

“And many at last were the kind—some the sad—farewells, ere long whispered by us at gloaming among the glens. Let them rest for ever silent amidst that music in the memory which is felt, not heard—its blessing mute though breathing, like an inarticulate prayer!”

CHAPTER II.

GLASGOW COLLEGE.

1797–1803.

“LONG, long, long ago, the time when we danced hand in hand with our golden-haired sister! Long, long, long ago, the day on which she died; the hour, so far more dismal than any hour that can now darken us on this earth, when her coffin descended slowly, slowly into the horrid clay, and we were borne, deathlike and wishing to die, out of the churchyard, that from that moment we thought we could never enter more.” That touching reminiscence of his golden-haired sister, which came back among the visions of a merry Christmas long after,* points to what was probably John Wilson’s first deep experience of sorrow; and it is no imaginary picture of the scene it recalled. For even in those early years, and still more as life advanced, he was intensely susceptible to emotions of grief, as well as of gladness. A heavier trial awaited him at the threshold of the new life on which he was to enter after leaving the manse of Mearns in his twelfth year. He had seen the yellow leaves fall, on to the close of that last memorable autumn which finished his happy school-time, and now he was summoned home to see his father die. As he stood at the head of the grave, chief mourner, and heard the dull earth rattling over the coffin, his emotions so overcame him that he fell to the ground in a swoon, and had to be carried away. Such an effect, on a frame more than commonly robust, indicated a depth of feeling and passion not often seen in our clime among boys, or, in its outer manifestations

* “Christmas Dreams,” Wilson’s *Works*.

at least, among men. The aspect and the character of Wilson have sometimes suggested to the imagination those blue-eyed and long-haired Norsemen, who made their songs amid the smiting of swords, who were as swift of foot and strong of arm as they were skilled in lore and ready in counsel, fierce to their enemies, tender and true to their friends. And this little incident reminds one more of what we read in Sagas of that passionate vehemence of theirs, than any thing we are accustomed to now-a-days.

After the death of his father, he appears to have gone immediately to Glasgow University, where he entered as a student in the Latin class for the session of 1797-'98, attending other classes in due course down to 1803. During those years he resided in the family of Professor Jardine, the same prudence which had dictated the choice of his earlier instructors being here again conspicuous, and the results not less satisfactory. His life in Glasgow was a happy one; and, under the combined influences of admirable professorial instruction and a free enjoyment of good society and innocent pleasures, his character developed by natural and insensible transition from boyhood to youth, from the period of school lessons and "Muckle-mou'd Meg" to that of essay-writing and speech-making, of first love and "lines to Margaret."

Of the various professors under whom he studied, there were two who won his special love and lifelong veneration: these were Jardine and Young.* When the relationship between pupil and teacher has been cemented by feelings of respect and affection, the influence obtained over the young mind is one that does not die with the breaking of the ties that formally bound them. Of this Wilson's own experience as a professor afforded him many a delightful illustration. To Jardine, in the first place, as not only his teacher, but his private monitor and friend, he owed, he has himself said, a deep debt of gratitude. He is represented as having been "a person who, by the singular felicity of his *tact* in watching youthful minds, had done more good to a whole host of individuals, and gifted individuals too, than their utmost gratitude could ever adequately repay. They spoke of him as of a kind of intellectual father, to whom they were proud of acknowledging the eternal obligations of their intellectual being. He has created for himself a mighty family among whom his memory will long survive; by whom, all that he

* The former was Professor of Logic, the latter of Greek.

said and did—his words of kind praise and kind censure—his gravity and his graciousness—will no doubt be dwelt upon with warm and tender words and looks, long after his earthly labors shall have been brought to a close.”*

Wilson’s intercourse with Professor Young was of a nature equally friendly, and his reminiscences of that “old man eloquent” are not less pleasing:—

“We have sat,” he says, “at the knees of Professor Young, looking up to his kindling or shaded countenance, while that old man eloquent gave life to every line, till Hector and Andromache seemed to our imagination standing side by side beneath a radiant rainbow glorious on a showery heaven; such, during his inspiration, was the creative power of the majesty and the beauty of their smiles and tears.

