



PART FOURTH:
NIGHT AND AFTER-NIGHT—UNDERNEATH, AND
BEYOND THE SOIL.



It was one of the most remarkable circumstances in the social life of Robert Burns—in which he differed from most other men, and surpassed in felicity or in distraction almost all other poets—that he was permitted from the first to worship, with a sort of adoration bordering on frenzy, the best, the most beautiful, and sometimes the most accomplished women, without offence or injury. He loved them all avowedly, in succession or together, after such a fashion as no other man perhaps ever loved; as no other man, indeed, was capable of loving. They were to him, as we have already said, all extant types or vital impersonations of the principle of Beauty, and the most perfect illustrations of divine workmanship; which he could no more refrain from admiring, than he could help seeing: and it seems to have been a conceded privilege with him (which he usurped at once, if it was not otherwise granted), to extract from their beauty or from their goodness the elixir of immortality, and add their names without protest to the constellation of feminine perfection, with which the hands of poets, from time immemorial, have emblazoned, unreproached, the face of heaven. In return for which, he was honoured unreservedly with their friendship and gratitude. That he loved them after this fashion, is undeniable; and that they requited him with such honour, is notorious to the world. His attention, in some cases, was no doubt first excited, and his devotion towards some of them personally deepened, by affectionate sympathy for their misfortunes; but it was their beauty or their accomplishments, or both together, that ultimately inspired and transported him. To palter about the use of proper terms here, as if there was something discreditable to him or them in this relationship—as if he were guilty, and they were compromised—is childish and derogatory in the extreme. To not one of all these women (with one singular and world-famous exception, for which we have already attempted to account) was there the slightest reproach from Robert Burns's acknowledged admiration; nor to his wife herself, who enjoyed her own inviolate supremacy among them without fear, was there any scandal. With many of them, the most beautiful, she was on terms of affectionate intercourse; and of the rest, even the most fashionable, wives or spinsters, she had sufficient information to disturb her peace, if she cared to be so disturbed at all. If apologies were ever required—which possibly there might be—for excessive attentions on his part in quarters where she was a stranger, and where the simplicity of her own manners, or her humbler position in life prevented her appearing, she was herself the first to offer them. But after what she knew, and was willing to acquiesce in, of Mary's rival claims—that debt of love for ever resting-owing—there was no other earthly competition of which she had reasonable cause to be afraid. The idea of complicity or of guilt, in any one of these cases, is an unwarrantable and offensive misjudgment of all concerned.

It is far from our present purpose to attempt any detailed account of the friendships thus alluded to, or of the parties themselves personally interested. These will appear by degrees, hereafter, in their respective places. A bright and beautiful galaxy they form, with their varied destinies of premature departure, of prolonged and tranquil life, or of bitter misfortune; like so many starry scintillations clustered together in some comet's track, obeying his influence and sailing along with him into eternity—the effulgence of his own love overshadowing them all, as the splendour of an unfading dream. We seem to see them still surviving, like supernatural realities; and the man himself, as if he too still lived, and loved them on. Such an apotheosis of beauty by a ploughman, who could imagine? Since women lived, perhaps, so many authentic recognisable individualities among them have not been honoured and glorified together, by any one man's love and genius. But to glance at them for a moment thus, was indispensable; for as much as it was to one of these both the poet himself and his wife were indebted, in these sad hours, for the ministrations of mercy and love; and to another his memory was indebted, for the most affectionate tribute of admiration, and the only truly prophetic appreciation of his genius at the moment, when the cloud received him silently out of sight from all others. Jessie Lewars it was, who now sleeps softly by the side of his cenotaph, that watched the dying patient, and soothed the helpless wife; that came and went on tiptoe between their adjoining rooms; that snatched away the children “to keep the house all quiet,” and that is understood, although not certainly, to have been present at the closing scene; and Mrs. Riddel—the ‘Maria,’ both of his eulogies and of his unmanly passionate invectives; the woman of genius, of fashion, and of accomplishments, who could cope with him a little in wit; who could quarrel with, and dismiss, and then forgive, and receive, and honour him; who affectionately entertained him in his dying hours, when “the stamp of death was imprinted on his features;” and from whom, if she pleased, he would accept “commands for the other world”—she it was, who, with womanly grace and womanly instinct, appeared foremost on his death, with her own public vindication of his character, and her own prophetic assertion of his immortality. Sorrowful as the night of affliction, of depression, and of despair at last became, and gloomy as the concluding hours of the day had been; lights like these in their unspeakable beauty, kindled at his own undying flame with rays of love, are seen illumining and relieving the darkness. Why should a Christian man be afraid to say that they sanctified it also, if sanctification were needed?

There was another sort of relationship, however, of an entirely different kind, which was not of less value to Burns in the approaching crisis; in which masculine attachments, founded upon similarity of tastes or opinions, and growing at last into brotherly devotion, asserted their supremacy at the end. Of the numerous friends with whom through life occasionally, but more especially of those with whom at that time regularly, he maintained correspondence, there were few indeed, one may suppose, who would not gladly have assisted, by word or deed, to refresh his heart, or alleviate his sufferings. But there were few in reality, to whom he either could or would communicate the secret; there was not one in the world, it may be said, who could honestly afford the very consolation he most anxiously desired. To have assured Robert Burns, at this crisis, of his wife and children's prospective happiness and comfort, in the event of his own removal, would have been better than thousands of gold and silver; more consolatory than all the eulogiums or personal attentions that could be lavished on himself. But who could undertake that, or hint, in his presence, at the only possible means by which it was likely to be accomplished in those days? The protection of his own fame from outrage, and of his moral credit from wilful violence by the unscrupulous hands of others, might be his second care. But this also he must leave in uncertainty to the discretion of strangers, and to the long-suffering providence of an offended God. Who could afford him security on a single point? and what means could he himself adopt to right all these contingencies, with the hand of death upon his forehead? Of those, however, to whom the mere external circumstances of the case were known, and who of their generosity contributed from a distance, to alleviate his personal distress, his own relative at

Montrose (himself in no affluent condition) must be specially recognised; Mr. Graham of Fintry, Commissioner of Excise; and Mr. Thomson of Edinburgh, with some qualifications, deserve to be mentioned also. Of those upon the spot, Mr. Findlater, his supervisor, was kindly considerate in his attentions; and, according to Chambers, a young man named Stobie, a candidate for appointment in the Excise, generously undertook to discharge his official duties, without which his salary, reduced as it then was, could not have been continued at all: "to whom, therefore, in reality," says that biographer justly, "the gratitude of those who love the memory of the bard must be considered as chiefly due:" and such services, we have no doubt, were rendered by this youth from motives of affectionate regard, as much as from any other that could be suggested by the most ungenerous observer. The honour and satisfaction, however, of attending directly on Robert Burns, was to be shared with Jessie Lewars by another party still.

