



PART THIRD
GLOAMING - RETURN TO THE SOIL!

SIX years are all that now remain to be accounted for of this wonderful earthly existence; and the division of this, between day and night, is the biographical problem. There seems indeed to have been a double day; or social night, with long-continued intellectual day, contending. The shadows that were now gathering thick about the door, and on the path, touched not the brightness of the inner sanctuary, nor dimmed the splendour of the upper dome: yet night, in some serious sense, was impending there. It is not so much, however, to this sad approaching moral twilight we refer, by the designation of the Gloaming; as to that turn of the soul itself upon the zenith, with wistful gaze towards the much-loved earth, which is observable now. This fact, indeed, is the most remarkable in Burns's whole spiritual career. His conscious connection with the soil, however high he soared, was indissoluble. In that climax of exaltation which he attained over Ellisland, he looked down directly upon Alloway Kirk and his father's cottage; nay, with tearful smiles on the distant Carrick shore. That was a relationship never to be cancelled; and now that he has attained the highest scope of inspiration and popularity together, he begins to slacken the rein on his winged courser's neck, and descends in imagination earthward upon Ayrshire. Pegasus, it is true, with the wind under his wings and feet, and with every accessory and stimulus to continued flight; surveying prospectively no longer cities, but empires and the world, would fain rise again in some other direction; or pause at least on the hill-tops of Dumfries, to strike out new fountains, if he may: but his eye is still westward turned; he remembers the old woodland slopes, and seems to luxuriate still among the crofts of Mauchline. Besides which, his eye itself is sometimes slightly filmed; and his action, so long aloft, is a little too exaggerated and fine. Proposals are even entertained, and preparations made, for some grand English epic flight, utterly alien to his whole constitution, and a mistake, even to be thought of. In a word, the day has turned, both with horse and rider. Sympathetic instincts draw them together down; and so many headlong upward sweeps have shaken the miraculous constancy of brain and pinions, for them both. It is no longer now the morning beam slanting upwards, with the bulk of glory behind it, on which they are floating; but the evening beam slanting downwards, and the bulk of glory, not gone, but perceptibly diminished. It is impossible to read quietly the letters and the lyrics of this period, when his heart was yearning westward but his fancy was estranged elsewhere—about Edinburgh, or the Nith, or even across the Border—and not perceive that the sweet early splendour of love and music has been somehow, sensibly and yet insensibly, tarnished; and the soul itself unwittingly betrayed. O Burns! Burns! descend again, for truth's sake, for love's sake, ere bewilderment and nightfall in reality overtake thee!

Notwithstanding such undeniable aberrations, however, and seductive aerial flights as these, the most exquisitely finished lyric scrolls, ever produced by mortal hand, were indited by him during this

very period of high perilous distraction. Snatched they seem to be from the sunlight, wrought of the echoing atmosphere, and flung down from the very clouds, to entrance and astonish the world. The finest of his noon-day performances do not exceed some of these; some of them, the sweetest, are borrowed with apologetic fondness from the old repositories of his early youth. Taken throughout, they are incomparable. Like the blackbird or the mavis, this merle-man pours forth his richest melodies after thunderstorms and evening rains. Fortunate indeed, beyond all earthly precedent, was the editor into whose hands such celestial windfalls drifted! Will any one produce now, from any European language dead or living, a parallel in taste, in elegance, in delicacy, and in perfection of composition, to 'Wha is scho that lo'es me?' Then may the supremacy of this man, as a mere artist in harmony, be yielded without further debate. But the folly of comparison between such effusions as this, with the higher vital elements of love and truth superadded to mere harmony, and the most elaborate formal efforts of all previous writers, of any age or country, would be manifest, if men had leisure to compare them. The poorest only of these come down to the level of Anacreon—Horace has nothing exactly of the sort—and brush with tingling feet the heads of Sheridan and Wolcott: the richest of them rise and swell in perpetual symmetry and fulness, with sweet entanglement of syllables never to be sundered, like love-knots of the firmament. But men have no leisure, as yet, to make such comparisons. In the midst of all which, however, there were no doubt some falterings, and indubitable earthward tendencies, not of the spiritual or ecstatic sort, perceptible; for which society, and accident, and constitution together, must hereafter be interrogated.

