

CHAPTER XVIII.

PUBLISHES TWO ROMANCES, "LORD ROLDAN," AND "THE MAID OF ELVAR"—"LIVES OF THE PAINTERS, SCULPTORS, AND ARCHITECTS"—LETTERS TO MR. RITCHIE—CRITICISMS—REVISITS NITHSDALE, AND ENTERTAINED AT A BANQUET IN DUMFRIES—FAREWELL TO DALSWINTON.

NOTWITHSTANDING the great mental excitement and manual labour which attended the preparation of the "Anniversary Annual," he had other matters in hand, which speedily came forth in a three-volume romance, entitled "Lord Roldan," which does not appear, however, to have made much impression upon the public mind; and also another romance, "The Maid of Elvar," which seems to have shared the same fate. We fear that he now wrote too hurriedly, and too extensively, with the little time he had at disposal; but doubtless he had his own reasons for doing what he did. Still, like the eagle soaring to the sun, he undertook a work which required great reading, great research, and great judgment, namely, writing "The Lives of the most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects," and which appeared in Murray's "Family Library." The work was published in six volumes, and of course embraced a great number of artists, with criticisms of their works. These were treated with very considerable taste and judgment, although some of them fell short of public expectation. The work was originally intended and

advertised to be completed in three volumes, but the matter so increased that it extended to double that number.

Well, what said the critics about it? What said Professor Wilson, for whose opinion we have always had a high regard? When only two volumes had been published, he said in one of his *Noctes*:—"Allan Cunningham's Lives of the Painters—I know not which of the two volumes is best—are full of a fine and an instructed enthusiasm. He speaks boldly, but reverentially, of genius, and of men of genius; strews his narrative with many flowers of poetry; disposes and arranges his materials skilfully; and is, in few words, an admirable critic on art—an admirable biographer of artists." Nothing, surely, could be more complimentary—and coming from such a quarter. A writer in *Blackwood* said on the appearance of the first volume:—"The biographies included in this first volume are very interesting reading—the result apparently of much diligence—abounding certainly in masculine views and opinions, shrewd, terse common sense, and last, not least to our taste, in quiet graphic humour. The poet peeps out, as is fair and proper, here and there; but, on the whole, the style presents, in its subdued and compact simplicity, a striking and laudable contrast to the so often prolix and over-adorned prose of Mr. Cunningham's romances. He may depend upon it he has hit the right key here." What more encouraging and eulogistic could be said? The first volume, which contained the Lives of Hogarth, Wilson, Reynolds, and Gainsborough, was immediately transmitted to Edinburgh, with the following letter to Mr. Ritchie of the *Scotsman*:—

“27 Belgrave Place, 2nd July, 1829.

“My dear Friend,—I am your debtor for many kind words, kind deeds, and kind letters, and it is one of the chief miseries of my life that my hand has to keep up such a continual contest with the world for bread that it allows a debt of friendship to grow so enormously that it can only lessen and must never hope to pay it off. There is no man breathing, my dear Ritchie, with whom I would more gladly make a periodical interchange of social civilities than with yourself; and I hope and trust that fortune is not so much my enemy as may prevent me from yet having such an indulgence. Bairns, Bronze, Marble, Biography, and a periodical have united against me; and I can only say that if there be any passages in a little volume which, with my name on it, will along with this be put into your hands [*the letter is here mutilated*]

“To you I may plainly and openly state what I feel. This volume, then, containing the Lives of Hogarth, Wilson, Reynolds, and Gainsborough, ought to be the most popular of anything I have yet written, because I think it has more of human nature, more of shrewdness and sagacity, and more life and variety of narrative and anecdote than any of my works. I have read much, inquired much, and thought much, and formed my narratives from the best materials, and endeavoured to impress them with a popular stamp. I hope, my dear friend, that they will meet with your approbation. If I am successful now I shall have no further fear.

“My two eldest sons are preparing themselves for India, and are now in the Seminary of Addiscombe, where the eldest has distinguished himself much. My wife and the weans are also well. Why do I tell you of these matters?