“That was long, long ago, in the Greek class of the College of Glasgow; and though that bright scholar’s Greek was Scotch Greek, and all its vowels and diphthongs, and some of its consonants too, especially that glorious guttural that sounds in *lochs*, all unlike the English Greek that soon afterwards, beneath the shadow of Magdalen Tower, the fairest of all Oxford’s stately structures, was poured mellifluous on our delighted ear from the lips of President Routh, the ‘erudite and the wise,’ still hath the music of that ‘repeated strain’ a charm to our souls, reminding us of life’s morning march when our spirits were young, and when we could see, even as with our bodily eyes, things far away in space or time, and Troy hung visibly before us even as the sun-setting clouds. Therefore, till death, shall we love the Sixth Book of the Iliad; and, if we understand it not, then indeed has our whole life been vainer than the shadow of a dream.”†

A somewhat similar account of this interesting man, from another source, is worthy of insertion here:—

“I own I was quite thunderstruck to find him passing from a transport of sheer verbal ecstasy about the particle *ἀρα*, into an ecstasy quite as vehement, and a thousand times more noble, about the deep pathetic beauty of one of Homer’s conceptions in the expression of which that particle happens to occur. Such was the burst of his enthusiasm, and the enriched mellow swell of his ex-

* *Blackwood*, July, 1818.

† “Homer and his Translators,” *Wilson’s Works*.

panding voice, when he began to touch upon this more majestic key, that I dropped for a moment all my notions of the sharp philologist, and gazed on him with a higher delight, as a genuine lover of the soul and spirit which has been clothed in the words of antiquity.

“At the close of one of his fine excursions into this brighter field, the feelings of the man seemed to be rapt up to a pitch I never before beheld exemplified in any orator of the Chair. The tears gushed from his eyes amidst their fervid sparklings, and I was more than delighted when I looked round and found that the fire of the Professor had kindled answering flames in the eyes of not a few of his disciples.”*

It may be seen from these sketches what manner of men had the moulding of that young taste in its perception of the good and beautiful. Nor could his mind fail to have been ennobled by such training. It was the means of encouraging him to cultivate the literary taste, which, in addition to the more severe routine of his studies, aided to make his memory a storehouse of knowledge, rendering him even as a boy one of the most desirable companions with his seniors.

Of the characteristic mixture of work and play which enabled him to be both an active and distinguished student, and a vivacious racer and dancer, there is fortunately some slight record extant under his own youthful hand, in the pages of a little brown memorandum-book, in which he carefully noted the chief transactions of each day from the 1st of January to the 26th of October, 1801. A very interesting and curious relic it is, if only for the light it throws on that beautiful portrait by Raeburn, now in the National Gallery, Edinburgh, which has probably disappointed so many people as a representation of young Christopher North. That slender youth, so tidily dressed in his top-boots and well-fitting coat, with face so placid, and blue eye so mild, looking as if he never could do or say anything *outré* or startling,—can that be a good picture of him we have seen and heard of as the long-maned and mighty, whose eyes were “as the lightnings of fiery flame,” and his voice like an organ bass; who laid about him, when the fit was on, like a Titan, breaking small men’s bones; who was loose and careless in his apparel, even as in all things he seemed too strong and primitive to heed

* *Peter's Letters.*

much the niceties of custom? So people ask and think who knew not Professor Wilson, save out of doors or in print, and who imagine that he could never have been otherwise than as they saw him in manhood or age. But true it is, that that gentle-looking cavalier represents the John Wilson in whom the deep fires of passion and the hidden riches of imagination lay still comparatively quiescent and undeveloped. For that youth, though he is a bold horseman and a matchless leaper, as well as a capital scholar and a versifier to boot, has not yet had his nature stirred by that which will presently make him talk of life as either bliss ineffable, or wretchedness insufferable. The man whom we know in after life jotting down his lectures on old backs of letters, illegible sometimes to himself, at this time keeps a neat and punctual diary, with its ink rulings for month, and week, and day, and *£ s d*, all done by his own hand; the one page containing, under the heading "Appointments, Bills, Memorandums," notes of each day's events, with the state of the weather at the week's end; the other, its careful double entry of "Received" and "Paid," duly carried over from page to page; and the expenditure in no single instance exceeding the income. It is altogether an illustration of character that might surprise the uninitiated even more than Raeburn's portrait.

As has been said, labor and pleasure seem not unequally to have divided his time. Invitations to dinner, balls, parties, etc., are frequently chronicled. A boy of sixteen might be supposed to be somewhat prematurely introduced to those social amenities. But in his case the thing does not seem to have been unnatural, or other than beneficial. No doubt his personal attractions, and a stature above his years, combined with the knowledge of his good prospects in life, made him an object of more attention than would otherwise have been the case. In the heart of this gayety, too, there are indications of marked attention to the ordinary but too often neglected minor duties of society. He makes frequent visits of politeness; he writes regularly to his mother and sisters; his respect to his grandmother and other relatives is undeviating, for upon the old lady he waits daily. Order and punctuality, in fact, seem to regulate his minutest affairs,—the more worthy of remark, as in later years these praiseworthy habits were almost entirely laid aside. It will perhaps not be altogether without interest to insert one or two of the entries from this pocket-book, even though mo-

notonous, and to a certain extent unimportant, alluding to names of persons, the mention of which, save to a very few, will scarcely awaken any familiar associations.

