! what pilotage on earth can save him? One day at least in the three hundred and sixty-five shall be sacred to Mary, now in heaven: but Jean, at home, shall reign triumphant all the rest of the year; and Clarinda, with her eloquence and despair, must finally retire or suffer—not without additional suffering to him. Such compromise of a sort he must negotiate for himself now, as fate will permit; and for all minor momentary aberrations, among the fashionable lights of the metropolis or of the neighbourhood, the kindness, the forgiving blindness, the partiality of a faithful and triumphant wife—herself sometimes to blame; but to whose bosom after all he returns, and in whose arms, if he can, he will die—must invent all reasonable apologies.

In such circumstances, however, it was manifest that the farm could never be advantageously tilled. Could a man be so divided, and live or thrive in any mere earthly sense? It was a moral impossibility. In this view, he was a living involuntary sacrifice. On the whole, for him and his, as to this world's good, it was likely to be a disastrous struggle. Some effort therefore must be made to retrieve his condition, and most reasonable arrangements, we find, were accordingly made. The new house of his own designing, as we have seen, had by this time been built at Ellisland; to which he and his wife and family, with solemn observance, very pleasant yet to think of, have removed. The household plenishing, by gifts and purchases, was complete, and the stocking of the farm presumably sufficient. In short, it was satisfactory and beautiful in every way, and seemed to foreshadow prosperity. But the land was unproductive under his tillage; and his own time possibly—his thoughts undoubtedly were—very much absorbed in something else than agriculture. The best ploughman in Ayrshire, the best reaper and binder, as he boasted to be, ought not thus to have been defeated in Dumfriesshire, if his heart had been honestly there. But he is far from despairing, or even suspecting anything of that kind to be wrong. He adopts, with the assistance and approbation of all kind friends, a new plan. The farm shall be devoted exclusively henceforth to dairy produce; his sisters shall reside with him there, to assist and instruct Jean—little more than a girl; he himself shall now assume the duties of Excise officer for the district—an unpleasant profession, for which he has already served an apprenticeship in Ayrshire, but which will enable him to realise an additional annual income of some forty or fifty pounds. The farm and this together should make all happy and comfortable, and possibly would so have done, if the man who was to profit by such anomalous occupation had not been Robert Burns. The district this man had to survey included some ten parishes, and required horsemanship for two hundred miles every week. The man himself was a living wonder everywhere, and carried a world of excitement and of passion with him wherever he moved. He was most assiduous, but above all merciful, in the discharge of his public duties, and he tried at the same time to attend wisely to the farm: but the 'Musical Museum' in Edinburgh had to be supplied continually, and the demands of half the world for interviews, for favours, for correspondence, had to be attended to, and complied with. All this could not go on for him profitably together. Some choice, some renunciation of himself or of his affairs, was inevitable. But whatever might be relinquished, inspiration could not. Finally, as we know, the farm was surrendered, well enough for the proprietor at the moment, who suffered neither loss nor inconvenience; and Burns's removal to Dumfries, in the way of his adopted profession exclusively, seemed to be the inexorable, and not altogether unfriendly decree of fate; for promotion was no doubt before him, if length of days and other circumstances should permit.

In the meantime, song-writing and all kindred literary pursuits, correspondence with London newspapers themselves included, are cultivated with absorbing energy and delight. At the plough, in the barn, by the dreary moorland edge; on horseback at village fairs, in aristocratic mansions at bacchanalian revels, in the quiet fields, or by the peaceful river side among the broom and ferns; in storm or sunshine, his soul is in this heaven of song. The musical faculty, so long imperceptible, is now developed to a marvellous extent. Above all, the music of his country transports him.

To sanctify and adorn this, he lives and breathes. It shall be consecrated by his devoutest efforts, for the lips and for the ears of his fellow-countrymen, as an incomparable miscellany of national domestic hymns; for the lads and for the lasses, with the blithe accents of love, and for the grey-haired patriarchs and spectacled dames, by the fireside in cottage or in hall, regenerate once more in the language of their youth, to lilt or croon. It shall be the palladium of his own immortality also; the celestial fluid amber of melody, in which the sunbright wings of his yet more celestial fancy shall be embedded, as reliques of the spirit-world for ever. During this epoch, as we have said, 'Auld Langsyne' was rescued and remodelled by him in his thirtieth year, most probably in a few moments, to last as it now stands, the perpetual solace of yearning memories, for ever and a day; and 'Tam o' Shanter' appeared, to convulse and electrify the world—the work, it is said, of some twelve hours' incessant ecstatic inspiration. To the same period belong the 'Whistle' and the 'Peck o' Maut,' with their exultant frenzy; and that almost incredible interlude of pathos and beauty, 'To Mary in Heaven.' Besides which, 'Of a' the Airts the Wind can Blow,' and 'Were I on Parnassus Hill,' were chaunted to welcome Jean to Nithsdale—was ever bride so greeted before? treading out music, as it seemed, from the very earth, and gathering all the harmonies of the atmosphere about her, as she advanced! These, and all the rest that appeared from time to time in the 'Museum' or elsewhere, scattered with prodigal liberality, in unrequited profusion, like Sibylline leaves, came forth for the delight and wonder of the people. During the whole of this epoch, in short, much glory and goodness, much self-control and strength combined, in the whirlwind of temptation are visible; and many a secret triumph, doubtless, was achieved unknown.