Dr. Maxwell was the friend whose name is to be pre-eminently associated with the sorrowful anxieties of the closing hours. Dr. Maxwell, who was a man of skill and of accomplishments, had completed his medical education at Edinburgh, under the most distinguished teachers then possibly in Europe. His diploma, which we have seen, presents a perfect constellation of signatures.¹⁰ In addition to such advantages at home, he had seen also not a little of the world abroad, within the last few eventful years of Continental history. Having been in Paris during the Revolutionary era, he had even been enrolled a *gendarme* in that distracted capital, in which capacity he officiated as sentry over Louis XVI., on the day of his decapitation; and, as a souvenir of that terrible event, had dipped his handkerchief in the king's blood. That souvenir, it is alleged by the Doctor's friends, he retained with sacred vigilance till the end of his life. How it was disposed of then, is not, to the present writer, known. That Dr. Maxwell participated in the dreadful deeds of that epoch of popular frenzy, in any other way than as a passive agent in the whirlwind, to escape destruction himself, nobody, who knew anything of the Scotchman's character and dispositions, would believe; but that his political prejudices were of the revolutionary type, may also be taken for granted. His intimacy with Burns was by no means an advantage to the poet, and still less to the officer of Excise; and the fact that he and Burns were somehow associated, as subscribers for a revolutionary paper, was most prejudicial in every way to Burns's credit with the Government. This gentleman it was, however, to whom Burns was affectionately attached, with the kindness of brotherhood; and he it was in turn, who, with the admiration of genius and the bond of political sympathies to make him a friend, as well as an adviser, was physician to the family, and immediate personal attendant at the death of the poet.

The symptoms of Burns's illness, after his return from Brow, which was on the 18th of July, 1796, were very unequivocal. Fevered, shaken, and convulsed with pain, he staggered from the conveyance which had brought him home from the coast; and toiling up the difficult street, consecrated for ever thus by his last footsteps, he crossed in over the threshold of the quiet domicile he was never more to leave again in life. The night was now begun—short, but dark and sorrowful; night, not only of grief and pain, but of swift approaching intellectual collapse and delirium. One thing yet, however, whilst the light of consciousness remains, is to be thought of—his wife's condition. Assistance for her must be implored, in Heaven's name, from Mauchline. This, on the very day of his return, is done; and is the last recorded intelligent act of his existence. The shadows now rapidly lengthen, and the midnight hour, with a sudden stride, draws nigh. Early on the morning of the 21st, his intellect manifestly wavers. Silence and patience, good friends, all! This house is sacred; this lowly upper room, with its humble equipment, with its immortal tenant, is inviolable. Let Jessie Lewars minister; let the good *gendarme* physician watch; let the helpless wife beyond the partition there, soon to be made widow, and mother again, ere her thirtieth year, have peace and rest whilst she may. Why should you and I any further intrude? or with curious ear attempt to decipher the inarticulate ravings, that are said to be escaping from those fevered dying lips? Ah, friends! This is the

¹⁰ Reminiscences, original—Dr. Maxwell.

solemnest of many solemn things in these solemn years: more sadly solemn, perhaps, to the physician as he sits there, than the recent decapitation of a king. To the end the delirium prevails; and the demon of wrath, dark and scowling, at some imaginary enemy—some thoughtless creditor, who has been needlessly urgent upon him in the day of his calamity—emerges, blaspheming, from the palace of the soul! When this comes, the end indeed has come. And shall the eloquence, the music, the melody of a lifetime be drowned in discord like this? His eldest son—a child scarcely ten years old, in Jessie Lewars's hand, brought in by herself along with younger brothers to witness the departure; the same whom he had decorated but a year before, in fatherly pride and joy, as we suppose, with his little bunch of flowers for the miniature—declares it. Dr. Maxwell, who is absent at the moment, does not hear it; and Jessie Lewars herself, if she was actually then within hearing, has rehearsed nothing; but the boy in after life, still deeply impressed with it, being interrogated, affirms it. Let the jealousies then, of the virtuous world, be satisfied; let its enmities be appeased! The intellect that dazzled and offended it has been eclipsed in darkness; the soul that violated its decorums, that scorned its discipline, goes wandering, wavering forth from its desecrated precincts into eternity. Farewell, thou mighty one! great and God-like wrestler against despotism and falsehood, on behalf of men! “Thy warfare is accomplished, thine iniquity is pardoned; thou hast received of the Lord's hand double for all thy transgressions”—Saint nor sinner shall harass thee more!