The season is begun at home in Edinburgh, where his mother, with the rest of the family, had now taken up her residence. A happy band of brothers and sisters, and other relatives, there met together to welcome in the new-year. So, for a while, the dingy walls of Glasgow College, and its eight o'clock morning lectures, were shut out from thought, and the bright-hearted boy rejoiced with his friends. Before quoting from the memorandum-book its brief record of those days, which gleams out from the past like light seen from an aperture for the first time, let us hear him in maturer years recalling the memory of such scenes:—

“Merry Christmases they were indeed; one lady always presiding, with a figure that once had been the stateliest among the stately, but then somewhat bent, without being bowed down, beneath an easy weight of most venerable years. Sweet was her tremulous voice to all her grandchildren’s ears. Nor did those solemn eyes, bedimmed into a pathetic beauty, in any degree restrain the glee that sparkled in orbs that had as yet shed not many tears, but tears of joy or pity.

“Whether we were indeed all so witty as we thought ourselves—uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins, and ‘the rest,’ it might be presumptuous in us, who were considered by ourselves and a few others not the least amusing of the whole set, at this distance of time to decide—especially in the affirmative; but how the roof did ring with sally, pun, retort, and repartee! Ay, with pun—a species of impertinence for which we have therefore a kindness even to this day. Had incomparable Thomas Hood had the good fortune to have been born a cousin of ours, how with that fine fancy of his would he have shone at those Christmas festivals, eclipsing us all! Our family, through all its different branches, has ever been famous for bad voices, but good ears; and we think we hear ourselves—all those uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, and cousins—singing now! Easy is it to ‘warble melody’ as to breathe air. But we hope harmony is the most difficult of all things to people in general, for to us it was impossible; and what attempts ours used to be at seconds! Yet the most woful failures were rapturously encored; and ere the night was done we spoke with

most extraordinary voices indeed, every one hoarser than another, till at last, walking home with a fair cousin, there was nothing left for it but a tender glance of the eye—a tender pressure of the hand—for cousins are not altogether sisters, and although partaking of that dearest character, possess, it may be, some peculiar and appropriate charms of their own; as didst thou, Emily the ‘Wild-cap!’”

“1st of January, 1801.—Union with Ireland celebrated; Castle guns fired; no illumination. Called on Mr. Sym (Timothy Tickler of later date).

“2d of January.—Ball at our house; danced with the Misses M'Donald, Corbett, Fairfax, Chartres, Balfour, Brown, Lundie, Millar, Young.”

Not too long is he to be absent from work. On the 4th of January the gayeties of home are left, and he takes a seat in the “Telegraph.”

“Left Edinburgh at seven in the morning; arrived in Glasgow safe, and dined with my grandmother.”

Items of travelling expenses make a curious comparison between the past and present cost for a similar journey:—

“For a seat in the ‘Telegraph,’ £1 1s.

“For the driver and guard of ‘Telegraph,’ 4s.

“For breakfast and waiter, 1s. 6d.”

With his grandmother he was a great favorite. This lady, Mrs. Sym, lived to a good old age, as did also her husband; he being above ninety when he died. The old gentleman had considerable character, and not a little caustic humor; a quality that may be said to have pervaded the Sym family. A story is told of his having sent a note to his wine-merchant on receipt of a jar of rum, which he fancied had had more than the ordinary dilution, begging him to be so obliging, on his next order, as to send the water in one jar and the rum in another. His wife was a gentle, kind woman, and very attractive to young people, to whom she was ever ready to show attention and hospitality. She was very handsome in her youth, “stateliest among the stately,” as Wilson has called her. In one of her daughter’s letters, written five-and-thirty years later, there is a reminiscence of these early days:—

“Occasionally you and some other boys getting a Saturday’s dinner, a good *four-hours*, and being dismissed with—‘Now, you will go all away; you have gotten all your dues; and, besides, *I’m weary*

of you.' Then, as you advanced in your academic career, came Jamie Smith, Wee Willy Cumin', Alick Blair, sounding out, '*Ohon a ree! ohon a ree!*' Your grandmother ready dressed at her wheel in the parlor, your aunts at their work, Blair announced in the dining-room, and me the only one who would join him. On entering, I find him groping in the press and *howking* out a book, part of which was read with his peculiar *burr*."*

Many a charmed spot is mentioned in this diary. The name of Hallside, Professor Jardine's residence, is specially associated with reminiscences of pleasant society and light-hearted diversions, which show how well philosophy and geniality agreed together under that hospitable roof. The following is a specimen:—

"*23d March*.—Ran for a wager three times round the garden; accomplished it in nine minutes and a quarter. Won 5s."