Because, my dear friend, it is not my verse or my prose alone which interests you in me. Your feelings are tender [*the rest wanting*].

“William Ritchie, Esq., W.S.,
‘59 George Square, Edinburgh.”

When the second volume came out we have no doubt that it was also sent to the same quarter, but we cannot find any letter to that effect. However, the third volume was accompanied with the following interesting, genial, and affectionate account of how matters were going on:—

“27 Belgrave Place, 29th May, 1830.

“My dear Friend,—I send you another of my little books, and if you only think as favourably of it as of its elder brethren I shall be happy. I believe 12,000 copies are printed, for the sale of the others has risen to about 14,000, and the second edition of the second volume is already out of print. That I owe some of my popularity to the kind notices of my friends I am well aware, and who amongst them all has been so kind as yourself? This volume has been written in pain and suffering, for an evil spirit called Lumbago got on my back and punished me severely.

“When shall we see you again? When you arrive give us a day or two of your company; and to render it even more bewitching than it was, bring Mrs. Ritchie with you, and put her into the hands of my wife.

“Gray is now a married man. His wife is wealthy and weel-faured, and smiles like one of the syrens. She is a fine young creature. My wife is as plump and well-to-live as ever, and when she meets two or three North country friends sums up her estimate of happiness by saying, ‘Oh, if we had but Mr. Ritchie here!’ Our two eldest boys are at Addis-

combe, and are distinguished mathematicians, standing at the head of their individual classes, and ranking first in *Merit* also. There can be little doubt of their success in the Engineers if they continue to study.

“ I hope Mrs. Ritchie is well. As for yourself, I suppose you are never otherwise. I must include your niece also in my inquiries. I have forgot her name, but that is of no moment, as I imagine it is changed by this time. Do drop me a note now and then. In this wide world you have no one who likes you better, with the exception of the ‘parties aforesaid.’ I am a poor hard-working creature, toiling in marble and bronze all day, and at night dipping my pen in biographical ink to earn an honest penny for the bairns’ bread. ‘A blink of rest’s a sweet enjoyment!’ Do, therefore, thou worthiest, and pleasantest of all Scotchmen, write me a note and gladden me once more by the sight of thy well-known hand.—I am, my dear friend, yours most truly,

“ ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

“ William Ritchie, Esq.

“ With Vol. 3rd of the Painters.”

This is a most interesting letter in various ways—the grateful recognition of his friends in the great sale of his work—the strong desire to see Mr. and Mrs. Ritchie in London—the account of his boys studying at Addiscombe, and maintaining such distinguished places—and the statement of his own hard-wrought condition to keep the “bairns in bread.” His boys in Addiscombe were a source of the greatest satisfaction, and his hope of their success in the Engineers every father must feel. As we shall afterwards see, they did not disappoint their parents’ expectations when they had entered upon the

field of their operations in India, but did the greatest credit to themselves, their country, and all connected with them.

“There is no place like home.” Such is the opinion of all men, whatever their clime, condition, or generation. However bleak, barren, and poverty-stricken, there is no land like the land of our birth; and however humble, decayed, and dilapidated, there is no dwelling like home. The heart swells with emotion, and the eyes fill with tears, when, after long years of absence, we revisit the scenes of our childhood, and find ourselves again at home. Amid trackless prairies, and perpetual snows, the wild Indian thinks there is no wigwam like his own; and the hardy Highlander, inured to the fury of the mountain tempest, or secluded from the world in the lonely glen, sees no shieling like his own, and no flowers like the heather blooms. Home has a charm for the inferior creation as well as for man. The hare, however wide her circuit, returns to her old form at last; the swallow, having swept through distant climes, returns to her old nest in the window corner; the fish, having explored the depths of ocean, returns to its old fresh-water stream. And in like manner the emigrant, after traversing foreign lands in quest of fortune, returns, or desires to return, at last to lay his bones in the churchyard where his fathers sleep. The love of country and home is manifested in various ways. We show it in the fondness with which we speak of it when far away, in the eagerness with which we defend it in danger, and hazard life itself to maintain its honour and independence.

