



MR GEORGE M'ROBERT, EDINBURGH.

GREAT writer has remarked that man is properly the only object of interest to man. This is evidenced by the unspeakable interest he takes in biography. This penchant has its seat in our social nature. How inexpressibly comfortable to know our fellow-creature; to decipher the whole mystery of his heart, and to watch him in all his goings up and down in the world. What is the real significance of our common conversation from day to day? little or nothing but biography and autobiography; and what indeed is the genesis of all gossip, slander, scandal, and the like, but evidence of the interest we take in the whole inner and outer life of our friends and neighbours.

The editor of the **BORDER MAGAZINE** does well in endeavouring to gratify this social disposition in its purer and higher moods by presenting to his readers from time to time literary portraits of men who have gained distinction in some walk of life or who exemplify some outstanding virtue, and are, therefore, worthy of their admiration and esteem.

It gives us no small pleasure to add to its portrait gallery one already known, but not sufficiently, to its readers, and one deserving of a place among his peers. His life has an intrinsic as well as an external interest, for he has

had much to struggle with and has struggled with it successfully.

Mr George McRobert, the subject of this sketch, was born in the Border parish of Gretna, not far from the village of that name, long famous for its clandestine or run-away marriages. His father was a ploughman—an untaught, truth-loving peasant, just and upright in all his ways, and with seldom a dream beyond a simple, homely life. The boy never really knew his father, being a mere child when he died, but his love and reverence for such a father has remained with him through life. On the mother's side, whose maiden name is Irving, he comes of an old Border clan of that ilk. They were a strong race, and figured in most of the Border troubles of the time. Their stronghold was on the banks of the Irving burn, near Langholm. His mother is still living, a woman of marked individuality of character, but, alas, all damped, depressed, and held down by the necessity there was for unremitting toil in early life, and by the entanglements and discouragements of later years.

The Parochial Board had to aid the widow to rear her four fatherless children. It was, therefore, in circumstances of poverty that the boy was raised. The earliest companion of his childhood was want, which he sometimes fig-

ured to himself as a voracious vulture hovering over him and refusing to be scared away. One of his first impressions came from the tears of his mother, who had barely bread enough for her children. His education was of the most meagre description; in after years when he taught himself the three R's he had to begin with "pot sticks and hooks."

In his ninth year he was running messages, and in his tenth he entered on farm service as "cow herd." His wages were ten shillings for six months, with board and lodgings. It was a sad change even from the humble home with its accompanying discomforts, for in the widow's cottage if there were sometimes "forbidding looks" there was devotion; if there were occasional "wry faces" there was affection. His master was an old bachelor, stiff and exacting, and his fellow-servants were unfeeling, coarse, and boorish. Thus ill-treated, orphaned, and alone, and with dispondency gnawing at his heart he fell into a sort of nausea and lost appetite for his food. "One good heart," we have heard him say, "he found in the kitchen-maid." Other terms of farm service followed, but these were even a greater round of hardship and toil than the first.

Giles must trudge who ever gives command—
A Gibeonite who serves them all by turns.

The toiling, anxious mother, now residing in Annan, despite all her exertions continued to be "sorely held down." The busy little town of Langholm seemed to offer better prospects to her, and thither she removed with her young family. The boy, who followed, soon got employment in one of the "mills." The regular hours, lighter work, and social atmosphere of the factory was a pleasant change from the drudgery and friendlessness of farm life. He could now contribute something towards the support and comfort of the home. He felt that he had begun to be a man—was indeed a manikin, some ray of hope now began to spring up within the lad,—a certain small degree of self-confidence. He began to take some credit to himself, and in spite of the trying circumstances in which he had languished, he resolved to struggle forward and be a man.

When nearing his fifteenth year he became apprenticed to the shoemaking trade. This was an important epoch in his life. His master, the late Mr Andrew Byers, had a large and constantly increasing business and a considerable number of workmen in his employment. He was a man of sterling worth and deep religious feeling, and strove with all the tact at his command to be on cordial relations with his em-

ployees. He took a deep interest in their moral and religious welfare; and his gentle personality and kindly efforts made a deep impression on many of his young men.

While serving his apprenticeship our subject began to develop a curious contradictory nature. To the outward observer he seemed simply a wild, careless, frolicsome youth, brimming all over with animal spirits, full of fun, and pranks, and mischief, and in particular daily making a target of a certain "lum hat." Yet all the while within this rough, boisterous, romping, healthy youth there was another youth, sensitive, shy, introspective, self-examining, self-torturing, who thought of his good master ready to die and of himself as not ready to die.