AFTER-NIGHT

DUMFRIES, ere noon, shall awake to the sad sense of what has occurred this night; Edinburgh, by public announcement, ere many succeeding dawns; then all Scotland, and England, and by swift degrees the world. At home, public solemn lying-in-state for the inanimate remains, as if a prince had departed, has been decreed by magisterial authority; and public funeral honours, by soldiers and citizens—in which, strange to say, a future Prime Minister of the empire is assisting. Affectionate provision for the widow and children; elaborate biographies of the deceased for their behoof, and magnificent memorial editions of his poems, follow; with what not besides of loving tribute, “tears and praises,” from the residue of men.¹³ “Watchman, watchman, what of the night?” “The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye!” Foolish watchman: “The night is far spent, and the day is at hand; for now is this man's salvation nearer, than when he lived and breathed.” His spirit is at last abroad. The Soil, with all its sore electrical entanglements; with its fleshly temptations and lusts; with its seductive sunshine and song, has been overleaped and shaken off for ever. The night-pang of separation between him and it has been accomplished, and the soul, equipped for immortality, is free. Henceforth as a spirit shall he live, glorious and independent, far beyond all funeral pomps, and national regrets, and charities, and commemorations; diffusing his vitality wherever men are capable of inspiration by speech and music. Another life is now in store for him, than that with which he has so sorrowfully parted; a life commensurate with his endowments, and imperishable as his gifts; an Hereafter of existence, expansive and enduring as the sympathies of his fellow-men. Into this also, as into his former existence so concluded, it behoves us for a moment now, with what additional light has been accumulated at this distant date, reverentially and believingly to inquire. Reverentially and believingly we do it. Not certainly into the realities of an invisible and eternal spirit-world, do we, with profane curiosity, desire so to look. For us, as regards him and all others, these, with their dread incertitudes and alarms, are for ever sealed.

¹³ Gossip—Death of Burns: various authorities.

But of the subordinate immortality bequeathed to such a soul, nearer yet not less real, in fellowship with the surviving universe, of which he was, and still is, a vital component part, without either profanity or impertinence we may inquire; and of such alone our inquiry here is.

“It has been appointed unto all men,” as we know, “once to die; but after this the judgment”—a judgment which never fails to be recorded, either in heaven or on earth. It is appointed also to some men to return again to the earth where they lived and died, and to abide in perpetual connection with, although beyond it; to assist in its concerns, to minister to its necessities, unseen; to instruct and guide it in its onward progress, unfelt; to soothe its sorrows and enlarge its joys, at the very moment when it is occupied with premature, and often uncharitable, judgment on their existence. Such immortality of being, and indissoluble connection of the man with the world which was once his dwelling-place, is indeed of two sorts; one of which, however, is much higher than the other. Most commonly it originates in some great deed of his, or series of achievements—as victories, discoveries, or works—which have a sort of authoritative, judicial, or instructive force of their own; in which case, immortality is but the memory of these personified, and identified with him: beyond which his own life is stationary, and he has no other vital relationship with the world. He is built into his monument. Sometimes, on the other hand, but very rarely, it is connected with a certain inextinguishable vitality of constitution, independent of all mere works or achievements, although necessarily associated with them; in which case it is no mere memory of these, however abundant or glorious they were, but a prolongation of the soul’s existence itself, which seems to live and breathe along with them perpetually. Of this latter kind was, and is, the After-Life of Burns. Be assured of it, most friendly, sceptical reader: it is not any mere volume of his in prose or poetry, that draws you so strangely towards this man, or ensures for him such immortality of love from you. Such volumes of his, packed with the most resplendent treasures of imagination merely, and glittering with gems of speech, like the jewels that dropped innumerable from enchanted lips, would not have made the man immortal as he is, or added a single day of life more to his brief earthly existence. These would have added glory, but not life, to him. He lives still for you and for the rest of us, because a portion of his earthly life remained still to live unexhausted, and due to posterity beyond himself, when he died. His life, in short, like his history, was an unfinished providence; linked on to succeeding years beyond the pause of death, and to be identified with the lives of his fellow-men in all succeeding generations, by the indissoluble sympathy of being. This was the peculiar inherent characteristic of his nature, which enriched, and beautified, and multiplied his speech into perpetual echoes; and which could not be fully recognised, but by the most profoundly sympathetic souls, whilst the man himself lived.

Such undying spiritual life as this, is that alone which mingles with the universe and obtains its secret; and adequately, or at least frankly and affectionately, confesses the mystery of its own relation to the universe—to the poor and often miserable universe, “which groans and travails together in pain,” lacking an interpreter of like passions with its own, with love and pity, for its sorrows and its guilt. Life of this sort, it is manifest, whoever will reflect upon it, must be an undying element; must go far beyond the mere individual himself who inherits it; and in proportion to its profundity and extent, in proportion to its purity and truth, will reach evermore further into eternity. If it equals the universe in these respects, it may even survive the universe; may require another universe, in fact, for its own special perfection. Consider the Gospel, O friends, and what you call Revelation, if you doubt this; and remember without offence here the names of Christ and Moses. Such life, indeed, can never go on in any other name than that of the man himself who first inherits it, or be dissociated from himself whilst other men survive; because it was through himself it came: but beyond his own allotted earthly span it reaches, and to other men, inheritors of the same nature as his own, it appertains, as surely as if he and they, by one long protracted birth, had come into the world together. It was such an one, we naturally say, and no other, who so penetrated and interpreted for us the living sphere; by whose intenser life our own lives are intensified or renewed;

and we therefore who now live, at the remotest intervals, to enjoy the interpretation, or to homologate the experience, attribute with gratitude and wonder a longer and a higher sort of life to him; and keep him thus alive by spontaneous contributions of vitality, that we may rejoice in the perpetual fellowship of his life, as if it were really and truly our own. Not his, but ours, was a life like this; and whilst we live and breathe, it can never be exhausted. Pre-eminent among such natural living interpreters was Robert Burns. Till this day that life of his, with its exhaustless tide of consciousness, flows on through the dullest constitutions; that vitality of his, with its resistless pulse, throbs and circulates in the feeblest veins. Such life, in short, is but confluence or continuity of vital being; to which we all drop in like living links, when the day of our existence arrives—clinging to the chain, or mixed with the flood by some inexplicable affinity, as it glides along through our own time and neighbourhood. Stop it, foolishly and ungratefully, who can or dare! This was a man. He was all a man; and wherever men are, there is he, secreting and dispensing with equal power the common inheritance of humanity. He sympathised as a man wholly, with moral and with vital universe alike; and avowed his own share of conscious complicity with nature unreservedly, sometimes even in objectionable terms, that he might be identified with her enduring vitality in every form. His own special life itself, with all its passionate idiosyncrasies, he gave in undivided, unconditional revelation, not only for the scrutiny and approval of men, but for their individual interest and behoof, of love and joy in the endless secret. Nothing of his was denied or hidden, in which they could have a share; nothing of theirs was neglected or despised, that he should understand or feel: in which absolute surrender of himself by vocal affidavit, so to speak, in both ways, he became at once the prophet, the brother penitent, and the confessor of the world; and the loving circulation of his words by edition after edition, for centuries to come—for the consolation and refreshment of the world, not from admiration merely—will be the lasting proof of it.