Allan Cunningham was very far from being an exception to this feeling. The great preponderance of his writings, prose and poetry, had reference to Nithsdale, and reflected his love for his native vale. Above the hum and the buzz and the roar of London he still heard the "craw" of the rooks in the Dalswinton woods—the soft murmur of the Nith, of which he had so melodiously sung. He saw the fertile holms of Kirkmahoe—the green hills of Tinwald—above all, the straggling village of Quarrelwood, where he had spent so many glorious evenings with the M'Ghies, and he had a longing desire to revisit the scenes of his youth. True, many of his former acquaintances had been removed by the hand of death, but a few still remained, especially George Douglas M'Ghie, with whom he had played so many pranks in youth, and brought on the terror of French invasion in the parish. So, in the summer of 1831, he carried out his desire, and visited Nithsdale with delight, though not unmixed with sadness. He saw Sandbed Farmhouse, to which he had been brought when little more than two years old, and where he had spent his early days; but where was the then family now? All gone! His worthy father, of whom he wrote so affectionately, had long since passed away, and the members of the family were also all absent. He saw Dalswinton village, where he had passed his apprenticeship under the tuition of his brother James; but there, also, all was changed. Strange faces looked out of the windows and the doors, but they had no sympathy with what was passing at the time in his own breast. Some rough voice would

say, as he passed down the one street which the village contains—"Ay, is that Allan Cunningham? Wasn't he brought up hereabouts? Didn't he mak' poems and sangs? He's a gey stout chield. Ken ye oucht aboot him particular?" It is this *unkendness* in our own locality which comes home to the heart. Our old friends and associates are not there to welcome us, and we acutely feel that there have arisen others who know not Joseph.

Taking advantage of his visit after a long absence, it was at once proposed, and speedily arranged, to offer him some ostensible testimony of the esteem in which he was held by his friends of Nithsdale, on account of his private character and literary merits. Accordingly, he was entertained at a public banquet in the Commercial Hotel, Dumfries, at which were present the leading gentlemen and others of the town and district, under the genial presidency of John M'Diarmid, Esq., of the *Dumfries Courier*, himself a distinguished poet, who shed a halo of enjoyment over the festive scene. One may easily conceive that Cunningham, greatly appreciating the honour which was being conferred upon him, was not quite at ease in his present position. The former days when he wrought in that town as a common stone-mason, and assisted in erecting the dwellings of several of those present, doubtless rose before his view, and he inwardly asked—"What am I or my father's house that Thou has brought me hitherto?" But still he had a consciousness that he had done something for his country, and his spirit of independence would not allow him to hang his head. So he sat in the "seat of honour" like a man who has honours thrust

upon him, while all the time he wished, we believe, he had been somewhere else. In proposing the toast of the evening, Mr. M'Diarmid concluded a long and eloquent eulogium in the following terms:—

“ We have met here this day to pay a merited tribute of respect to a man who, as Sir Walter Scott said long ago, is truly a ‘ credit to Caledonia,’ and more particularly to his native district—a district which, in conjunction with Robert Burns, he has done much to illustrate and immortalize, and to which, if I may be allowed to judge from his writings, he still clings, both in fact and fancy, with all the fondness of a first love. More than twelve years have elapsed since he last feasted his eyes on the favourite scenery of Dalswinton, and nearly a quarter of a century since he first went forth to the wide world, with few advantages of birth or education, and fortified chiefly by a warm heart, a glowing fancy, and a good name, to exemplify, as he has done, nobly and well, the might that may slumber in a peasant’s mind. There are two aspects in which we may view the character of Mr. Cunningham—as a man and as an author—and in both he has won the world’s regard in a manner which, I must say, under all the circumstances, has been seldom equalled and rarely surpassed. In his presence it would be bad taste to say all, or even the half, that many of us may think of him; but this I may say without offence, that, considering the obstacles he has encountered and overcome, I am inclined to set him down not merely as a remarkable, but an extraordinary character. As a poet he leans to the ballad style of composition, and many of his lyrics are eminently sweet, graceful, and touching. As a novelist he is chiefly distinguished for fancy and a power of sketching natural scenery; while his legends, illustrative of Scottish manners and