Hallside is a modern house, somewhat in the style of a Scottish manse. The grounds were about seventy acres in extent, gradually sloping to the east, and bounded in part by the river Calder. On the opposite banks stood the pretty cottage *ornée* of Mrs. Jardine's brother, Mr. Lyndsay, whose wife was the niece of the celebrated Dr. Reid, the metaphysician. Their only child was a beautiful girl, whom Professor Wilson took in after years as model for the heroine of his *Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*. The charms of this agreeable neighborhood were heightened by the beauty of the situation. Calder Bank, Mr. Lyndsay's residence, commanded a fine view of Bothwell woods and castle, the gray towers of which contrasted well with the dark spreading trees that faced the ruins of Blantyre Priory, beautifying the banks of the Clyde.

Often did John Wilson and his companions from college visit those enticing scenes, and pleasant it is to find, after a lapse of sixty-one years, a memory fresh and distinct of these happy days. The "Margaret Lyndsay" of that time, now Mrs. Palmes, says:—"My knowledge of your talented father was almost confined to the period of childhood; but I well remember my own delight when the fair-haired, animated boy was my companion by the Calder, in races on

* The writer of this letter, Miss Catharine Sym, long known in Glasgow as one of its most original characters, was the only unmarried daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Sym. She was perhaps one of the wittiest women of her time, in that dry way so peculiar to Scottish nature. Before she died, not many years ago, at eighty years of age, she returned to her nephew a correspondence, and many juvenile manuscripts that had passed between them in the days of his boyhood. Not long before his death he destroyed those papers, which, had they been extant, might have supplied some interesting materials for this part of the Memoir.

Dychmont Hill, on foot or with our ponies. Whatever he did was done with all his soul, whether in boy's play or in those studies appointed him by my uncle, Professor Jardine. His beaming countenance and eager manner showed his deep interest in all he did.

"I recollect suffering from his purchase of a violin. My room was under his, and during the night and early morning hours he devoted himself to bringing out the most discordant sounds; for as he would not have a master, the difficulties to be overcome only proved an additional charm. The final result of his musical taste I do not remember. Poetry probably succeeded, for even at that early age he wrote *little* poems (long before the 'Isle of Palms'), some of which I hope were preserved."

From his journal it is to be seen he purchased other instruments besides a violin:—

"*February 9th.*—Got a flute and music-book to learn.

"*10th.*—Began to learn the flute by myself.

"*March 11th.*—Patterson came to-day. Liked Patterson pretty well; agreed with him for sixteen lessons. Terms, a guinea. Bought and paid a German flute.

"*12th.*—Played a duet with Perkins."

There is no further mention in Diary or elsewhere of this musical taste being carried out, although his playing on the flute at Elleray, long years after, is a circumstance which inclines one to believe that he continued some practice on this instrument after leaving College. He was, however, a devoted lover of music, both vocal and instrumental, though always preferring the former. His singing was charming, uncultivated as it was by study; no one could listen to it without admiration or a touched heart. His voice was exquisitely sweet,* which, combined with the pathos he infused into every note, and expressed in each word, made the pleasure of hearing him a thing to be remembered forever. His manner of singing "Auld Lang Syne" may be described as a tribute of love to the memory of the poet, whose words appeared to inspire him with something be-

* "*North.*—Do you like my voice, James? I hope you do."

"*Shepherd.*—I wad ha'e kent it, Mr. North, on the Tower o' Babel, on the day o' the great hubbub. I think Socrates maun ha'e had just sic a voice. Ye canna weel ca't saft, for even in its laigh notes there is a sort o' birr; a sort o' dir! that betokens power. Ye canna ca't hairsh, for angry as ye may be at times, its' aye in tune, frae the fineness o' your ear for music. Ye canna ca't sherp, for it's aye sae nat'ral; and flett it could never be, gin you were even gi'en ower by the doctors. It's maist the only voice I ever heard that you can say is at aince persuasive and commanding—you micht fear 't, but you maun love 't."—*Noctes.*

yond vocal melody; his sweet, solemn voice filled the air with sounds that, while they melted away, seemed still to linger on the ear, delighting the sense. Many are there who can remember the effect produced by his rendering of this beautiful song.