But neither, any more than their humbler brethren, can such immortal natures escape judgment: nor would it be just and equal to the rest of mankind, that they should. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ," and give an account of ourselves at this infinite tribunal of God. Dead or living, we must so appear; and dead or living, we are arraigned by each other there. This man, beyond all others, has been freely so arraigned; most probably, because beyond all others his own free declarations have compromised and involved the world. Let no man disguise it. Burns's public confessions, to whatever they amount for good or evil, are confessions in the name of the world, implicating the listeners, and much more the rehearsers, by speech or song, as long as human nature remains what it is. The reader and the hearer together have an irresistible complicity with him, as he had with nature; and so the secret satisfaction, and the secret sense of guilt which we experience, drag us all together to the bar along with him, handcuffed and tongue-tied, in confusion: in which embarrassing position he, the most conspicuous and only public transgressor, must bear the imputations and rebut the charges of his brethren. All that can be said, on the other side, is that such confessions of his, however objectionable, were the only adequate confessions he could make; and the only adequate reparation he could offer at the same moment, to the offended reserve and betrayed concealment of the world. Other sort of confessions, indeed, he might have made, and did make privately, as by speech and letter circulated after his death; of which the world knew nothing at the time, and knows comparatively little yet, although they are all now patent. But with these, if they had been all, the world would never have been contented. To hear him speak aloud, with tingling ears at the boldness and truth of his declarations, was what the world, with delight and dread, and hazardous satisfaction, of which he had all the blame to bear, insisted on continually: and such declarations, on his own and the world's behalf, were the only confessions worthy of himself or it; the only confessions, in fact, that God, for the centuries yet to come of unregenerate nature, will consent to listen to. All other confessions by this man, how authentic soever and sincere, were still inferior to these; and never from the same profound depths of life and consciousness, that were stirred to

overflowing by the visitations of angels or the invisible wand of music. Like the confessions of St. Augustine to the omnipresent God—eloquent as they are beyond the speech of Cicero, in their spontaneous fulness, and pantheistic almost in their philosophy—the confessions of Robert Burns must all be made to the Deity of incarnate sympathy or passion (with whom most men, unconsciously, have so much to do), before the reliability of profoundest truth could be attained in them, as exponents of his own constitution, or utterances entitled to a response from the rest of mankind. Other confessions, it is true, might have sufficed for other men, but for themselves only; in which, therefore, the world at large would have had comparatively little sympathy or interest: but confessions like these alone, in their truth and fulness, could really suffice for him, or through him benefit and suffice the world. In many of his songs there is the tacit admission of what some moral men might denounce as sin, and in many of his letters are qualifying details of regret, and extenuations, and apologies—which might be quoted or commented on in his defence, if required. But this is practically unnecessary. His relation both to God and man is of a higher kind. We repeat, he was the St. Augustine of Passion and of Poetry, as Augustine was the Burns of Spirituality and Prose. Passionate or spiritual, and confiding, they both were, to the brink of bankruptcy. Like their old Hebrew prototype David, and in some respects like Solomon, they both had a burden always of spiritual grief, or of natural shortcoming within them to get rid of; and the consciences of all other men were the far-extended, involuntary shrine of expiation, where it must be solemnly and publicly laid down. To shrive themselves thus in these latter ages, as their predecessors also did in the ages that were gone, the one must have his tablet and his quill, the other his harp or reed; furnished with which, they have at once electrified and betrayed the world. Men cannot at the same time be much better, without being also worse than either; and nobody, with half their avowals to make, had ever eloquence or courage enough so to make them. In this respect the Christian bishop, like the Hebrew philosopher, and the Scottish song-singer, like the Hebrew psalmist, go before God together; who will hear and judge them both, as he did their inspired brethren before them, on the ground of spontaneous sincerity; and being so judged of God and of themselves, they abide without dread the ultimate judgment of their fellow-men.

In one important particular, indeed, these two great Confessors—the one for the church, and the other for the world—differ. The confessions of the saint were made when all transgression, we may presume, had been accomplished; on after-view and deliberate consideration of a long life, with the strictest scrutiny of repented deeds, and with the solemn formalities of reiterated and recorded prayer; in which respects he resembles, and even surpasses Solomon. In Burns's case, on the other hand, the transgression and the confession go together. He transgresses whilst he sings, or sings whilst he transgresses; and so the sin and the acknowledgment are immortalised at once on the same page. The *corpus delicti* of transgression, and the *peccavi* of repentance are seen and heard at the same moment. There is no space for repentance with him in general; or when it does follow at a distance, it follows with such another burst of passionate articulation, that it can announce itself only as a song; in which respect also he resembles David. But the result in both cases is the same. The saint and the singer are alike before the world, and the inmost secrets of their moral constitution are divulged. Was it discreet then, in Burns, whose words were thus to float for ever in the air, and to be conveyed on the wings of music to the ends of the earth, to make confessions of such a sort as he sometimes does, in the hearing of mankind? Was it discreet on the other hand, we may with equal justice inquire, or for the credit of the church, that an occupant of the seat of Moses, or rather of the throne of Christ, should make avowals in the ear of God, and with the ultimate cognisance of men, such as those which St. Augustine has here and there left behind him? Or rather, was it possible in either case for men of such a stamp, so divinely unreserved and honest as they both were, to withhold confession? Were they any more responsible for this, than clouds are for the discharge of electricity? or fountains, sweet or bitter, for disclosing their contents? But the truth is, in both