character, are nearly as perfect as any compositions of the kind with which I am acquainted. As a biographer, Mr. Cunningham excels greatly, from the graceful ease and spirit of his style, the extent of his information, and the peculiar opportunities he has enjoyed of conversing with a whole host of public men—authors, painters, sculptors, engravers, dramatists, actors, orators, and statesmen. Already the work I speak of has become prodigiously popular, and, if I am not mistaken, will go down to posterity a striking memorial of what genius and diligence can accomplish. In this happy country there are thousands of men who, not contented with the advantages of rank, fortune, and education, aspire to literary honours and distinctions; yet, if we except the master-spirits of the age, how few of the whole can be put in competition with our respected guest! To take only one example, what is even Lord Leveson Gower?—a nobleman of high rank and fortune, polished manners, and finished education—what, I say, are his translations from the German, and occasional contributions to periodical works, compared with the writings of plain Allan Cunningham?

“Here, therefore, I take my stand, and proceed to say that if all our poets and authors had been cast in the same happy mould, the world would have heard much less of their poverty and misfortunes. Industrious, temperate, and self-denying, it has been his pride to practise that genuine independence which too many only rave about. While his evenings were cheerfully devoted to the Muses, his days were more profitably employed, and he has never hitherto fallen into the egregious error of making that the staple of his mental industry for which there is rarely a regular demand. Voltaire tells, that while the Portuguese sailors, on entering battle, are prostrate on the deck imploring their saints to perform miracles in their favour, the British tars

stand to their guns, and literally work miracles for themselves. This sagacious hint, which contains much wisdom under the guise of satire, has not been lost on our valued friend, who, in place of joining the crowd of adventurers, who frequently work to a thankless master, and persist in piping when there is none to dance, has studied human nature to better purpose, and shown his admirable good sense by making literature a staff rather than a crutch—a pleasure or pastime rather than a profession. It is somewhere finely said by Paley, that it is not the Lord Mayor seated in his coach of state that benefits society, but the feelings of the apprentice, whose emulation is roused by such a pageant. And, on the same principle, I would remark that, so far from assembling here this day for the vulgar purpose of eating and drinking, we have met for the noble one of marking the high sense we entertain of genius, industry, and good conduct, and of exciting others to persevere in the same paths of private worth and public usefulness, that in due time they may also meet a similar reward. And, finally, gentlemen, when all I now see around me shall have been removed from the stage of active life, other Allan Cunninghams may haply arise; and all I can add is an ardent wish that, when they chance to revisit the scenes of their youth, they may be welcomed with the same enthusiasm and cordiality, and that from Dumfriesshire, at least, may disappear now and hereafter, the old reproach, that a prophet has no honour in his own country.”

It is unnecessary to add that the toast was received with the utmost enthusiasm.

Cunningham made a very modest reply. He said he was quite unaccustomed to public speaking, and could

make but a poor return indeed for the great kindness and attention which had been shown him, and the manner in which his health had been proposed and received. In his case the saying had certainly been reversed, that a "Prophet had no honour in his own country." He was proud that he belonged to this district, for it was the first to own him—he was proud that his father and grandfather were freemen of this town—he was proud that all his earliest and most lasting feelings and associations were connected with a place such as this—and he was proud that any little knowledge he possessed had been gained amongst them. He could never forget the reception he had met with, and the kindness he had experienced since his arrival in Dumfries; and for the honour done to him on the present occasion, all he could do was to return his warmest and most fervent thanks.