On certain of these celebrated productions, on which so much of his reputation has since been built; and on which not a little idle and some illiberal criticism, affecting his own moral character, has also been founded; a remark or two, in passing, may possibly be expected here. Of 'Tam o' Shanter,' for example, in its moral tendency, notwithstanding all its beauty, what has not, now and then, been foolishly said? Of the 'Whistle' and the 'Peck o' Maut,' what respectable authority can yet deign to speak with patience? and what shall we say of the man himself, from whose pen, almost at the same moment, such an effusion as the hymn 'To Mary in Heaven' could flow? We must content ourselves, however, for the present, with some very general reflections indeed on these, and all other similar productions affording such extraordinary contrasts, as they stand related to that mystery of tumultuous life within; of which, after all, they afford but most inadequate glimpses. Of 'Tam o' Shanter' itself, says Wordsworth—"I pity him who cannot perceive that in all this, though there was no moral purpose, there is a moral effect:" but if a moral effect, how can even Wordsworth be sure there was no moral purpose? For the 'Whistle' and for the 'Peck o' Maut,' so much perhaps can hardly be said. The one is simply the lyric, almost extemporaneous record of an heathen orgie, among wellborn Christian Scottish gentlemen; the other, of a social, and possibly too long protracted convivial reunion, a few days before, among Scottish peasant lads. But whoever may imagine from the words of such songs, that Burns himself was a guilty partaker in the one case, or a turbulent convivialist in the other, supposes what is utterly incorrect in matter of fact, and impossible in theory. The very composition of these songs, one of them apparently on the spot, the other immediately afterwards, is incontrovertible evidence of the man's sobriety at the moment. He must have some craze for calumny in his head, who can allege or even imagine otherwise: and surely, if ever there was a moral for the world, founded unconsciously on the similarity of social habits among high and low, these very songs, written by the same hand within a few days of each other, contain it. How then shall we presume to judge of the man's own moral character, whose most unpremeditated words afford such lessons to the world? It must suffice in the meantime, farther to observe, that the writing of 'To Mary in Heaven' very shortly afterwards (as has been ascertained, with much pains, by Mr. Chambers), so far from being any evidence of the transient character of Robert Burns's feelings, was only an additional proof of the profound internal constancy of his soul; that, with such a sorrow of its

own, could listen patiently to the shouts and laughter of the external world. The ocean himself both ripples and rages, and may be in opposite moods within twenty-four hours. But it is the ocean alone that has heart enough to swell: what sigh, for depth and harmony, can equal his?

Upon the whole, however, it must be admitted that the effect of this unprecedented mid-day exaltation, in so far as it detached Burns from the life-giving realities of the soil, and tempted him occasionally to uncertain regions of conventional superiority and display, in letter-writing or otherwise, was injurious. Not that such a translation from one sphere to another could be altogether avoided, or that it was necessarily wrong; but that its effects became at last intoxicating, and the danger of compromise for the soul itself, arising thence, supreme. Burns at this crisis, and during the whole of this period, was in fact the Lunardi of fashionable literary achievement hovering over a harvest-field. No man had ever soared half so high preserving steadiness of flight, or so strongly attached by indissoluble electric affinities to the earth from which he sprung; and no man ever made so many daring attempts to cut himself for ever adrift, with reckless ease and grace, from those heaven-ordained terrestrial moorings. If Burns, by mere epistolary sleight-of-hand, and terrible fascinating social adventure at that season, could have lodged himself beyond the sphere, never to return again, he would have tried it. The very poetry of that epoch, the most wonderful of its kind extant, is affected by this strange elasticity and headlong soaring of the man. The adulation of the people, the music of the land, seems to carry him aloft; and he drags his rough-cast verses with him, to finish them beyond the echoes of the world. His efforts now, in this respect, and onwards to the end of his life, are almost all transcendental; and efforts so grandly simple in their transcendentalism, so numerous and triumphant on every lyric theme, and so infallibly sure to captivate the world over which he was soaring, were surely never made in so brief a noontide by any son of man.

How long after this he might have held the zenith, is questionable; but the zenith itself, in reality, about this time was touched. The date of 'Tam o' Shanter' marks it. During those twelve hours of entranced occupation, interrupted only with tears of laughter, on which not even wife and children for the moment dared to intrude, Robert Burns was highest in the heavens. His climax of ascension was over the Nith at Ellisland, with his countenance westward. Such unprecedented elevation might no doubt have been prolonged, but his approaching removal to Dumfries as an officer of Excise determined it. This occurred in 1791. That he still struggled with uncertain balance to retain it, and swaying to and fro on the difficult summit, for awhile, seemed likely to preserve it, is certain. But adverse influences, both natural and social, were already beginning to drag him down; and occasional dallings with the foreign English muse, with exaggerated compliments to inferior rivals on the Mount of Song, whose topmost level never reached his feet, seem to indicate the approaching danger. To Dumfries, however, with darkening or illusive prospects, and dubious patronage; with multitudinous temptations and uncertain foot; with sycophants, and spies, and tale-bearers to government and to posterity, before him, he must go. The establishment at Ellisland is dissolved; the disposal of stock and of all superfluous gear follows; the removal is accomplished. Farewell, Ellisland—romantic, ill-cultivated, abortive farm! Farewell, native Ayrshire—cradle of life and love and song; to be revisited no more for ever, but in the sleepless feverish visions of the quick closing day!