But the excellent Mr Byers was not the only one who exercised a strong and formative influence on the young shoemaker. The Rev. Mr Borland, of Yarrow, was at this time pastor of the little congregational church in Langholm. He was a man of striking personality and strong convictions, an able, earnest, forceful preacher. With him preaching was no dry jejune Sunday duty, but a living and practical obligation for work days as well. He took a deep interest in the youth of his congregation. It was his custom on fine evenings to take long walks with the more intelligent of them, talking and arguing on every subject likely to interest them, and to stir, quicken, and develop their young life. We have heard Mr McRobert speak in terms of gratitude for what these "walks" and "talks" did for him and others. Hitherto a timorous, bashful, awkward carriage had shut him out from the society where alone he could attain any culture for heart and spirit. But now the rude barriers of social caste had been broken down, and the teacher and taught were no longer parted by rigid fences.

He was now eighteen, and at last, as he has expressed it in an autobiographical fragment, "awoke to the realness of life and his own utter inability to take a creditable part in its battles." Knowledge was his first requisite, and he set himself in dead earnest to acquire it, and the more he learned the more he realised his need and aspired.

On completing his apprenticeship he went to Glasgow, and after days of fruitless tramping found employment in the "Goose Dubs." His shop-mates were a depraved set of fellows, who used every effort to lead him astray, and as he resisted persecuted him to make him yield. What a change in company and language, in manners and morals. The dingy workshop, filled with the fumes of tobacco and whisky, and

the illimitable oppressive wilderness of shops, warehouses, and factories all seemed so different from the social life of his native town and the natural loveliness of its encircling hills.

He has often said to the writer that it was still a mystery to him how he was upborne and carried through the severe ordeal, for his virtuous principles were as yet in a plastic condition. It would seem that his chief strength lay in a certain passivity or defiance of fate which incessantly attended him and gave him courage not to yield; but to try to the uttermost whither he was doomed never to work himself out of his abasement. His habits of reading and self-improvement came to his aid, for they not only relieved the tedium of many a lonely hour, but even amid his boring and hammering there came a hope, a dream that he would one day free himself from earthly encumbrances and attain to some measure of heavenly independence.

Life in Glasgow was followed by a season in Leicester, where he perfected himself in his craft. Here his fellow-workmen were of a superior class, very conservative of their trade interests and not at all disposed to yield up its secrets to every new-comer. His stay in Leicester, though brief, afforded opportunities for improvement and Christian activities.

Returning to Langholm and entering again the service of his old master he settled down for some years. During this period he definitely, though unconsciously, laid the foundation of his future life's work. His reading and other forms of self-improvement were vigorously pursued, but his active temperament, ready sympathy, and quick intelligence made him the eager promoter of every philanthropic enterprise; to the Good Templar Order and the Home Mission movement in particular he devoted his efforts and energies. In connection with Good Templary he not only took a leading part in the work of the home lodge, but acted for some years as District Deputy and District Superintendent for Dumfriesshire, and occasional lecturer for the Grand Lodge. During those years invitations came in from all parts of the country for him to address meetings, institute lodges, settle knotty questions of law and order, and in a general way to further the objects of the Order among both old and young.

By and by the more earnest workers in the good cause began to see the need for a more powerful, redeeming, and healing agency. Evangelists were secured and meetings were held in the town and neighbourhood, and at the end of six weeks over 120 professed to have experienced a quickening influence. To give

solidarity and permanence to the work "Langholm Home Mission" was instituted. The late Mr Byers, referred to above, was the leader of the movement, and its formation took place in his "workshop" in 1880, and from the "Gaul Steps," in the Market Place, its promoters, including our subject, formally announced their objects and aims. In the course of time the work of the Mission extended to distant parishes and to remote villages, and Mr McRobert did yeoman service in addressing meetings and pushing forward the new cause, to which he devoted himself with a purity of motive and a oneness of aim, with an arduous self-denial and perseverance worthy of so good a cause. He was president for some years of the enterprise, which has been described as one of the most successful Border Missions.

In 1886 Mr McRobert was appointed by the directors of Edinburgh City Mission as their agent or missionary to the cabmen. He entered on his duties with many misgivings of heart, but the transparency and integrity of his character soon gained for him the confidence of his superintendent, and his humane disposition, hopefulness, and unfeigned interest in everything affecting the life of the cabmen won their friendship and esteem.

There is no class of men who stand more in need of sympathy, and are more susceptible of, and responsive to, its influence than the cabmen of our great cities. As a class they are deprived of the sweet restraints of social life and cut off from all religious influences, and they would be more than human if they did not lapse into evil ways and religious indifference. Mr McRobert's duties consist chiefly in visiting the stances and stables seeking for opportunities of conversation with the view of directing and helping them towards a better life, and to act as friend and adviser to those who have been worsted in the battle with adverse circumstances.