Thomas Carlyle, now so celebrated as an author, and of world-wide fame, was also present, and made his first public speech, which it is interesting to note was in proposing the memory of Burns. In some preliminary observations he thus gracefully alluded to their guest, Mr. Cunningham:—"One circumstance had been stated, and he felt gratified that the Chairman had done so. He had certainly come down from his retreat in the hills to meet Allan Cunningham at a time when scarcely any other circumstance could have induced him to move half-a-mile from home. He conceived that a tribute could not be paid to a more deserving individual, nor did he ever know of a dinner being given which proceeded from a purer principle. When Allan left his

native place he was poor, unknown, and unfriended—nobody knew what was in him, and he himself had only a slight consciousness of his own powers. He now comes back—his worth is known and appreciated, and all Britain is proud to number him among her poets; we can only say, be ye honoured, we thank you; you have gratified us much by this meeting. It had been said that a poet must do all for himself; but then he must have a something in his heart, and this Mr. Cunningham possessed. He possessed genius, and the feeling to direct it aright. He covets not our silver and gold—is sufficiently provided for within, and needs little from without. It then remains for us (continued Mr. Carlyle) to cheer him on in his honourable course, and when he is told that his thoughts have dwelt in our hearts, and elevated us, and made us happy, it must inspire him with renewed feelings of ardour." This was greeted with immense applause, and the speaker went on to what he had risen to propose, the memory of Burns.

Cunningham's old minister, the Rev. Mr. Wightman, of Kirkmahoe, was present in the highest spirits, and enlivened the evening by reciting a short poem he had composed for the occasion, and which began thus:—

"The Nith in lambent beauty glides,
To blend with Solway's briny tides;
The landscape all is fresh and fair,
And bland and balmy is the air;
Glad nature seems to swell the strain,
That welcomes Allan back again!"

During the evening Mr. Cunningham was, without

previous intimation, presented with the freedom of the incorporations of the town by Convener Thomson, who said he did so by the authority of the trades, "in testimony of the regard they bore him as a man of genius, an honest man, and one who was a credit to his country."

Mr. Cunningham, who was greatly affected at the unexpected honour conferred upon him, said, that while he had spoken of his father and grandfather being freemen of Dumfries, he did not anticipate that he was soon to be made one himself. He was pleased to think that he had been an apprentice in the town, and had worked as a mason in her streets and public places. He could still recognize the marks of his chisel on many an edifice, and even now observed the gentleman by whom he was treated as a friend, though still a servant. He had the other day made a pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Burns, and set down, among the signatures of many who performed the same errand, his name as a mason, for he was perfectly sure that he was a mason, although not so sure that he was anything else. Of course the room resounded with plaudits when he resumed his seat.

A compliment similar to Mr. Carlyle's was paid him eleven years afterwards, when he had passed from the scene of earthly eulogium, by another distinguished writer, who is also gone. Professor Aytoun, at the Burns' Festival in 1844, on the banks of the Doon, in proposing "The Memory of the Ettrick Shepherd, and Allan Cunningham," spoke of the latter in the following eulogistic terms:—"Of the other sweet singer, too—of

Allan Cunningham, the leal-hearted and kindly Allan—I might say much; but why should I detain you further? Does not his name alone recall to your recollections many a sweet song that has thrilled the bosom of the village maiden with an emotion that a princess need not blush to own? Honour, then, to the poets! whether they speak out loud and trumpet-tongued, to find audience in the hearts of the great, and the mighty, and the brave—or whether, in lowlier and more simple accents, but not less sacred in their mission, they bring comfort and consolation to the poor. As the sweep of the rainbow, which has its arch in heaven and its shafts resting upon the surface of the earth—as the sunshine which falls with equal bounty upon the palace and the hut—is the all-pervading and universal spirit of poetry; and what less can we do to those men who have collected and scattered it around us, than to hail them as the benefactors of their race?"