There is something very *naïve* in the way some of his memoranda are mixed up, in humorous contrast, the important and trivial side by side. Thus we have in one line—"Gave Archy my buckskins to clean;" and in the next, "Prize for the best specimens of the Socratic mode of reasoning given out in the Logic," followed by "Ordered a pair of corduroy breeches, tailor, Mr. Aitken;" "Began the syllogism to-day in the Logic class," and so on.

"*February 13th.*—Called on my grandmother; went to the sale of books; had a boxing-match of three rounds with Lloyd—beat him."

"*14th.*—General examination to-day in the Logic class;" "not examined; went to the Mearns;" "went to the sale; went to the society; the hack I had an excellent trotter; beat Fehrzyen with ease; found a sack on the road."

The result of the sale seems to have been most satisfactory. Two entries of purchases made are such as would give delight to a boy who paid due attention to his expenditure of pocket-money: "Bought Foote's Works at the sale, 2 vols., 1s. 8d.;" "also bought the *Rambler*, which Mr. Jardine was owing me."

The next item betrays a true boyish weakness, in the form of a consuming love for sweetmeats, especially of one particular sort,—thus, "For barley-sugar, 4d.;" and at another time, "For barley-sugar, at my old man's, most excellent, 6d." This taste is frequently indulged; the sum seems to increase too, by degrees, and many a shilling was spent at *Baxter's* upon this favorite luxury, for which he retained his liking even in old age.

During this winter his studies had been prosecuted with considerable assiduity, as may be gathered from his notes.

"*January 17th.*—Agreed to-day with Mr. Jardine to give up the Greek class, as I am too *throng*."

"*20th.*—General examination to-day; went to the Speculative Society; spoke as a stranger."

"*21st.*—Finished my exercise upon Logic."

"*23d.*—Called upon my grandmother; gave up the Greek private, finding I had too much to do this winter."

"*February 5th.*—Finished my Socratic mode of dialogue to-day."

“*April 26th.*—Got the first prize in the Logic class.

“*May 1st.*—Prizes distributed; got three of them.”

After this date there is no more allusion made to study at College, but enough has been quoted to show how he was disposed towards it. The rest of the summer is spent in various ways amusing to boyhood, while it is evident that the more agreeable pleasure of ladies' society was not wanting to interest him. The lasting effect of love on a boy's mind is, with most, a matter of doubt; but where there is depth of character, and sincerity as well as strength of feeling, the results are not always to be judged by common experience. How it fared with him in this respect, will be touched upon in another chapter.

One or two more extracts from the Diary before this year has closed must be given. The first is characteristic of his constant energy and movement. Even a simple walk with a friend finds him wearied with any thing like delay: “Walked to Paisley with Andrew Napier; tried him a race; ran three miles on the Paisley road for a wager against a *chaise*, along with Andrew Napier; beat them *both*.” Another exploit of a similar nature, at a somewhat later date, is related by a friend who was present on the occasion: *—

“He gained a bet by walking *toe and heel* three miles out and back (six miles in all) on the road to Renfrew, from the *shedding* of the roads to Renfrew and Paisley, in two minutes *within* the hour. I accompanied him on foot (but not under the restriction of *toe and heel*), and Willy Dunlop on horseback, to see that it was fairly won. Nobody could match your father in the college garden at ‘hop, step, and jump.’ Macleod (now the Rev. Dr. Norman Macleod, sen.), an active Highlander from Morven, who had also the advantage of being his senior, approached most nearly to him.”

It appears that even in holiday-time he set himself to work.

“*June 4th.*—Finished my *poem* on Slavery.

“*7th.*—Began an essay on the Faculty of Imagination.

“*August 17th.*—Finished the first volume of Laing's *History of Scotland*.

“*August 30th.*—Made considerable progress in my essay upon Imagination; finished the second division of my exercise.

* Mr. Robert Findlay.

“31st.—Stayed at home all day; wrote an account of the Massacre of Glencoe.”

“September 19th.—Stayed at home all day, and wrote an essay upon the Stoical Philosophy.”

The notion of John Wilson having been at any time of his life an idle man, must have seemed absurd to those who knew him, though perhaps, for people who think that a hard worker must necessarily be dull and tiresome, natural enough. Even in his boyhood my father was no idler; and there remains still more convincing proof of his assiduity and love of study to be shown in his career when at Oxford. There is yet some short time to be accounted for, spent in Glasgow; and of his friendships formed at College, something may be said in this place. Boys generally combine themselves when at public schools, and other seminaries of education, into select coteries, and are as frequently judged by the qualities of their companions as by their own. The very high character of the Glasgow professors at that time almost insured a certain number of first-class youths, especially as several of them received into their own houses young men whose education was privately, as well as in their classes, under their superintendence.