cases, the greatest good has practically accrued. The heart of the world has been disburdened, the conscience of the world has been cleansed, the relation of the world to God has been adjusted; by the intervention of two such men, practical mediators among the ungodly, who have nothing more now to apprehend of shame or evil, from their own worst avowals: and for how many an avowal else, of tenderest truth and beauty, has the world, not of the ungodly alone, been unwittingly indebted to them both! Yet, let not the world of either class be too severely blamed in this. No two men, perhaps, would have been more likely to misjudge one another than these very confessors in the name of mankind, from opposite sides of the same great altar. What Burns would have said of St. Augustine in some respects, we may or may not conjecture; but if that hymn to 'Mary in Heaven' had been imagined in any form by St. Augustine himself, it would have been exaggerated or at least assumed by him, with the devoutest self-abasement, as a sin against God, and a practical moral wrong against the wife of his bosom—if such he had had. Looked at even in a looser light, and without the intense spiritual analysis of which he was capable, this exquisite lyric implied unquestionably a temporary wandering of the soul from the sanctuary of marriage, to a scene of passionate regrets beyond that pale; and a temporary violation to that extent of vows which were sacred for life. But was the man who made it less truly honest on that account, or on the whole less faithful, for that half-hour's moral alienation of his fancy among the stars? or would any wise and loving wife, knowing with what sort of husband she had to deal, think worse of the man who seemed to forget her for a moment, in the act of such passionate confession to the sanctified in heaven? It may be well, indeed, for those who have no such yearning, inextinguishable sorrow to endure; but where the sorrow lives, and returns intensified with every solar year, the world and all else that is dearest in it must retire, till the agony of prostration, and the recovery of the soul again from such annual threatened collapse, have been honestly, yea devoutly, achieved. No mischief of any kind to the world has, or ever will come out of it.

Burns's true moral relation to the world, then, or rather to the very Earth herself, fountain and depository of all vital force, is that of natural Poet-Confessor; in which function his supremacy may fairly be declared perpetual. A function this is, pre-eminent among all those which imply the baptism of fire; for which he himself was anointed with unprecedented passion; and to which no other soul need ever look as his successor, without the same gifts, and the same life-long conflict and participation in sorrow and sin. Notwithstanding the splendour and almost sanctity of such a position, however, a cloud of reproach arises, issuing, one may say, from the very chinks of the ground, to dim his immortality; as if the Soil, with her inexorable claims and endless importunities, must follow and attach him beyond the grave. Painful, yet by no means unexampled, is a fate like this; and requires deliberate investigation: in prosecuting which, let both writer and friendly reader for a moment pause, to collect what necessary information can be obtained at the outset. It must be remembered then, in the first place, that notwithstanding the various editions of his works—seven, apparently, in number—and the miscellaneous pieces in musical collections and elsewhere, which had appeared before his death, it was sufficiently known to the world that much at that date remained still for publication. Immediately after that sad event, therefore, the gathering up and arranging of the sweet and beautiful, or characteristic fragments, that lay scattered with his initials on them everywhere about the land, began. These were found in single stray documents, or in richer masses of poetry and correspondence; some of them already among printing presses, some in editorial bureaus, but the greatest number by far in the sanctuaries of love and friendship. They included, among much else, nearly all the songs—one hundred in number—prepared by him for Thomson's collection, together with the correspondence attached, which were honourably and frankly surrendered; also the 'Jolly Beggars,' 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' and a number of minor fragments accidentally discovered by degrees; but above all, that brilliant series of letters, hitherto unseen but by the favoured few, which was to place him at once on a level, as the author of enchanting realities in prose, with the

most accomplished and popular authors of epistolary fiction. The first authorised edition of these, with all that was then accessible of his poems, was by Dr. Currie; who, upon the whole, discharged that difficult task of biographer and editor with credit and candour. This was the first resuscitation of life for him, and the earnest of new immortality. It was now distinctly seen, that with all the effulgence of a lifetime spent in presence of the world, there had been another life, equally splendid, spent, or rather squandered in shadow, which was now to be recalled. But it was manifest also, from Dr. Currie's work, that there was much of another sort behind, of which he either knew not anything, or did not wish to know. Accordingly, new researches were made, and innumerable supplements followed; with complaints of injustice to the memory of the departed on the one hand, and new revelations of his unknown life on the other: conspicuous among which posthumous publications were the 'Reliques,' both in poetry and prose, collected by Cromek; one or two piratical editions of his works, with hitherto unpublished pieces, by Stewart and others, of Glasgow; and glimpses from time to time, in other ways, of the correspondence with Clarinda. This accumulation of fragments, dating from the appearance of his life by Dr. Currie, has grown ultimately into a mass of authorship greater, if not more beautiful—for more beautiful nothing could be—than the original acknowledged productions of his pen. The last considerable additions to this wonderful heap have been made, after much indefatigable and praiseworthy research, by Mr. Robert Chambers, who, in this respect, has done eminent service; and in the edition now before the reader, several hitherto inaccessible fragments of correspondence will also be found; not so large in extent, as valuable (in the editor's opinion, some of them unspeakably so) in their bearing on the moral character of the man. One great irreparable loss, for ever to be lamented in this light, has been that of the Aiken correspondence—feloniously abstracted many years ago from friendly keeping, and never since seen. If still in existence, it should be sought for probably in America. In the present edition, one letter addressed to Mr. Aiken appears, which has already been quoted from; and this is the only inedited fragment of the series known to be still extant—for which the sum of five guineas, we believe, was cheerfully paid as a centenary memorial. Upon the whole, it may be fairly concluded, that almost all of Robert Burns the world has either any right, or any present chance of seeing, is at last before it;¹⁴ and it may certainly be affirmed, that there is no British author, Shakspear himself included, to whose productions, of any sort whatever, so intense and universal an interest attaches.