In the meantime, with respect to the peculiar conflict of soul, as indicated in his higher compositions, which seems to have been going on during the whole of this period, which we choose to call the gloaming, the explanation assignable from the facts of the case is satisfactory. The removal to Dumfries, with its attendant difficulties and sorrows, and the warming of his hearth there having been accomplished, and the yoke of his ungrateful calling fairly assumed; his correspondence with the literary world, with business responsibilities to a certain extent involving his credit as an author, began. Other business responsibilities he never entertained, and suffered no man living to entertain for him. But to do somewhat for the glory of his country, and for the delight of the world, in the way of song-writing, he did undertake, and devoted the last remaining breath of life to finish the doing of it. Up till this period he had been a regular contributor, as we are aware, to 'Johnson's Musical Museum;' which, without his help and practical superintendence, could scarcely have been completed. His contributions to this work from first to last, some of which did not appear till after his own death, seem to have amounted to upwards of one hundred and eighty songs, original and revised. For his sake alone at this day, original copies of that collection fetch a handsome premium; and at the time, such was the effect produced by the first glance of his compositions there on the mind of one accomplished reader at least, himself an author and collector of no mean repute, and engaged at the very moment in a similar occupation—that of revising or renewing our old Scotch songs—that he threw his own productions almost unreservedly into the flames.* Thomson, it appears, now projected a similar but much handsomer collection, for which Burns's aid, on any terms almost, was indispensable; and to which Burns, on Thomson's earnest application, without any terms at all—fiercely disdaining terms—became a recognised, or rather, it should be said, the one recognised and reliable living contributor. Others there were also, no doubt, whose names at the moment were of service; but Burns it was, whose name pre-eminently must secure circulation and immortality for the work. This, with all his other external official and domestic entanglements, he undertakes, as supplement of love and pleasure to the fatigues and sorrows of life, in a letter of characteristic vehemence and *abandon*, in reply to Thomson, dated Dumfries, 16th September, 1792.

A limited number of original songs, with a few revisions, was all that was at first intended; but an

* Robert Jamieson, editor and author of 'Popular Ballads,' volunteers this declaration for himself in his second volume; and he certainly was not a man to make a sacrifice of the kind rashly.

engagement of this kind, in hands like his, must prove indefinite, and if life had continued, would have been endless labour. Morning after morning, by the cool Nith side, or in the shady groves of Lincluden, he toils in the exciting enterprise; night after night, he commits recorded inspiration to the post. Failure is a thing not to be thought of. Time, health, strength, life itself, shall sooner be parted with. Out of all which work, peculiar and difficult, the distraction and the triumph of the epoch together arise. But the reader may see at a glance that this work, glorious as it was, was no longer the work of the early day, exuberant and spontaneous. The day was already waning, when work like this could begin. The glory of independent contribution, therefore, must be his only solace; for a certain amount of preparation, and a certain strain upon his faculties, and the irritation of harness, however delicately imposed, utterly strange to him, were all inevitable in its prosecution. He declined therefore all remuneration whatever, wisely and bravely; he stipulated for the supremacy of his native tongue most prudently, for he felt the danger already of too much dallying with the English muse, and the impossibility of his producing the truest simplicity or pathos in that language. In these two particulars, absolute freedom was his sole defence; which being conceded (gladly enough, we may presume, by all parties), he flung himself for help in this enterprise of love and generosity, without reserve, alternately upon earth and heaven. It was to purify, to enrich, to refresh, to delight the souls of his fellow-men, he was thus devoting his energies; why should not the highest powers in heaven and earth assist? The sort of training that was requisite, he adopted as a pleasure; and the harness he had to bear, in connection with editorial interference, he carried with a gentleness and modesty never perhaps before exemplified, in the self-renunciation and denial of any artist. It is wonderful indeed, to think of, at this hour. His forbearance with respect to one song alone, in which the soul of the nation itself seems to speak in words of unquenchable fire; besides many more in the collection where it first appeared—considering the elevation on which he then stood, combatting so patiently for his own right of genius with a self-sufficient editor—is indeed a marvel of its kind; and to be looked at with reverence and humility by all would-be autocrats of thought.

The sort of preparation itself required for this work was in a measure scholastic. He must devote himself much more to the mystery of song-writing as a mere art; to the study of music, by listening to its practice everywhere; to the resuscitation of old originals, for purification and repair; and to the comparison of himself with other lyric writers, and the accommodation of himself, as far as that was safe or possible, to the exactions of critics and the world. All this was imperative in the situation, and he accepted it accordingly: in certain departments of which new study, however, he founded for himself a sort of false heaven, and worshipped unconsciously certain oracles of taste, that were totally unworthy of his homage. But it was to the Earth, to the life-giving Soil, to which he appertained from the first; and to himself, the darling prophet of the soil, through whom its electricity was diffused, and wafted safe to every ear, in a coil of song; it was to these—to himself and them—he was supremely indebted, and most religiously resorted for inspiration, after all. No study, no antiquarian research, no criticism under heaven, could supersede or alter this. Through the whole of this momentous and sorrowfully triumphant period, the recurrence of his intellectual life to Ayrshire—to the westward; to the very spot of earth, in fact, from which his first inspiration flowed; as if all must be lived over again and renewed there, to be again given away in song, is visible—is open to the reader's sense, in every line. The tongue, the tone, the thoughts, the sweet rich mellifluous articulation, are all of the westward. The sun is always setting there; the day tending ever thitherward, and his soul with it. On the banks of Nith at early morning, or on green sward, as we have said, by Lincluden Abbey—with headache, and with heartache too, oppressed and gloomy, he habitually strays; to conquer or escape the world; to fulfil worthily for the people his self-imposed divine task, of remodelling their speech and purifying their hearts by song: but his life is by the Ayr—where his mother's voice seems still to be heard; where sisters and brothers still throng around him, with proud and loving wonder at his words; where his own and his father's household prayers seem still to be ascending;

where Jean is still in untouched beauty, and Mary as she went for ever away; and Rankin with his ready roar, and kind old Lapraik with his affectionate epistles, and Gavin Hamilton with his friendly patronage, and the bewitching supercilious fair ones of Mauchline—before Clarinda, whose letters still trouble him, had been seen; or the world with its criticisms and with its selfishness, which he begins now to hate, or at least to despise, had been thought of, or feared.