On the day following this banquet, Cunningham and a party of gentlemen, by invitation of Mr. Leny, dined at Dalswinton House. They went out to Kirkmahoe a considerable time before the dinner hour, in order to have a ramble through the scenes and places where the poet had spent the days of his youth. After strolling about for some hours over the holms and the hills of Dalswinton, so well known in days of yore, and even still well known, with the tears oftentimes running down his cheeks, in remembrance of youthful days, he expressed to Mrs. Leny his desire to spend the evening of his days on the banks of the Nith, with a cot, a kail-yard, and a cow. Mrs. Leny, with her well-known

generosity and kindness of heart instantly replied to the poet's wish:—"Only come once more amongst us, and these, at least, I assure you, you shall have." The generous offer, highly appreciated, was never enjoyed. At the comparatively early age of forty-seven he thought he had not yet done with the great City, and, therefore, though the offer was not declined, but gratefully acknowledged, the fulfilment of its acceptance was delayed. The place was pointed out where the "cot" was to be built, and the "kail-yard" to be planted, a romantic spot on the edge of a deep glen, and commanding an extensive view of the vale of the Nith, from the hills of Blackwood to the Solway, and even, in a clear day, to the hills of Cumberland. But the intent was not carried into execution. On returning to London from his home-tour, he made a sketch of the intended cottage, but underneath he wrote the following stanzas, which he sent to Mrs. Leny:—

"A FAREWELL TO DALSWINTON.

" ' A cot, a kale-yard, and a cow,'
 Said fair Dalswinton's lady,
 ' Are thine,' and so the Muse began
 To make her dwelling ready.
 She reared her walls, she laid her floors,
 And finished roof and rafter;
 But looking on her handiwork
 She scarce refrained from laughter.
 A cot sketched from some fairy's dream,
 In fancy's strangest tintin',
 Would mock the beauteous banks and streams
 Of thee, my loved Dalswinton!

- " When I look, lady, on thy land,
 It fills my soul with gladness,
 Till I think on my youthful days,
 And then I sink in sadness.
 With mind unfurnished with an aim
 Among your groves I wandered,
 And dreaming much, and doing nought,
 My golden hours I squandered;
 Or followed Folly's meteor light,
 Oft till the sun came glintin',
 And seemed to say, 'tis for thy sake
 I shine, my sweet Dalswinton!
- " There stands the hill where first I roamed,
 Before the Muse had owned me—
 There is the glen where first she wove
 Her web of witchcraft round me:
 The wizard tree, the haunted stream,
 Where in my waking slumbers,
 Fair fruitful fancy on my soul
 Poured fast her flowing numbers.
 Dalswinton hill, Dalswinton holm,
 And Nith, thou gentle river,
 Rise in my heart, flow in my soul,
 And dwell with me for ever.
- " My father's feet seem on thy braes,
 And on each haugh and hollow;
 I grow a child again, and seem
 His manly steps to follow,
 Now on the spot where glad he sat,
 As bright our hearth was blazing,
 The gowans grow, and harebells blow,
 And fleecy flocks are grazing.
 Farewell Dalswinton's hill and grove,
 Farewell, too, its fair lady—
 I'll think on all, when far I rove,
 By vale and woodland shady.

“ Farewell thy flowers, in whose rich bloom
The honey-bees are swarming—
Farewell thy woods, with every smell
And every sound that’s charming—
Farewell thy banks of golden broom,
The hills with fox-gloves glowing,
The ring-dove haunts, where fairy streams
Are in their music flowing.
Farewell thy hill, farewell thy halls—
Dark fate to me is hintin’,
I’ve seen the last I e’er shall see
Of thee, my sweet Dalswinton !”

The prediction given in the last stanza was unfortunately only too true. The poet never saw Dalswinton again, but the tone and spirit which the effusion breathes show how closely and dearly it was enshrined in his heart. He never returned to the vale of Nithsdale any more. Cunningham, after all, did not see the M’Ghies on his visit, for which he was greatly sorry, and, writing afterwards to his friend George, he said:—
“I was sorry I saw so little of you when I was in Dumfries, and the day I had laid out to see you in Kirkmahoe was one of much misery. I had nearly died in Crichope Linn, which would have been picturesque enough, but somehow one covets a bed in such times. When I make a descent on Scotland again, I will set up my standard in lodgings of my own, and rally the M’Ghies and others of the clans around me.” He had done a great favour to George with respect to a friend, and this is a part of the letter stating what he succeeded in doing.