In the meantime however, as the reader will now be able to understand, the risk of reproach may also have arisen with these new revelations. It would have been too happy a fate, indeed, for any man to escape it. By the fear of this, and by the sorrow connected with the apprehension of it, the concluding hours of his life were embittered and darkened. He did not live to the age of seventy-six, and had no time for repentance and retraction, or even to set the house of his deathless reputation in order, like St. Augustine. He could recall no manuscript, he could cancel no line. The enemy was at liberty to persecute his soul, and take it: yea, to tread down his life upon the earth, and to lay his honour in the dust! and the enemy sought opportunity to do it. No sooner, then, was he asleep, and the possibility of discovery with the possibility of profit suggested, than his correspondence is mercilessly ransacked; his most unguarded confidential utterances are rehearsed with gross exaggeration, and circulated officiously to his discredit; contemptible forgeries for gain are affiliated on his authorship, and obtain currency in his name; every scrap of writing, good or bad, that had passed in any circumstances from his pen, is seized and published; among which, at so recent a date as 1843, appears the whole Clarinda correspondence with authority—in which, however, nothing otherwise reprehensible is found, except the fact, as we already know, that the letters it contains were all addressed to a married woman, and many of them after the writer himself was a married man. Finally, a whole series of other letters by him, known privately to have been in a publisher's possession, with some questionable passages among them—improper passages—is at last disclosed,

¹⁴ Gossip—Burns Manuscripts in British Museum.

and ultimately goes up to auction, when it is redeemed at an almost fabulous ransom, as an unpublished relique of his life. Other disclosures yet remain, which we seek not to authenticate. Witness after witness, however, depones to the truth of all this; but yesterday, it appears, Lord Byron's name must be added to the list; and the stain looks, in the eyes of the world, as if it were utterly ineffaceable. One brave hand on the other side, at least, we know, that has deliberately dashed such foolish lying fragments in pieces—the foolish lying fragments of the scribbled window pane, on which that busy diamond of his had been often needlessly at work—that they should never more bear witness against the honour of his soul. What might have realised scores of pounds on the auctioneer's table has thus been devoutly sacrificed. From first to last, was there ever such a history of selfishness, curiosity, concern, and love, contending with one another about the reputation of a human being? Such conflict alone were immortality.

In these circumstances, what can any honest biographer say or do? This is another after-night revelation, not of glory, it should seem, but of shame, that must certainly be glanced at, and dissipated if possible, ere the new day of immortality begins. To deny it, is out of the question; to extenuate, of no avail. The clamour of one half of the world, and the silence of the other half, are symptoms of concern that cannot be neglected. The best and wisest course, therefore, is distinctly to recognise and explain the fact. There is probably not one wise or good man out of a hundred, who can understand such a constitution as Robert Burns's, and who knows anything of the veiled existence of his fellow-men, who will feel much surprise in the matter; and not one, wise or unwise, in ten thousand, who has the slightest acquaintance with the literature or illustrative art of the two or three last generations, or even with the closet literature and art of the present hour, as gross and scandalous as the chambers of Oriental imagery, who will require any very serious apology to be made, in this respect, for a man like him. Their own humiliating consciousness, or privileged observation, will explain all. They are initiated. But for the great mass of readers, good and honest, uninitiated and unconscious—who know little more of the world than what appears on the surface, and nothing more of themselves than what occurs from hour to hour—to whom there can be no debateable land in morals, nor any waste corner of imagination under heaven; and who would be shocked at the idea of any secret ungodliness in the man whom they sincerely love and adore;—for these, some explanation is indispensable, that no exaggerated suspicion of sin connected with his memory may hang about their conscience, or poison the fountain of their love. For the satisfaction, therefore, of all such—who constitute unquestionably the great majority, as it is to be hoped, for a thousand reasons, they ever will—it must here be distinctly stated, and should always be remembered, that it was only towards the end of his life, and chiefly in his unpublished correspondence with Thomson, delinquencies of this sort occurred. It is certain that even his published letters of this date are blotted here and there with heavy thunder-drops of grief and rage, that seem to have been dried in the dust of the highway; and in his unpublished letters, it is not impossible that blots of a more discreditable character may appear. But in his correspondence with Thomson, we foresaw long ago, on the very threshold of our biography, as our readers will remember, that something entirely different from all that appears in his general correspondence might be expected.* That correspondence originated, as we have seen, in peculiar circumstances, and was limited to topics that presented many a temptation to such improprieties; and more recently also, in the course of our inquiries, we have found that a considerable part of his latest literary labours, both for Johnson's Museum and Thomson's Collection, was the examination, or revision and renewal, of the oldest and very worst metrical compositions of the country. With all their impurities, therefore, he must become intimately acquainted, and in the very reading and transcription of these immoralities, it is by no means wonderful that his own pen, in lighter correspondence on the same subject, should have been occasionally infected. Everything, good or bad, he touched on in correspondence, he touched on sympathetically. If the bad was to be

* Page xiv.

abolished, it would be transformed and made beautifully better; if it was only to be commented on, or pointed out for scorn or laughter, or remembered in any other way, it would be exaggerated and made beautifully worse. He touched nothing by revision, that he did not thus adorn either way: and that his own reputation should have suffered, even secretly, by this extraordinary facility of renewal or reproduction, is a matter of regret undoubtedly. On the other hand, it must be remembered that some of these enormities were beyond even his powers of emendation any way; and that he committed them finally, with asterisks of disgust, to oblivion. If *he* renounced them in despair, what then must they have been?