Let any reader, who doubts of this, remember now that 'Scots wha hae' and 'A Man's a Man for a' that' were written in these very years—in the twilight almost of this eventful day. No one reading these wonderful effusions for the first time, or detached from their respective proper places among the other writings of the man, would date them anywhere else than at Mauchline or Moss-giel; as far back even as Tarbolton, one might be inclined to refer them. On internal evidence alone, for example, and the merest accidental external evidence, the 'Jolly Beggars' must be referred to the same date. Burns himself had absolutely forgotten its existence. Examined upon the same principle, these later works, in their intellectual characteristics, belong to the same era; are children, as Swedenborg would say, of the same age. There are other productions also, to which they have a still stronger resemblance, whose dates are distinctly ascertained. With the 'Cotter's Saturday Night,' 'Scots wha hae' must always stand; and with the birth-day greeting to his Majesty, 'A Man's a Man for a' that.' The song in the name of mankind, in fact, is but a postscript to the 'Dream' of welfare for the king, and reads like an epilogue of regeneration and repentance for the 'Jolly Beggars' themselves. It was the history of a lifetime, doubtless, which justified the postscript, and which brought the prophecy of regeneration round. Kings might be dethroned, or perhaps decapitated, in the meantime; beggars might repent and reform, or might even rise and reign; society, in short, required, and might be subjected to radical reconstruction: of which, public events during his own life sufficiently apprised him. But it was the retrospective lifetime still of the same man; who speaks beyond his Majesty now, as a prophet should, with the same easy elevation of tone as that in which he had first addressed him, years before, on his birth-day. In these two songs, the fire, the patriotism, the foresight, the wisdom, and the tenderness of centuries are combined; with which, however, the *liberté*, the *égalité*, the *fraternité*, and other terrible 'for a' thats' of sanguinary revolutions, are not to be confounded. The present writer, at least, can hardly help believing that the germs of both these immortal lyrics were in the author's soul for years, unshaped; destined to leap at last, as they did, in perfect form and at the proper moment, to the page of articulate revelation. The history of both is singular, and interesting in many ways beyond much of the same sort, so far as Burns's own moral nature is concerned. For the one, as we have seen, the author must contend at arm's length with a self-sufficient publisher; the other, of equal value in its own place, is allowed to float away from his hands, like some literary bagatelle, as he calls it—neither poetry nor prose, and scarcely worth acknowledgment by him: a sort of indifference which may seem affected or not, according as we view his political relations at the time and crisis. Be this, however, as it may; although Burns had written nothing else than these two songs, he might have ventured on the darkest midnight safely with such an *Aurora Borealis* on his track: if night could ever come to the man, who took leave of day with such a hymn as that of Bannockburn, and with such a prophecy as this of Manhood, in his mouth.

Night nevertheless, as we have said, of a certain and very solemn sort, will come. The weakness of Jacob, that was scarcely perceptible in passing over Peniel, must at last return with accumulated force, and overwhelm him. Society has jealous ears, creditors inexorable claims, conviviality desperate attractions, and his own constitution, torn up into nightly fragments for the gratification of others, has limits that will be reached very soon. The end was inevitable. The world, which has heard or seen many things, discreditable in its opinion, begins to frown upon and to shun him; he is repulsed and humbled, where he was once received with joy. Midnight triumphs at the 'Globe,' which are frequent, tend very much otherwise than to his own social reputation, even in Dumfries; besides which, unfriendly reports of his politics, and his political sayings, and fraternity with political

notorieties of questionable mark, reach high quarters, and degrading admonitions follow. Credit itself goes, or is in jeopardy: the man who scorned to accept pecuniary acknowledgment for one of the divinest works in the world must be indebted now, in these sad years, to the generosity of a friend for twenty shillings; or must himself *dun*, as gently as possible, for some old friendly debt. What is saddest of all, the hearth has once been seriously tampered with, in Jean's own luckless absence, and inward peace of mind, for the transgressor, is broken. All this his letters, in their proper place, too distinctly testify; in addition to which, the pang of a bitter bereavement, in the loss of an only and beloved daughter, pervades and intensifies all. Rheumatism, accidentally contracted, follows, and fever; and then search, unavailing search, for what will never more be found in this world. In short, the end has come; and at the age of thirty-seven——But this was not a man to be pitied. He will have no intrusive whinings when he draws near the inevitable limit; he will have no awkward squad to fire over him when he falls; he will be stretched out in his grave at full length there, on every inch of earth that belongs to him; he will playfully accept commissions from his dearest friends for the other world, as he goes. *Ah! hardiesse admirable*: what other world?