Mr. Alexander Blair, to whom my father dedicated an edition of his poems, was an Englishman, and with him he began, at Glasgow, an intercourse that ripened into a lifelong friendship. This gentleman has been deterred from acquiring a prominent position in the world as a philosopher and scholar, solely by the modesty and diffidence of his character. He was my father's companion both at Glasgow and at Oxford, and in after life the Professor derived most valuable aid in his philosophical investigations from this friend, whose correspondence with him for many years was uninterrupted. It is much to be regretted that letters of so interesting and elevated a character should, with one or two exceptions, have perished. Another of those early companions was Robert Findlay of Easter Hill, grandson of an accomplished and learned doctor of divinity well known and beloved in Glasgow. He too continued a friend until death; and from him there have come to me many treasured memorials of an affection on both sides like that of brothers. Besides these two, the most intimate associates of John Wilson in those days were Mr. William Horton Lloyd, an Englishman of large fortune (whose beautiful sister married Mr. Leonard Horner), Mr.

William Dunlop, and Archibald Hamilton, a distant relative of my father, who afterwards entered the navy, and prematurely closed his promising career in the engagement off Basque Roads.

With these young men poetry was a frequent subject of discussion, and there was one poet, viz., William Wordsworth, on whose merits, then but little recognized, they found themselves unanimous. Some time before he closed his career at Glasgow University, Wilson's attention was attracted by the *Lyrical Ballads*, which had been recently published. There were at that time few eyes that had discerned in them the signs of future greatness. Among the earliest and most enthusiastic, but also most discriminating of their admirers, was young Wilson, who conveyed his sentiments to the poet in a letter of considerable length, written in a spirit of profound humility, at the same time with perfect independence of expression. It is as follows:—

“MY DEAR SIR:—You may perhaps be surprised to see yourself addressed in this manner by one who never had the happiness of being in company with you, and whose knowledge of your character is drawn solely from the perusal of your poems. But, sir, though I am not personally acquainted with you, I may almost venture to affirm, that the qualities of your soul are not unknown to me. In your poems I discovered such marks of delicate feeling, such benevolence of disposition, and such knowledge of human nature, as made an impression on my mind that nothing will ever efface; and while I felt my soul refined by the sentiments contained in them, and filled with those delightful emotions which it would be almost impossible to describe, I entertained for you an attachment made up of love and admiration: reflection upon that delight which I enjoyed from reading your poems, will ever make me regard you with gratitude, and the consciousness of feeling those emotions you delineate makes me proud to regard your character with esteem and admiration. In whatever view you regard my behavior in writing this letter, whether you consider it as the effect of ignorance and conceit, or correct taste and refined feeling, I will, in my own mind, be satisfied with your opinion. To receive a letter from you would afford me more happiness than any occurrence in this world, save the happiness of my friends, and greatly enhance the pleasure I receive from reading your *Lyrical Ballads*. Your silence would certainly dis-

dress me; but still I would have the happiness to think that the neglect even of the virtuous cannot extinguish the sparks of sensibility, or diminish the luxury arising from refined emotions. That luxury, sir, I have enjoyed; that luxury your poems have afforded me, and for this reason I now address you. Accept my thanks for the raptures you have occasioned me, and however much you may be inclined to despise me, know at least that these thanks are sincere and fervent. To you, sir, mankind are indebted for a species of poetry which will continue to afford pleasure while respect is paid to virtuous feelings, and while sensibility continues to pour forth tears of rapture. The flimsy ornaments of language, used to conceal meanness of thought and want of feeling, may captivate for a short time the ignorant and the unwary, but true taste will discover the imposture and expose the authors of it to merited contempt. The real feelings of human nature, expressed in simple and forcible language, will, on the contrary, please those only who are capable of entertaining them, and in proportion to the attention which we pay to the faithful delineation of such feelings, will be the enjoyment derived from them. That poetry, therefore, which is the language of nature, is certain of immortality, provided circumstances do not occur to pervert the feelings of humanity, and occasion a complete revolution in the government of the mind.