In him the cabmen of Edinburgh have a true friend and a faithful adviser. His work is a labour of love. The door of his heart does not rust on its hinges, but swings freely open to every caller, and draws to him all sorts and conditions of men, especially the troubled and distraught, for like Nausicæ in the *Odyssey* our friend regards unfortunates as messengers from the gods, and has quite a genius for helping lame dogs over stiles. But let no one attempt to impose on him, for years of experience as a city missionary has given him a sleuth hound acuteness for detecting all falseness, meanness, and mendicancy.

As an agent of the City Mission Mr McRobert

has many collateral duties. He conducts a religious service every Sabbath evening, and in the course of the winter months is in great request for social gatherings. It may be of interest to state here that since his "awakening" Mr McRobert has addressed 2500 gatherings, and distributed 83,900 tracts, booklets, and magazines.

We would like to observe here that his addresses have a strength and charm all their own, and consist in the clearness with which he perceives the analogies that exists between sensuous and common things and things spiritual and divine, and the ease and felicity with which he unfolds his parable and applies its lessons to life and character. His hearers while they listen are amazed, they never saw the resemblance before, and as he dilates on his theme a peculiar freshness and charm breaks on their hearts like a revelation, and sometimes even glows with the luminous radiance of a vision. Notwithstanding that he "sees sermons in trees, and stones, and running brooks, and good in everything," he is no sentimentalist or dreamer. His addresses are alive with strong impulses fitted to stimulate, strengthen, and help his hearers. His words are refreshing and vivifying like the mountain breeze, and like the breeze shape themselves to the object they touch, only the more completely to play upon it and impress it.

Mr McRobert is an independent to the heart's core, and is a tower of strength in the little Congregational Church in Dalry Road. To qualify himself more fully for his work he entered the Congregational Theological Hall as a voluntary student, and was subsequently officially recognised as a lay preacher of the body. He has occupied many pulpits and received invitations to undertake pastoral duty, but like Chaucer's good parson, "he has never changed nor sought to change."

The literary achievements of Mr McRobert would require a chapter—a complete bibliography to do them justice. Twenty years ago he commenced to report and to write short articles for local papers, gradually feeling his way into high-class papers, magazines, and reviews. He has written on almost every conceivable subject from "Sunlight Soap" up to poetry, stories, and religious biography. Serieses of articles from his pen have attracted considerable attention. His initials are familiar to readers of the BORDER MAGAZINE, whose pages have been enriched by not a few of his photos. In a neat brochure, entitled "A Bright Border Sunset," he has enshrined the memory of his old master, the late Mr Andrew Byers. The little

work obtained numerous reviews of a most favourable character. He is the originator and editor of the "Cabmen's Friend," a periodical specially designed for "the stance, the stable, and the home." It is well illustrated, contains much interesting and useful reading, and has been widely circulated.

On one department of his life Mr McRobert is very reticent. We have heard him address a company of mothers on several occasions without the slightest allusion to his domestic life. He has been singularly fortunate in his choice of a wife. Like Solomon's virtuous woman, "she looketh well to the ways of her household, and the heart of her husband doth safely trust her." Mrs McRobert is one of those retiring natures, who believe that a woman best fulfills her divine mission in the world and wields her queenly power through life when she becomes a Mary in the house of God and a Martha in her own.

Mr McRobert is in the prime of life, tall, and well built. His heavy imperial moustache, cheeks closely shaven, full firm jaw and chin, suggestive of severity or repelling harshness. But the mild light in his deep set eye tempers the austerity of his vigorously-moulded countenance. At a nearer view the expression softens, and his face denotes calculation, watchfulness, and determination. When addressing a meeting there is a look of expostulation and entreaty in his eye which acquires as he proceeds an expression of pathos and even of trouble. When one looks at Mr McRobert's face and realises that he is still a young man, or at least "not more than the usual age," one feels that he has yet a future before him.

We must now cut our friend short. We have presented some features of a singularly rich and strong character. We have seen a young spirit naturally healthy shooting heavenwards through manifold obstructions, striking its roots deeper into the soil, spreading its branches over a wide area, and shedding its fruit on every side,—a veritable "Tree Igdrasil." Mr McRobert is another proof, if such were wanted, that man is not the product of his circumstances, but the circumstances are the product of the man. Let no lonely, unbefriended son of Adam despair or doubt the majesty of his soul, if he have the will, the right will, then there is a path for him from the lowest depths to the loftiest height. It is but the artichoke that will not grow except in gardens; the acorn is cast carelessly abroad into the wilderness, it rises to be an oak; on the wild soil it nourishes itself, it defies the tempest, and lives for a thousand years.

A. C. W.