That such brief summary of sorrow and decay is not an exaggeration, it is no part certainly of the present biographer's business to prove. It is his rather, to assert the supremacy of a higher and a better life in this gloomy onfall. Wisely and religiously says Wordsworth, on this very topic—"Silence is a privilege of the grave, a right of the departed: let him, therefore, who infringes that right by speaking publicly of, for, or against, those who cannot speak for themselves, take heed that he opens not his mouth without a sufficient sanction."* The only sanction the present writer requires perhaps to plead, for some brief investigation here, is the necessity of a reply to so much that has been already, unwisely or uncharitably, advanced upon the subject; such reply, even at the eleventh hour, being still the right of the departed. In addition to this, however, he maintains that other sanction, not less sacred, of purifying the conscience of the living, by vindicating the memory of the dead; no better means of effecting this divine purpose being available to any biographer, or indeed to any teacher of the people, priest or moralist, than to leave as pure a reflection as possible, in the souls of men, of an object they will inevitably worship, whether it be pure or no. To such popular adoration, Robert Burns has an indisputable, an inalienable right, as the representative and prophet of the people; and to distort or to defile the last look of that man in the eyes of the people, is to defile the people themselves. They must, and will, for ever look at him. Let his look therefore, for their sakes, be as God-like as it may.

In the first place, then, so far as the charges against his public and official character are concerned, it would seem an outrage almost on common decency and patience now, in this the year of grace, and it must be presumed of intelligence, 1867, to ransack the conscience of a British Cabinet, or even of a Board of Excise, for motives of political fear or prejudice, to justify the base rebukes and threats of dismissal directed at such a man, to terrify and coerce him. Yet such, no doubt, in regard to Robert Burns, was the fact:—'Junius' presumably dead, or long ago handsomely promoted. It were curious otherwise, to conjecture how a case of this kind might have been handled in the *Public Advertiser*; and what sort of letter would have been addressed to the Right Honourable William Pitt, First Lord of His Majesty's Treasury, &c., &c., after his message to the Exciseman. Burns, to be sure, was a Scotchman; which might have cooled the zeal considerably of the illustrious unrecognisable South Briton, who indulged a very strong antipathy to his Northern fellow-subjects, and was in no danger certainly either of confounding them with Englishmen, or of asserting their rights on equal terms. There was one respect however, that, namely, of having made himself amenable to persecution in his own person, in which the poor officer of Excise who had indited 'A Man's a Man for a' that,' and presented 'Delolme on the British Constitution' to the Library in Dumfries, with his own signature, and as his own confession of political faith, had very manifestly the advantage of his distinguished

* Letter to a friend of Robert Burns, 1816.

predecessor; who, with all the acknowledged courage and capacity of an Englishman, could instigate to revolution and twit the king, only from the ambush of the mask and lantern. But all such speculative parallels apart, what can it now signify, in the sight of intelligent men, to Burns's reputation as a public servant, that he was Tory, Whig, Radical, or even Revolutionist? It is true, as Mr. Carlyle says, that "Meteors of French politics rose before him, and that these were *not* his stars:" in consequence also of following which, he got himself fatally "wounded." Nevertheless, Reform and Revolution, since his day, have become omnipotent powers; by which no longer poor Excisemen, but Ministers of the Crown themselves, must be content to stand or fall: in which, as in many other respects, Burns was a prophet centuries in advance of his age. Or what could his political principles at any time signify to his capacity for gauging, or his credit as an officer? His immediate supervisor alone was responsible for all derelictions of duty: who being satisfied, no Board that respected its own credit for decency would have deigned to interfere.⁸ It might be imprudent indeed, for a man in his circumstances, to brave the animosity that was sure to be provoked by the undisguised avowal of unpopular ideas. Imprudent it certainly was. The anonymous writer who betrayed and terrified his own employers, and who, if he had been convicted, would certainly have been hanged, was wisely despatched to India with a salary of ten thousand a year, and subsequently knighted; the sweetest singer of all the world, who avowed his own opinions unreservedly, and whose voice in due time should become moral law to a whole nation, was hustled from his humble 'walk' into starvation and the grave. In view of such consequences, it might well be called imprudent. But imprudence of this kind was still the highest evidence that could be afforded of political integrity and honour—the very sort of evidence, it must be remembered, that 'Junius' himself could never tender.