“That your poetry is the language of nature, in my opinion, admits of no doubt. Both the thoughts and expressions may be tried by that standard. You have seized upon those feelings that most deeply interest the heart, and that also come within the sphere of common observation. You do not write merely for the pleasure of philosophers and men of improved taste, but for all who think—for all who feel. If we have ever known the happiness arising from parental or fraternal love; if we have ever known that delightful sympathy of souls connecting persons of different sex; if we have ever dropped a tear at the death of friends, or grieved for the misfortunes of others; if, in short, we have ever felt the more amiable emotions of human nature—it is impossible to read *your* poems without being greatly interested and frequently in raptures; your sentiments, feelings, and thoughts are therefore exactly such as ought to constitute the subject of poetry, and cannot fail of exciting interest in every heart. But, sir, your merit does not solely consist in delineating the real features of the human mind under those different

aspects it assumes, when under the influence of various passions and feelings; you have, in a manner truly admirable, explained a circumstance, very important in its effects upon the soul when agitated, that has indeed been frequently alluded to, but never generally adopted by any author in tracing the progress of emotions—I mean that wonderful effect which the appearances of external nature have upon the mind when in a state of strong feeling. We must all have been sensible, that when under the influence of *grief*, Nature, when arrayed in her gayest attire, appears to us dull and gloomy, and that when our hearts bound with joy, her most deformed prospects seldom fail of pleasing. This disposition of the mind to assimilate the appearances of external nature to its own situation, is a fine subject for poetical allusion, and in several poems you have employed it with a most electrifying effect. But you have not stopped *here*, you have shown the effect which the qualities of external nature have in forming the human mind, and have presented us with several characters whose particular bias arose from that situation in which they were planted with respect to the scenery of nature. This idea is inexpressibly beautiful, and though, I confess, that to me it appeared to border upon fiction when I first considered it, yet at this moment I am convinced of its foundation in nature, and its great importance in accounting for various phenomena in the human mind. It serves to explain those diversities in the structure of the mind which have baffled all the ingenuity of philosophers to account for. It serves to overturn the theories of men who have attempted to write on human nature without a knowledge of the causes that affect it, and who have discovered greater eagerness to show their own subtlety than arrive at the acquisition of truth. May not the face of external nature through different quarters of the globe account for the dispositions of different nations? May not mountains, forests, plains, groves, and lakes, as much as the temperature of the atmosphere, or the form of government, produce important effects upon the human soul; and may not the difference subsisting between the former of these in different countries, produce as much diversity among the inhabitants as any varieties among the latter? The effect you have shown to take place in particular cases, so much to my satisfaction, most certainly may be extended so far as to authorize general inferences. This idea has no doubt struck you; and I trust that if it be founded on nature, your mind, so long accustomed to

philosophical investigation, will perceive how far it may be carried, and what consequences are likely to result from it.

“Your poems, sir, are of very great advantage to the world, from containing in them a system of philosophy that regards one of the most curious subjects of investigation, and at the same time one of the most important. But your poems may not be considered merely in a philosophical light, or even as containing refined and natural feelings; they present us with a body of morality of the purest kind. They represent the enjoyment resulting from the cultivation of the social affections of our nature; they inculcate a conscientious regard to the rights of our fellow-men; they show that every creature on the face of the earth is entitled in some measure to our kindness. They prove that in every mind, *however* depraved, there exist some qualities deserving our esteem. They point out the proper way to happiness. They show that such a thing as perfect misery does not exist. They flash on our souls conviction of immortality. Considered therefore in this view, *Lyrical Ballads* is, to use your own words, the book which I value next to my Bible; and though I may, perhaps, never have the happiness of seeing you, yet I will always consider you as a friend, who has by his instructions done me a service which it never can be in my power to repay. Your instructions have afforded me inexpressible pleasure; it will be my own fault if I do not reap from them much advantage.

“I have said, sir, that in all your poems you have adhered strictly to natural feelings, and described what comes within the range of every person’s observation. It is from following out this plan that, in my estimation, you have surpassed every poet both of ancient and modern times. But to me it appears that in the execution of this design you have inadvertently fallen into an error, the effects of which are, however, exceedingly trivial. No feeling, no state of mind ought, in my opinion, to become the subject of poetry, that does not please. Pleasure may, indeed, be produced in many ways, and by means that, at first sight, appear calculated to accomplish a very different end. Tragedy of the deepest kind produces pleasure of a high nature. To point out the causes of this would be foreign to the purpose. But we may lay this down as a general rule, that no description can please, where the sympathies of our soul are not excited, and no narration interest, where we do not enter into the