But the fundamental fact connected with this inquiry, is that of Burns's own existence, by birth and education, on the verge of an epoch gross and godless—gross in the pursuit of sensual enjoyment openly, godless in the use of most licentious language unprovokedly. Not all his father's virtuous vigilance could possibly protect him from this. There was not a book of a certain class, beyond his immediate early reading, that was not tainted with it; not a peasant lad with whom he came in contact, who did not understand it; not a gentleman who did not patronise and enjoy it; not a woman who was not perfectly aware of, and even constrained to acquiesce in it. The songs and the proverbs of the country, above all, abounded with it. This we have already explained, as our readers will remember, in advance; and the miracle of all seemed then to be, that in the midst of such conversation and experience, Burns should have survived in speech and writing comparatively so pure. In the course of our biography, we have seen him absorbing and remodelling not only the taste and the tongue, but the moral character of the people; and his immortal, inalienable honour it is, that by his own voice he diverted this current of impurity, and changed this speech of Pandæmonium into songs and shouts of joy. "I will," said he; "'Be thou clean:' and immediately the leprosy departed." This man's appearance, in short, this man's word, was the date of a new epoch. This whole subject the present writer has discussed more fully elsewhere;* and he is averse at this place, either by quotation or otherwise, to repeat himself. But without the risk of repetition, he may be allowed to state now, once for all, that at considerable expense, both of means and patience, he has secured an opportunity of examining at leisure some of the exploded nuisances (and by no means the worst, he can readily believe, of what yet exists); and on the most dispassionate review, he hereby publicly records his own gratitude, as a member of society and as a minister of the Gospel, to Robert Burns, for the divine deliverance he has wrought out for Scotland from the domination of such grossness and impurity. In taste and beauty alone, the change is like a miracle. Let his detractors of every class, from pious reviewers to the most sensitive of women and the clergy, be assured that his breath alone has disinfected or abolished a mass of corruption and vulgarity, which all their united genius, piety, and zeal, would have contended with, for centuries to come, in vain. It may be safely affirmed, indeed, that no uninitiated reader of Robert Burns could possibly imagine from what a chaos of corruption so much beauty, by a single touch or word of his, has been evoked; and therefore not one in ten thousand can imagine the extent of moral obligation, and debt for the purest pleasure, they lie under to him. The writer speaks thus distinctly, because the documents authorising such a declaration are, or have been, before him. It must be understood, however, that it is not the ancient romantic legends, popular ballads, or higher love songs of Scotland—the most exquisite of any age or country, and in which the very essence of pathos and of beauty are enshrined—that are here referred to. These incomparable remains Robert Burns admired and venerated. He was himself, in fact, the only man then living who could produce a parallel to any of them; and it is the highest proof of his own great modesty and discretion, that he neither touched nor attempted to rival them. Not to these, by any means, do we now refer; but to that other class entirely, of popular convivial and amatory, or rather lascivious songs, and tainted proverbs, which were the common staple of the people's mirth, and the only literature of their conversation. So long

* Genius and Morality of Robert Burns: a Lecture.

ago as the middle of the sixteenth century, the necessity of superseding these popular immoralities was experienced, and an honest enough effort in this direction was made, by converting the vicious doggerel of the day into "Spiritual Sangs and Godly Ballates," with a "prologue" and preface in succeeding years, from catechisms and the Ten Commandments! What sort of success attended this well-meant, but ridiculous, overture to the public conscience, may be easily imagined.* Ramsay himself, although the author of several beautiful songs, can hardly be said to have made any real improvement, besides that he did considerable additional mischief; and other minor contemporaries and successors of his individually, by fugitive utterances of a higher kind, contributed a little, but not much, to the general reformation of taste: how little, may be understood, when it is known, that so beautiful a ballad as 'Auld Robin Gray'—the work of a girl disgusted with the impurity of the age, and terrified to acknowledge her own workmanship—although received with much approval by the public, could be seriously ridiculed as a 'silly psalm,' by at least one most accomplished and respectable editor.† Such efforts, no doubt, were of service in preparing the way, and in demonstrating distinctly that the people were sighing for deliverance: but the old leaven of impurity was still strong, both in the voice and in the soul of the multitude. It was reserved for Burns alone, as a prophet, to command the nuisance away. His own instinctive sense of what was beautiful, his profound sympathy with the humours and passions of the people—which must all be taken into account by whoever would do them lasting good; and his own incomparable gift of utterance, entitled him to such authority in every heart, and over every tongue. It was no 'silly psalm' from his mouth; but a stream of regenerating prophecy.

It appears then, that what is called Burns's Era, was an era in morals as well as in literature; and that this man's name is indissolubly connected, not only with the most wonderful development of taste and genius, in poetry and music, ever effected by a solitary soul, but with the most extensive and permanent moral reformation of his fellow-countrymen. That Burns did sometimes condescend to compete, in secret, with the very rubbish he was thus abolishing, and to outdo it for a moment in the turbulence of his own passion, or for the gratification of questionable company; or perhaps, most of all, for the mere wanton exercise of his fancy, is by no means improbable. To a man so full of passion as he always was, and of such exuberant, uncontrollable imagination, with such exemplars of national humour and profanity everywhere around him—which were as familiar to his ear and to his eye from childhood, as the alphabet; which everybody at the time clamoured for; which no company of men ever met without rehearsing; and which he himself was virtually superseding in the ear of the world for ever,—the temptation of rivalry, even at the risk of shame, was almost irresistible. One can easily comprehend this, although no one can either justify or approve it. This old native scandalous humour, as it gleams in songs and proverbs, cannot We too eclipse in lurid flame, as well as in pure and holy light from the highest heaven? At midnight revels cannot We preside with shouts of laughter, as well as at the hearth or in the sanctuary with tears of gratitude and love? Yes: but only for a moment. Alas, even for that moment! The laughter, the triumph, of that moment shall engender sighs of sorrow, unutterable in any ear but God's. That such reprehensible sallies as these did take place, and that memorials of them exist to the present hour, in most confidential correspondence or otherwise, is asserted, as we have seen; and may be proved on most indisputable authority. One does not feel almost any disposition now to dispute it. Let the fact of their existence remain, in the registered letter, or on the shattered window-pane—immortal in its very fragments, as the Roman bronze. Why not? Were not all these cancelled long ago, and interdicted from men with tears of contrition on a death-bed? Should this man alone, of all who have delighted the world, go sinless and immaculate away from it? Silence then, for ever, here: as we should ourselves pray for the silence of futurity, in like most supposable case. Wherever such evidence now exists, wherever such documents now are—in honourable, in right honourable, or even in reverend

* See Appendix—Editorial Remarks on Language of Burns.

† Pinkerton: Preliminary Discourse—Vol. II. 'Scottish Ballads.'

keeping—let no man henceforth look upon them, yea, let no man name them, but with power of attorney from heaven!