As to his incapacity on any other ground—as of dissipation, neglect, or pre-occupation—the best reply to such assumptions will be found in two letters of his own, hitherto inaccessible to the public (one of them having appeared only as a note in a local pamphlet, the other never anywhere at all); both of which the present editor has much satisfaction in now producing before the world, with heartiest acknowledgment to their esteemed possessors for the opportunity. The former of these, which is of considerable length, will be found, with all necessary explanations, in its proper place.* The other, which has no date, and is very brief, but most significant, we think it better to quote in the text of our biography entire. For the use of this precious fragment we are indebted to the polite permission of Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Gladstone, Capenoch, Dumfriesshire, in whose possession the original, as a valuable heirloom, is preserved. The letter itself, although without date, refers manifestly to the melancholy epoch of which we now write, when he was in danger of dismissal for his politics, and when every other slander that could be imagined was circulated to his disadvantage and dishonour. "MY DEAR SIR,—I recollect something of a drunken promise yesternight to breakfast with you this morning.—I am very sorry that it is impossible. I remember too, you very oblidgingly mentioning something of your intimacy with Mr. Corbet, our Supervisor-General. Some of our folks about the Excise Office, Edinr., had and perhaps still have conceived a prejudice against me as being a drunken dissipated character.—I might be all this, you know, and yet be an honest fellow; but you know that I am an honest fellow, and am nothing of this. You may in your own way let him know that I am not unworthy of subscribing myself, my dear Clarke, your friend, R. BURNS." Who, that loves honesty and hates injustice, can refrain from smiles, from tears of indignation, on reading this letter? How 'drunken,' then, could the promise be, that was consistent with so distinct a recollection? but how cruel must the calumny have been, that could drive the immortal subscriber to an appeal like this! The letter itself we have had the satisfaction of carefully inspecting. It bears no traces whatever of recent dissipation. The pen has been a little rough, but the hand is strong and steady, as it always was; and the utmost minuteness, both in orthography and in punctuation, is manifest. There is another letter referring to a similar painful topic—the question of his treasonable toast—and

⁸ Reminiscences, original.

* Letter to David Staig, Esq., 1795—General Correspondence.

written undoubtedly before this, to Mr. Graham of Fintry, December, 1792, immediately after the brief farewell visit to Ayrshire; in which, from its style, if called upon to judge, we should be inclined to say that evidence of unnatural excitement was far more discernible. Yet no such conclusion, that we are aware of, has ever been deduced from that document. The style is inflated, the sentiment exaggerated, and the appeal forlorn. One cannot read it without pain; not from any serious sympathy with the writer's distressing apprehensions at the moment, but from the irresistible conviction that he had lost self-control from some cause, moral or physical, in the writing of it. In the present instance, no indication whatever of any such perturbation appears. Brief, suggestive, and beautiful, this morning note is one of the finest specimens of epistolary writing for a given object imaginable. Without effort, display, or circumlocution, but with the utmost delicacy and adroitness, it goes direct to the heart of a disagreeable and disgraceful subject. The writer, unreservedly avowing all, and anticipating all, appeals beyond the possibility of evasion to the very consciousness of the man he is addressing; and stakes, by a single turn of the pen, his own reputation with the world on his worthiness of that man's friendship. The most accomplished artist in style, after weeks of the soberest consideration, and with reams of blundered manuscript before him, could do nothing finer. Upon the whole, we may pronounce this document conclusive. Robert Burns, in fact, notwithstanding his so-called "drunken promise," was no more drunken or dissipated, in the injurious sense of these terms, than Mr. Clark himself, a gentleman of the highest respectability in Dumfries, might be;* not more, we may safely presume, than the Supervisor-General; not more, undoubtedly, than many a Lord of Session on the Bench, the morning after a carousal; nor more than the Right Honourable William Pitt, First Lord of His Majesty's Treasury, in the very action of debate. Let us reiterate his words, and solemnly adjure the most bigoted to remember them, that "he might be all this, and yet be an honest fellow; and was an honest fellow, and was *nothing* of this." Thanks, Mrs. Gladstone, for such brief testimony, not too late; and we beseech you, Madam, to preserve this document with religious care, as the most invaluable personal deposition to the public morality of one of the greatest of men. Of the liberality and kindness of heart which were inherent in the man, and could never be separated from the official, no mention whatever is required here; and on a review of his whole career in that obnoxious and distasteful calling, it may be affirmed with the utmost security, that his duties as an officer of Excise were discharged with a union of fidelity, tenderness, and humour, never perhaps illustrated before in such department of the public service.