feelings of some of the parties concerned. On this principle, many feelings which are undoubtedly natural, are improper subjects of poetry, and many situations, no less natural, incapable of being described so as to produce the grand effect of poetical composition. This, sir, I would apprehend, is reasonable, and founded on the constitution of the human mind. There are a thousand occurrences happening every day, which do not in the least interest an unconcerned spectator, though they no doubt occasion various emotions in the breast of those to whom they immediately relate. To describe these in poetry would be improper. Now, sir, I think that in several cases you have fallen into this error. You have described feelings with which I cannot sympathize, and situations in which I take no interest. I know that I can relish your beauties, and that makes me think that I can also perceive your faults. But in this matter I have not trusted wholly to my own judgment, but heard the sentiments of men whose feelings I admired, and whose understanding I respected. In a few cases, then, I think that even you have failed to excite interest. In the poem entitled 'The Idiot Boy,' your intention, as you inform us in your preface, was to trace the maternal passion through its more subtle windings. This design is no doubt accompanied with much difficulty, but, if properly executed, cannot fail of interesting the heart. But, sir, in my opinion, the manner in which you have executed this plan has frustrated the end you intended to produce by it; the affection of Betty Foy has nothing in it to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the constitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us, and prevents us from sympathizing with her. We are unable to enter into her feelings; we cannot conceive ourselves actuated by the same feelings, and consequently take little or no interest in her situation. The object of her affection is indeed her son, and in that relation much consists, but then he is represented as totally destitute of any attachment towards her; the state of his mind is represented as perfectly deplorable, and, in short, to me it appears almost unnatural that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother. This much I know, that among all the people ever I knew to have read this poem, I never met one who did not rise rather displeased from the perusal of it, and the only cause I could

assign for it was the one now mentioned. This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that of 'The Idiot Boy,' is, I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human nature, and the principle of it constitutes, as I dare say you recollect, the leading feature of Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments. I therefore think that, in the choice of this subject, you have committed an error. You never deviate from nature; in you that would be impossible; but in this case you have delineated feelings which, though natural, do not please, but which create a certain degree of disgust and contempt. With regard to the manner in which you have executed your plan, I think too great praise cannot be bestowed upon your talents. You have most admirably delineated the idiotism of the boy's mind, and the situations in which you place him are perfectly calculated to display it. The various thoughts that pass through the mother's mind are highly descriptive of her foolish fondness, her extravagant fears, and her ardent hopes. The manner in which you show how bodily sufferings are frequently removed by mental anxieties or pleasures, in the description of the cure of Betty Foy's female friend, is excessively well managed, and serves to establish a very curious and important truth. In short, every thing you proposed to execute has been executed in a masterly manner. The fault, if there be one, lies in the plan, not in the execution. This poem we heard recommended as one in your best manner, and accordingly it is frequently read in this belief. The judgment formed of it is, consequently, erroneous. Many people are displeased with the performance; but they are not careful to distinguish faults in the plan from faults in the execution, and the consequence is, that they form an improper opinion of your genius. In reading any composition, most certainly the pleasure we receive arises almost wholly from the sentiment, thoughts, and descriptions contained in it. A secondary pleasure arises from admiration of those talents requisite to the production of it. In reading 'The Idiot Boy,' all persons who allow themselves to think, must admire your talents, but they regret that they have been so employed, and while they esteem the author, they cannot help being displeased with his performance. I have seen a most excellent painting of an idiot, but it created in me inexpressible disgust. I admired the talents of the artist, but I had no other source of pleasure. The poem of 'The Idiot Boy' produced upon me an effect in

every respect similar. I find that my remarks upon several of your other poems must be reserved for another letter. If you think this one deserves an answer, a letter from Wordsworth would be to me a treasure. If your silence tells me that my letter was beneath your notice, you will never again be troubled by one whom you consider as an ignorant admirer. But, if your mind be as amiable as it is reflected in your poems, you will make allowance for defects that age may supply, and make a fellow-creature happy, by dedicating a few moments to the instruction of an admirer and sincere friend,

“JOHN WILSON.

“PROFESSOR JARDINE'S COLLEGE, GLASGOW,
24th May, 1802.

“WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, Esq.,
Ambleside, Westmoreland, England.” *

CHAPTER III.

LOVE AND POETRY.—LIFE AT OXFORD.

1803-'08.

“THEN, after all the joys and sorrows of these few years, which we now call transitory, but which our BOYHOOD felt as if they would be endless—as if they would endure forever—arose upon us the glorious dawning of another new life,—YOUTH, with its insupportable sunshine and its agitating storms. Transitory, too, we now know, and well deserving the same name of dream. But while it lasted, long, various, and agonizing, as, unable to sustain the eyes that first revealed to us the light of love, we hurried away from the parting hour, and looking up to moon and stars, invocated in sacred oaths, hugged the very heavens to our heart.”

These sentences contain one among many references in my father's writings to an episode in his early life, of which, had we only these incidental and sometimes imaginative allusions to guide us, no more

* The answer to this letter will be found at page 192, vol. i., of *Memoirs of W. Wordsworth*, by C. Wordsworth, D. D., 1851. For the foregoing letter I am indebted to Mr. W. Wordsworth, son of the poet, who kindly sent it to me, and also pointed out the reply, which is introduced in the *Memoirs*, without a hint as to whom it was addressed.