But why should we argue any longer here, after such apologetic fashion? In the light of that extraordinary portrait the year before his death, all is now sufficiently plain. Not a word written in these sad years, nor for years before, but must read to all the world of intelligent men with an entirely altered aspect. His eloquence itself seems to be a new thing, and all his fascination by speech and look more possible and real, in connection with these unpretending tints and shades. Nay, the light from that grief-laden face reaches far back through all intervening years of triumph and transgression, of inspiration and of toil, up to the very cradle, and shimmers with a sort of dread prophetic glory about the lowly nursing chair. With what eyes this man, then an infant, must have looked in his mother's face; what the love and the tenderness, what the humour and the rage of such a soul, maturing or matured, had been, we may partly now conjecture; what the terrible life-long conflict of the gifted sojourner between light and darkness, through the serenest azure of spiritual exaltation apprehending constantly the cloud of gloom, and through the dazzling sunshine looking evermore into the nearest and the darkest night; and what the agony at last of the poor sufferer, on whose shoulders the irresponsible hand of all-wise Deity had set such a head! On such principle of interpretation every stanza must be reconstrued, and the source of its inspiration a-new defined. The purest, the tenderest, the simplest, the loftiest, the most questionable memorials of his genius, receive alike through this another significance. And why not these later most objectionable fragments? Not mere lewd or wanton strokes, after all, but strangely, wofully significant revelations, must the whole of them have been; the registered outbreaks, in fact, of a lower nature, that was in the act of perpetual rebellion, and threatening through every chink of indulgence to rise and overwhelm the man; to unseat and dethrone the intellectual sovereign, that, with strange commingled despotism of strength and pity, kept the legion in chain until the latter day. Marvellous, indeed, is the whole of this new revelation, so swift and comprehensive, from the painted panel. In presence of this silent shadow, all mere phrenological investigations, all senseless moralising, all maudlin commiseration and Pharisaic censure, all foppery of criticism, together end. With a single glance of scorn, such vision from beyond the tomb annihilates them all. We repeat, since the days of Solomon and David, no man like this has walked our world: with all animated nature equally conversant; with trembling field-mice, with amorous birds, and with defiant demons of lust and rage, equally at home. To imagine a life in entire harmony with such a portrait, now for the first time seen, would be an achievement indeed. For ourselves, we can only hope, at this late hour, to fling a ray or two of light from its deep spiritual focus across the all-too imperfect already written pages; and for this self-unfolding beam, through clouds and thick darkness, of the setting sun, now visibly touching with diminished disc the abyss of death, that must engulf him for a season soon, we are grateful to a guiding, to a good and wise overruling Providence. Never, since we were born, have we been more distinctly conscious of close proximity to a departed soul, than in presence of this wonderful painting. Honour and peace to the dust of the nameless hand that fashioned it! No trifler in oils was he! We have gazed on it for hours, unwearied, in breathless bewilderment; we treasure it with the anxiety and veneration, and recur to it for inspiration, with the jealousy of a miser's love.

With such cloud of earthly vapours, nevertheless, gross and dull, attracted to himself from the soil, of which he was the vital offspring, and from which he rose, the After-night of his being is unquestionably so far tarnished; but through such earthly haze, the sweet bright god-like reality, in purity and truth, making for itself evermore a wider horizon and a higher zenith, shines; and exerts upon the hearts, and on the imaginations, and on the lives of his fellow-men a more wonderful influence for good and happiness, than the disembodied spirit of perhaps any other mere man. In all this throughout, the reader will observe, we speak not of Genius, of gifts or of endowments, but of Life: for who should talk of genius, when life itself—and such life—is the theme? a life which he

inherited from the earth and air, after the same unquestionable fashion, as if he had been the vital central stock of some vital indigenous forest—"trees of the Lord's planting all," himself the most wonderful, "that God might be glorified." Not beautiful and umbrageous merely, with the tints of genius on his manifold arms, but communicative and contagious he was, in leaf and rind, to the whole surrounding grove. So stands he and flourishes on, surviving all ordinary generations of pines and cedars, and imparting unperceived new youth and beauty to every succeeding growth of neighbouring wood; catching and absorbing on his loftier and broader top the sunlight and the starlight, the rains and dews of centuries—the heat, the radiance, and the moisture of perennial love and pity; abstracting also from the earth herself, with his deep-struck roots, the fiercer fire of passion that would have rent or prostrated a thousand common stems, and that finally affected his own corporeal manhood; and dispensing the commingled essence of all these, with the symphonious trill of birds and swell of Æolian strings among the branches, through every leaf and fibre to the sympathetic host around. From tip to tip it flies, and by invisible subterranean contact from root to root it travels, till the whole forest of humanity over continents and hemispheres has been impregnated, and sings and sighs and sways to its uttermost conscious limits, with the latent resistless electricity. Genius did never this. Such Orphic power is an attribute of Life alone, and is revealed with its wondrous magic among men at far extended intervals.

Of Genius too we might speak, but not now nor here. Life alone, the spiritual element of his being—the shrine of his intellect, and the fountain of all his power—has been the subject of our investigation hitherto, and with its final development, as still operative in the world, we close. That a few, by their own height and grandeur, by their mere antiquity and bulk, or by the sublime unapproachable character of their appointed themes, should attract admiration and enforce homage before him, as well as before others, is not to be wondered at or denied. Pindar was not as Homer, nor David as Moses: the *Iliad* and the *Pentateuch*, in their respective spheres, are works of a sort to be no longer thought of in the world. Neither was Petrarch as Dante, nor Burns himself as Milton or Shakspear. But Shakspear and Homer together could not supply the place of Burns. This man alone, standing on the earth, with neither vantage-ground nor theatre to extend his voice, speaks and dominates, by practical assent of mankind, through half the globe. By the river side or at the cottage door, at the sheepfold or in the field, by the verge of the wintry wood or on the golden-grassy knoll, in the weary 'gauger's walk' or on the very threshold of the tavern, sad but yet majestic there, he seems still to stand; and severing from his bosom the warm leaves of life, he distributes them, with laughter or with tears, among his brethren, or commits them careless to the keeping of the winds; which snatch and whirl them with amorous music, after their own fashion, to the uttermost ends of the earth, and toss them with jubilant defiance, as their adopted offspring, in the face of advancing time: in the midst of which ovation from the very elements, in a chariot of the atmosphere and with the hearts of his fellow-men in harness, he ascends for ever on high.