In the next place, with respect to his character as a man, as a husband, and as a father in particular, we know beforehand the trials to which his own constitution, and innumerable temptations, in one of these relations at least, exposed him. In this respect, his best apologist and his devoted advocate was his own wife; to whose defence of his fame, or loving extenuation of his errors, we do not presume to add a word; and after whose protest in his favour, we close our ears to all further inquiry. With respect, however, to his parental character, other parties than Jean Armour had the amplest opportunities of judging; and their judgment, upon the evidence of unquestionable facts, has been invariably to his highest credit. Parental love, parental devotion in him, seems in fact to have been a sort of divine instinct of his constitution. Instinct, we call it, and not virtue; for instinct brings us all nearer to God, and Burns himself would have been ashamed to hear a principle like this, supreme and sacred, spoken of by any sort of name that could possibly imply the approbation of man, or the hope of reward, as a stimulus to its cultivation; and the want of which would have made him, in his own eyes, an alien not only from the faith, but from the household of God, and worse than an infidel: without which, indeed, there could have been no Robert Burns at all. But by whatever name in our ethical nomenclature we choose to designate it, this family and parental love of his, including not only his own immediate flesh and blood, but all connected with him by kindred ties, in its regard, was a law of inviolable sanction; written not with pen and

* Samuel Clark, Esq., who occupied an important legal position at that time in the ancient Burgh.

ink, or even on tables of stone, but in the fleshly tables of the heart. The readers of his life in detail, or even of this more general biography, need hardly be reminded here of the fearless provision made by him for the child that was first affiliated on his love, and then abandoned in disgrace to his care; or of the tender personal solicitude manifested by him for his wife's protection, when her own folly had compromised, and her friends had expelled her. These facts are known: but many a beautiful suggestive incident, doubtless, of the same sort—such as his playful tossing of his first-born son from his open palm, “up to the ceiling and down to the ground,” in Nanse Tannock's parlour “before a' the folk,” and the nursing of the dear little daughter in the sunshine, on the doorstep at Dumfries, ere she must be given up by him for ever—is lost beyond recovery now, having been recorded only in the hearts of eye-witnesses, long since beyond the reach of the most diligent precognition. But one bright glimpse, reflected from the painter's easel, of his domestic life in these sad years, we cannot here omit. It was but a few months before this bitter bereavement, as we are fortunately made aware by Mr. Chambers (to whom many thanks for such researches are due), that a miniature of himself was done by some travelling artist, with such remarkable fidelity of representation at the moment, that he considered the likeness worthy of transmission to posterity, as his own most life-like and veritable effigies. Another portrait, however, at the same moment, on the same material, and manifestly by the same hand as his own, seems also to have been executed; and from that day to this has been its inseparable companion. This was of his eldest son, the idol of his affections and the frequent attendant on his walks. He makes no reference himself to this domestic luxury of love, nor was reference required; but that the portrait was of his designing, and for his own special joy in keeping, seems to be unquestionable; the child having been adorned by himself or Jean with a bunch of flowers—possibly of that very morning's gathering by the Nith side—for the grand auspicious occasion. That an expense of this kind should have been afforded from his slender means, and a pleasure so pure and beautiful as this association of himself and his boy, in circumstances of difficulty and in years of scorn, should have been devised and paid for by him, speaks more than all external testimony to the sacredness of his domestic life. These two portraits, so long lost sight of, and now almost miraculously recovered, the present writer contemplates not only with assurance of their authenticity, but with a fixed joy at the tender truthfulness of the relationship they illustrate and unfold. All indirect and beautiful as such transient glimpse of inner life appears, it is not the less reliable; and that such was the true character of Burns's domestic life, may never more be disputed.

Nor was this affection for his children a mere instinct of parental liking, that was satisfied with indulgence only, and implied no care. His most anxious desire on behalf of immortal souls, committed in any way to his charge, was the gift of knowledge. Sister, brother, servant, or son were all objects of this divine solicitude. He was the teacher of the household from boyhood, at Mount Oliphant, Lochlea, and Mossgiel; where his lessons in the garret or in the kitchen were, to the end of long lives, remembered with love: and of his own children, both at Ellisland and Dumfries, he was the most affectionate instructor at home, besides providing for them the best education the schools of the corporation could afford—a duty to them, and a satisfaction to himself, in which he exulted with delight; and from his scanty income he accumulated before their eyes a library both varied and valuable, in which Bibles and the highest literature predominated: one of the strongest incentives any parent could offer to the cultivation of intelligence by his child. The gauger's children in this respect, indeed, were an hundredfold better provided for, out of the abundance of his poverty, than the children of many a squire out of his wealth. In addition to which must be remembered and quoted his affectionate surrender, to the very last, of all disposable means to assist his father's family in distress, and his discharge of funeral expenses for his brother William, who died in the interval abroad. The whole of which outlay will appear liberal and generous beyond precedent, when the fact is now stated, that the expense of his correspondence by post alone, the first year of his residence at Ellisland, must have been almost equal to the rent of the farm; and although that was doubtless an exceptional

period of his life, yet his correspondence was certainly never much less during any succeeding year. This fact we have ascertained, on what appears to be most reliable authority.⁹ It is indirectly glanced at by himself in some business letters at the time, as the reader will by and by see, in which he complains of the very want of writing materials; but it does not seem to have been known as a fact to his previous biographers, or at least has not been quoted by them, so far as we remember, in explanation of his financial difficulties; and seems still less to have been considered, or perhaps even conjectured, by the friends who, in the enthusiasm of their admiration and anxiety to testify their love, honoured the uncomplaining object of their idolatry with such a terrible impost.

It remains now, finally, to glance at his social habits as a citizen, more particularly at his convivial habits as a boon companion. There was much drinking in those days everywhere; and not less, it may be presumed, in Edinburgh or Dumfries, than in Ayr or in Kilmarnock. Men, in those days, not only drank inordinately for fellowship's sake, but were mighty in drinking; and to compete with accomplished toppers at the board, was a task for any social Hercules. That Burns was exposed to such company too often, and that some of the friends he adopted out of such society were likely to compromise and disgrace himself, need not be disputed here. Notwithstanding, it must be distinctly maintained that Burns's true relationship to the whole of this questionable life was that of illumination, far more than that of personal participation. His presence at the table was like a sunbeam in the haze of sensuality; although the sun himself could not retire from such a horizon of sottishness, without the inflammatory blush of shame. At the 'Globe,' where such reunions most frequently took place, his presence may be said, without exaggeration, to have been socially, if not morally, indispensable. Alas! for him, and for his fatal gifts. Yet it was by no means invariable dissipation, either with him or them; much less invariable sin. God forbid! and you, most godly reader, beware how you affirm it. His presence there so frequently, and perhaps to such unseasonable hours in the taproom, was in simple acquiescence with the demands of his fellow-citizens, to discuss with them and to comment in their hearing, often to his own disadvantage, on the wonderful bulletins of the time, that were daily rehearsed from France—as much to the astonishment of statesmen at St. James's, as to the occupation of politicians in Dumfries. His eloquence and liberality secured for him undivided sway there, over such assembled politicians; and his late sittings there, in undisputed triumph of the hour, were no more to be wondered at or blamed (except by himself), than the long philosophic palavers of literary men in the preceding generation, at their rendezvous in Grub Street; or the midnight *conversaziones*, shall we call them? of literateurs, of wits, of savans, of politicians at the present hour, anywhere and on any pretence, in the city of London. That a light like this, one hundred years before his time, should have been shining, in prophet-like obscurity, within the 'Globe' tavern at Dumfries; whilst third and fourth-rate geniuses in first-rate places, with two or three bottles of port in their heads a-piece, should have been misgoverning the nation, night after night, elsewhere, and provoking the very angels to weep in pity or dismay—that is the wonder.

From the charge of inebriety, to which he seems to have been specially obnoxious about this time, his vindication, by circumstantial evidence, has been very elaborate, but in a fashion which seems to the present writer both inconclusive and degrading. It is pleaded, for example, that he could not be drunk on certain occasions, because he could thread a needle in a drawing-room, could walk home without assistance, could lock doors, wind up clocks, put off his own clothes, go unassisted to bed; that he has been known to moralise in the early morning with sorrow on his own state, to some tradesman repairing to his work, himself repairing homewards from the tavern; that, being once surprised by a clerical visitor in his own house, he made shift to regain self-possession and prepare for the baptism of his child; and that now and then, when he did unquestionably transgress, he apologised with shame and horror for his misdemeanour. That, upon the whole, he was not a drunkard, but addicted only to convivial enjoyment; that his constitution and his circumstances, not his habits of

⁹ Reminiscences, original—Statement by Mr. Reid.

excess, were to blame for any outward irregularities of life in this respect; and that in many respects, his irregularities themselves have been exaggerated. Of this latter conclusion there can be no doubt; but pitifully inconclusive and degrading seems to be all the rest. To what does such evidence, in fact, amount? To insulting misapprehension—to nothing more. Your habitual drunkard, your accomplished sot, can sway homewards, lock doors, wind up clocks, call to order and to prayers; can balance himself on the highroad, and stare you out of countenance; can appear in a presbytery, on the bench, or on the floor of the House of Commons, and comport himself with a gravity and an assurance of which Robert Burns was utterly incapable. As for threading needles in a drawing-room, to astonish and convince a woman—which your accomplished sot would never think of, and could not do—the feat itself, however beautiful, proves nothing more than that the lady who suspected him of drunkenness at the time had never seen such a man before, and could not, from her own inexperience, decide between the symptoms of inebriety and the indications of an electric constitution. Her own beauty, most probably, had more to do with the flush of his countenance and the rapidity of his speech, than all the wine or strong drink he had tasted that day. All such evidence, in short (in such a case), is utterly inadmissible for any other purpose than to prove, that one half of the charges against him by common-place, respectable, or inexperienced witnesses, are ignorant exaggerations. But for this playful threading of a needle before her eyes, and the gentle rebuke of her suspicions which it conveyed, such innocent girl, accustomed to see little else among the gentlemen around her than turbulent or intrusive stupidity after dinner, would have reported him drunk. The graceful accident of his own gallantry alone converts her into a witness in his favour.

But on this whole subject of social and moral respectability, as attested by the people of his acquaintance and of his day, we must be allowed here to state, once for all, that it has seemed always to ourselves not only inconclusive but cruel—more inconclusive and cruel almost, than a Political Jury Trial—to stake the reputation of Robert Burns on any such evidence. Let one dispassionately consider: Of all with whom his name is still associated, and with whom then living he had personal intercourse, how many now survive in the thoughts of mankind by their own inherent vitality? The literary, the scientific, and the highest political characters alone. Erskine, Stewart, Robertson, Mackenzie, Monboddo, Blacklock, Blair, Gregory, and Tytler, have each an independent existence; but their memories, nevertheless, are all enriched by connection with his name. Scott himself, the boy, receives an additional halo from the touch of Robert Burns, and Pitt suffers a terrible immortality for his treatment of this man. The artists and musicians who preserved his likeness, or provided melodies for his words, preserved most effectually thus their own fame also. The wits, the beauties of his time themselves, in their ecstatic rivalries with him, appear more conspicuous and resplendent than others on the page of life. Jane of Gordon herself is brighter than she would have been else, for her courtesy to him; and the incomparable Burnet has been enshrined by his mere mention, as in a priceless cameo. Mrs. Dunlop, with her womanly grace, dignity, and goodness, lives above them all exclusively as Robert Burns's friend; and for the rest—worthy nobles, eccentric individuals, landed gentry, accomplished squires, prosperous merchants, dignified magistrates, privileged Members of Parliament, captains, clergy, and other official persons; Hamiltons, Aikens, Alexanders, Riddels, Fergusons, Maxwells, Millers, Symes, Grahams, and Lawries; Glencairn himself, as a more fortunate brother man; and Buchan with his 'cross-gartered' greatness, unconscious footman out of livery or complacent major-domo to the Muses, provoking us to smile—these all depend absolutely for existence now, for one moment's consideration longer in the great world, on the breath of that man; on the ascertained and undeniable fact, that he had correspondence with them of some sort; that they were socially related to him by friendship, by patronage, or by what accident soever you will. Dissolve or disprove that relationship, and they disappear. "Wherein else are they any longer to be accounted of?" Glenriddel, Craigdarroch, and the Carse—Ballochmyle and Montgomery themselves, with all their beauty—might then as well be blotted almost from the map of Scotland.

On what condition then did such local magnates, supreme for a moment on the 'plainstanes of Dumfries,' or within the sound of a parish bell, recognise Robert Burns? On the ground of his own social equality with them, in gentility, wealth, rank, or prestige? If Mr. Carlyle's well-known account of social relationships in such neighbourhoods at the time, with respect to "that painful class stationed, in all provincial cities, behind the outmost breastwork of gentility, there to stand siege and do battle against the intrusions of Grocerdom and Grazierdom," be true, then we may be sure that such recognition of him by their order was a moral impossibility; even if they had not already, and for other reasons, "actually seen dishonour in his society, and branded him with their *veto*." What? The broken farmer, the second-rate gauger, the radical politician, the tainted citizen (in which respect, however, he was no worse, it may be conjectured, than most of themselves), be honoured with an *entré* into our circle? God forbid! Then might all 'Grocerdom' and 'Grazierdom' together, rushing in, overwhelm us. How then? On the divine idiosyncrasy of his own nature, we must conclude, since no other earthly recommendation to their notice, or patent possessed by him for introduction to their society, could avail. In such idiosyncrasy, unquestionably, lay his only claim; an idiosyncrasy of genius conferred by Almighty God, of unquestionable intellectual power, exercised, alas, too often at his own cost, but with prospective inheritance of immortality, which carried him beyond all "breastworks," dissipated "all thin delusions," cancelled every social distinction, and superseded every form. Yet it is to the good word, to the favourable opinion of these fortunate fellow-creatures, who were constrained thus, by the invisible Deity within him, to honour the man, and who in everything but social position were utterly his inferiors, that we are constantly referred for evidence of his respectability. The Lawries, the Fergusons, the Riddels, who contend in beastly computations for a whistle, and who must be bundled off to bed insensible, are to be vouchers for the respectability of the Exciseman, who sits in a window-seat like some disguised divinity in scorn, his wings and his wand laid aside, to chronicle and immortalise their madness! and when they, or their neighbours, quarrel with *him*, he forsooth must be abandoned. Where they *veto* he must not enter: when they *taboo*, he shall not be recognised; when they shun, he must wander alone on the cold and "shady side of the principal street of the town," quoting, as applicable to himself, forlorn elegies from Lady Grizzel Baillie! In a word, the one man who had put a new language of love and liberty into the lips of intelligent millions, and who had created an inheritance of light and joy for the unborn generations of a whole hemisphere, must be silent in their neighbourhood, or appeal to them in pity for a passport to live. O foolish friends, officious advocates—with your estimates and your certificates of character—will you not cease to outrage the immortal dead? Respectability! In the name of what God? It will be the highest respectability in all time coming for the gentry of Dumfriesshire, or of Edinburgh, or of Ayrshire, that a man like Robert Burns went out and in among them, or ever subscribed himself, in courtesy or condescension, their friend and servant.

